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Pastoral Counselling and Psychosocial Support in a Nigerian Technologically Driven Society

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Abstract
The emergence of a technologically driven society in Nigeria has significantly transformed the practice and conceptualization of pastoral counselling and psychosocial support. Digital tools, such as social media, virtual counselling platforms, and online ministry, have expanded access to spiritual and emotional care. However, these innovations raise ethical and relational concerns regarding confidentiality, authenticity, and pastoral identity. This paper explores the intersection of technology, pastoral counselling, and psychosocial support within the Nigerian context, highlighting both opportunities and ethical dilemmas in virtual ministry. Using secondary data from academic literature, reports, and case studies, the study examines the ethical challenges and theological implications of digital pastoral care. It proposes that effective pastoral care in Nigeria's digital society requires not only technological proficiency but also moral discernment, compassion, and spiritual integrity. The paper concludes by offering a framework for integrating technology into pastoral care responsibly and ethically, ensuring holistic and context-sensitive psychosocial support.

Keywords: Pastoral Counselling, Psychosocial Support, Technology, Ethics, Digital Ministry, Confidentiality

Introduction
The sociocultural environment in Nigeria has evolved in the recent past and this is mainly due to the fact that development in information and communication technology has been very rapid in the country. Digital channels, including WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tik Tok, Zoom, Google meet, Microsoft Teams, Skype, and YouTube, led to the reorganization of conversations, information search, and social networks of people. The tools are now an important part of the religious expression, community building, and spiritual life within the Nigerian contemporary society.

Research indicates that digital media, such as faith-based social media profiles, are useful in preaching, praying, and communicating to the church. According to Nigeria Christians, there is a high exposure and daily use of these platforms (Megwas et al. 2025). Christian churches in Nigeria are gradually adopting digital technology in their ministries. These are the evangelism, the worship services, discipleship training, and pastoral care. This trend is a more general change in African pastoral ministry, which uses technology to enhance accessibility, reach, and transcend the constraints of face-to-face ministry (Okonkwo & Olubunmi, 2024). Some of the denominations have not been ready to embrace the use of mass communication in the past. Currently, the Pentecostal and mainline churches have evident increase in digital interaction utilizing diverse means of mediated pastoral presence (Ihejirika, 2008).

Pastoral counseling is the support and guidance that is offered by pastors, priests, imams, chaplains, and other religious leaders to assist individuals to cope with life difficulty. Pastoral counseling is a spiritual, emotional, and psychological counsel that is offered to congregants and that bolsters their emotional, spiritual, and psychological health. It is supplemented by psychosocial support that assists individuals in coping with social and emotional challenges, enhancing resilience, and coping and relationship building.

Integration of pastoral counseling and psychosocial support on digital platforms is a chance as well as an ethical dilemma to which scholars need to pay close attention. With counseling shifting to the internet, the question of the quality and nature of pastoral relations, privacy, and confidentiality arise, as well as the ability to uphold the ethical standards. Substituting the face-to-face interaction with mediated interaction could influence the quality and responsibility of relations. We require structures which reconcile the advantages of technology and the integrity of theology and the presence of the pastor.

Christian digital engagement is encouraged as an ethical practice to prioritize the values of authenticity, humility and justice in online ministry and maintain the sense of community connected to embodied worship and care (Elizabeth and Grace, 2025). Those changes support the importance of critically analyzing the way digital tools transform pastoral care, being keen on their advantages and drawbacks. Empirical and theoretical studies underscore both the opportunities and challenges inherent in digital pastoral counselling. Digital platforms enable clergy to transcend geographical limitations, making ministry more accessible to congregants who are physically distant or otherwise unable to participate

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in traditional church settings. This expanded reach enhances participation in spiritual activities and allows for inclusive engagement across diverse constituencies. However, these benefits are accompanied by concerns related to digital literacy among pastoral caregivers, privacy and data security, potential dilution of interpersonal depth, and the ethical management of sensitive information shared in online contexts (Ojo & Odeleye, 2024)

Literature Review

Pastoral counselling has long been an essential component of Christian ministry in Nigeria, serving as a bridge between theological insight and psychological understanding to address the spiritual, emotional, and moral needs of individuals. Clinebell (2011) emphasizes that pastoral counselling integrates faith-based care with psychological principles to nurture holistic well-being. Traditionally, counselling interactions occurred face-to-face within church premises or pastoral offices, where confidentiality, empathy, and personal presence laid the foundation for trust and relational depth (Lartey, 2003). However, the forces of globalization and the rapid digital transformation of Nigerian society have redefined the context and modalities of pastoral care.

Digital technologies from mobile phones to virtual conferencing platforms have become central tools in contemporary ministry, enabling pastors to extend their reach beyond geographical boundaries. Fakoya (2023) notes that many Nigerian pastors now conduct counselling sessions through digital channels, such as WhatsApp, Zoom, and other online platforms. This development has expanded accessibility, particularly among urban populations and technologically literate youths, while offering flexibility for those constrained by distance, mobility, or time limitations. However, the digitalization of pastoral counselling introduces new ethical and professional complexities.

Incorporating Incarnational Presence in Digital Pastoral Counselling

One significant shift in pastoral counselling's digital transformation is the challenge of maintaining Incarnational Presence**.** Traditionally, pastoral care has been understood through the concept of the "incarnation" of Christ God made tangible and present among people. In Christian theology, incarnational presence emphasizes the importance of the tangible, physical presence of a counsellor, echoing the way Christ interacted with people face-to-face. In pastoral counselling, this incarnational model underlines the value of personal engagement and relational depth (Migliore, 2004). However, in digital spaces, this physical presence is often absent, leaving pastoral care practitioners to wrestle with how to maintain relational and spiritual presence in virtual interactions.

While digital communication tools allow counsellors to interact over long distances, the absence of embodied presence in digital spaces raises questions about how incarnational theology applies to such interactions. Can pastors still convey the same depth of care and emotional connection through digital platforms? More importantly, can the "spiritual presence" essential to pastoral care be sustained in these mediated environments? These questions highlight the need for further exploration into how Incarnational Theology can be adapted to digital spaces in a way that maintains its core values of empathy, trust, and relational depth. This is where Incarnational Presence needs to be reinterpreted. In digital contexts, it is not merely about physical proximity but rather cultivating emotional and spiritual presence through virtual means. Pastors may utilize technologies like video calls or messaging platforms to convey presence, empathy, and care in ways that honour the theological significance of "presence."

Contextual Theology in the Digital Age

As Nigeria rapidly modernizes, Contextual Theology has gained prominence in addressing the intersection of traditional theological principles with contemporary social and cultural contexts (Torrance, 2001). In the context of pastoral counselling, this approach emphasizes that theology must be lived and practiced within the unique socio-cultural and technological realities of the community. For instance, Nigerian society has embraced technology in nearly every aspect of daily life, making it crucial for pastoral counsellors to understand the dynamics of online communities and how faith can be effectively integrated into virtual spaces.

Incorporating Contextual Theology into digital pastoral counselling requires understanding the cultural significance of digital platforms within Nigerian society. The growing role of social media, online church services, and virtual counselling in Nigerian communities speaks to a shift in how faith is experienced. As Adebayo (2022) notes, faith and personal well-being are deeply intertwined with community support in Nigerian culture, and digital spaces must be examined through the lens of this interconnectedness. A Contextual Theological approach would encourage pastors to reframe their theological and pastoral practices to address both the opportunities and limitations digital platforms present for ministry.

The application of Contextual Theology to digital counselling could involve understanding how pastoral care in Nigeria, rooted in face-to-face relationships, is redefined when that relational depth must be mediated by technology. By adapting theological principles to contemporary contexts, pastors can navigate the ethical complexities and challenges of virtual pastoral care, ensuring that ministry remains relevant and relational even in a digital environment.

Ethical Considerations in Digital Pastoral Counselling

Despite the potential benefits of digital transformation, pastoral counselling in Nigeria faces significant challenges related to ethics and data security. With the shift to digital platforms, concerns about confidentiality and privacy are growing. Online impersonation and breaches of privacy are becoming more prevalent as counselling shifts to virtual spaces (Okonkwo & Olubunmi, 2024). Traditional pastoral counselling is underpinned by ethical frameworks designed to safeguard trust and confidentiality in face-to-face settings. However, the structure and professional standards governing virtual spaces are less well-established, raising critical questions about the safety and integrity of online counselling sessions.

The evolving ethical landscape of digital pastoral care in Nigeria necessitates the development of contextualized ethical guidelines that integrate theological principles, such as the importance of trust, relational integrity, and confidentiality, with the realities of digital platforms. Elizabeth & Mikaere (2025) emphasize that pastors must be equipped with digital literacy to navigate the ethical complexities introduced by online ministry.

The Ongoing Evolution of Pastoral Care in Nigeria

While digital transformation has expanded the scope and reach of pastoral counselling in Nigeria, it has also introduced new complexities that require both theological reflection and practical adaptation. The incorporation of Incarnational Presence and Contextual Theology into digital pastoral counselling practices can help address these complexities by maintaining relational and spiritual integrity in digital spaces. Pastoral counselling continues to grow in Nigeria, often surpassing secular counselling in terms of accessibility and trust. The need for ethical vigilance, theological depth, and digital literacy remains critical as the church navigates the ongoing evolution of pastoral care in a rapidly changing world.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three interrelated theoretical perspectives:

1. ***Pastoral Care Theory:*** Clebsch and Jaekle's classical framework identifies four functions of pastoral care: healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling. These functions remain relevant in technologically mediated contexts. Healing addresses emotional wounds, sustaining offers resilience during crises, guiding provides moral orientation, and reconciling restores relationships. Digital pastoral counselling can be evaluated in relation to how effectively it fulfills these roles, specifically within the constraints and opportunities of virtual platforms.
2. ***Psychosocial Support Theory:*** Psychosocial theory emphasizes the interaction between emotional well-being and social environments. Faith communities function as protective social structures that buffer stress, reduce isolation, and cultivate meaning. Pastoral counselling operates as a psychosocial intervention that integrates narrative therapy, spiritual coping, and communal belonging. Digital platforms are increasingly important in this context, providing means for faith communities to extend support networks and emotional care in ways that resonate with contemporary challenges and opportunities.
3. ***Digital Religion Theory:*** Digital religion scholarship argues that online religious spaces are not separate from "real" religion but extensions of lived faith. Technology reshapes religious authority, embodiment, and participation. Digital pastoral care must therefore be understood as a hybrid environment where theological meaning and technological form co-produce new ministry practices. This framework challenges the traditional, physical understanding of Incarnational Presence, suggesting that even in the absence of face-to-face interaction, pastoral care can maintain its essential spiritual and emotional qualities if it adapts appropriately.

Theoretical Framework Application

These three theoretical perspectives Pastoral Care Theory, Psychosocial Support Theory, and Digital Religion Theory serve as the foundation for understanding how digital pastoral care functions within the context of Nigerian society. The application of Incarnational Presence within digital spaces challenges traditional notions of pastoral counselling, inviting rethinking of how presence can be

experienced virtually. Meanwhile, Contextual Theology offers an essential lens for understanding how pastoral counselling can be adapted and practiced in a digital environment, ensuring that it remains culturally relevant and spiritually grounded.
By synthesizing these frameworks, this study seeks to address the theological and practical challenges posed by digital pastoral care in Nigeria, offering a robust conceptual framework for analysing how technology transforms the pastoral counselling experience.

Table 1: Difference between Pastoral Counselling and Secular Counselling

Aspect	Pastoral Counselling	Secular Counselling
Foundation	Rooted in theology scripture and faith	Based on psychology and behavioural sciences
Counsellor	Ordained minister or trained religious counsellor	Licensed therapist or psychologist in different fields
Goal	Spiritual healing, moral guidance, reconciliation with God and others	Emotional Well-being, behavioural adjustments, and mental health
Methods	Prayer, Scripture, confession, spiritual discipline, and fasting	Psychotherapy techniques, cognitive behavioural therapy, talk therapy among others

Some of the issues addressed during pastoral counselling in most cases include: marital and family conflict, grief and loss, depression or anxiety, moral dilemmas and guilt, faith crisis or spiritual dryness, addiction and recovery, forgiveness and reconciliation. In Nigeria, Pastoral counselling plays a vital role in:

- ***Church communities:*** Where pastors are seen as both spiritual leaders and psychological guides.
- ***Faith Based Institutions:*** Providing psychosocial and spiritual support in schools, hospital, and prisons by helping individuals to cope and navigate the challenges of life.
- ***Socio-cultural context:*** Where people often prefer religious counselling to secular therapy because of trust, cultural familiarities and spiritual understanding.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing a systematic review of existing literature to examine the digitalization of pastoral counselling in Nigeria. Primary data was gathered through a review of peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and reports published between 2010 and 2025, focusing on the intersection of digital technology and pastoral care. The study explores themes such as ethical challenges, accessibility, and the integration of digital platforms in religious practice. Articles and case studies from reputable sources were selected based on their relevance to the research questions. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify key trends and emerging patterns, including both the advantages and challenges associated with digital pastoral counselling. The data analysis is further complemented by theoretical insights into pastoral care, contextual theology, and digital ethics. This methodological approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of how digital platforms are reshaping pastoral counselling practices in contemporary Nigerian ministry.

Psychosocial Support and Technology

Psychosocial support emphasizes the interrelation between emotional, social, and spiritual well-being. In Nigeria, where mental health services are limited, faith-based institutions often serve as the first point of contact for individuals experiencing distress. Technology has enabled pastors and counsellors to provide such support remotely. Yet, it also raises concerns about relational depth, empathy, and the ability to interpret non-verbal cues in virtual interactions (Adebayo, 2022). Research in African pastoral studies has underscored that digital engagement must be contextualized to local realities, values, and communal structures (Lartey, 2003). Without adequate training, digital ministry risks becoming impersonal and potentially exploitative.

Ethical and Theological Implications of Digital Pastoral Counselling

The emergence of digital pastoral counselling in Nigeria has brought about a complex intersection of ethical and theological considerations. As churches adopt technology to enhance their ministry, the traditional dynamics of pastoral care once rooted in physical presence, confidentiality, and sacred trust

are being reshaped by the realities of digital interaction. This transformation invites a deeper reflection on how moral responsibility, spiritual authenticity, and theological integrity can be sustained within technologically mediated spaces. From an ethical perspective, confidentiality remains one of the most pressing concerns. In face-to-face pastoral sessions, privacy is safeguarded through controlled environments and trust built over time. In contrast, digital counselling conducted via mobile applications or online platforms exposes sensitive communication to the risk of data breaches, impersonation, and misuse (Fakoya, S 2023; Okonkwo & Olubunmi, 2024). Such vulnerabilities demand that pastors adopt secure communication platforms, seek informed consent, and observe professional discipline when using digital tools for ministry. Failure to do so not only undermine pastoral ethics but also erodes the trust and credibility of the church's ministry.

Theologically, the digitalization of pastoral care raises questions about the nature of spiritual presence and the embodiment of ministry. Christian pastoral theology has long emphasized incarnational presence the understanding that God's care is mediated through personal, compassionate, and relational engagement (Lartey, 2003; Clinebell, 2011). In digital spaces, however, this incarnational dimension risks being diluted as counselling becomes mediated by screens rather than shared physical space. This shift challenges pastors to rediscover new forms of "digital incarnation," demonstrating empathy, prayerful attentiveness, and genuine spiritual connection even in virtual environments.

Another ethical and theological tension concerns the maintenance of professional and spiritual boundaries. Social media and instant messaging blur distinctions between pastoral roles and personal interactions, often leading to over-familiarity or dependency (Megwas et al., 2025). Theologically, such situations can distort the sacred nature of pastoral relationships, reducing ministry to casual conversation or emotional support without proper accountability. Churches in Nigeria must therefore promote digital ethics and accountability structures that safeguard both pastors and counselees while reflecting biblical principles of humility, integrity, and care.

The integration of technology into ministry invites reflection on the church's mission and identity. Technology, while offering efficiency and reach, must not redefine the essence of pastoral care or the theological foundation of Christian ministry. As Elizabeth, E., & Mikaere, G. (2025) argue, digital ministry should remain guided by compassion, justice, and faithfulness, ensuring that technology serves the gospel rather than reshaping it. The church's ethical responsibility extends beyond simply using technology effectively it involves embodying Christ like care in every form of communication. Digital competence has become both an ethical and theological necessity. Pastors must not only understand how to use technology responsibly but also how to align their digital practices with biblical values and pastoral theology. Theological institutions should therefore include courses on digital ethics, communication, and theology of technology to prepare clergy for this evolving form of ministry (Ojo & Odeleye, 2024).

Discussion

Opportunities for Pastoral Counselling in a Technological Society

Technology has significantly democratized access to pastoral and psychosocial support, offering new avenues for ministry. Virtual counselling platforms enable pastors to connect with people in remote areas or Nigerians living abroad, overcoming geographical barriers. Social media has also become an essential space for spiritual encouragement, collective prayer, and raising awareness about mental health. During the COVID-19 pandemic, digital tools served as lifelines for many seeking emotional and spiritual support, especially when lockdown measures restricted movement.

Digital tools facilitate record-keeping, resource sharing, and follow-up communication, which enhances pastoral efficiency, particularly in large congregations. Technology also opens creative possibilities for evangelism and mentorship through podcasts, online courses, and interactive devotionals. These methods have been effectively utilized by large ministries such as The Redeemed Christian Church of God, Deeper Life Bible Church, and others to engage their congregants. (Agha, 2021).

Ethical Challenges in Digital Pastoral Practice

Despite the numerous advantages, digital pastoral care introduces ethical challenges that warrant serious reflection.

Confidentiality and Data Security: Online communication can be easily intercepted or recorded without consent, posing significant risks to confidential disclosures. To mitigate these risks, pastors must use secure platforms and ensure informed consent before engaging in counselling sessions (American Association of Pastoral Counsellors [AAPC], 2017).

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Authenticity and Relational Presence: Virtual interactions can create emotional distance due to the absence of physical presence and embodied empathy, weakening the pastoral bond. To address this, pastors should cultivate digital empathy, actively listening, validating emotions, and maintaining a compassionate tone.

Boundary Management: The informality of social media may blur professional boundaries. Pastors should set clear ethical guidelines regarding communication frequency, timing, and appropriateness to avoid potential relational misuse.

Digital Competence and Accountability: Ethical pastoral practice in the digital age requires technological literacy. Pastors should receive training in cyber security, counselling ethics, and online professionalism to ensure responsible practice in their digital ministry.

A Contextual Ethical Framework

To address the ethical challenges of digital pastoral counselling, a contextual ethical framework for Nigerian pastoral counsellors should include the following components:

1. ***Digital Literacy Training:*** Pastors should be equipped with the necessary skills to use secure communication technologies effectively. This training is essential not only for those actively engaged in ministry but also for clergy undergoing theological education. Digital literacy will help ensure safe and professional online interactions with congregants.
2. ***Ethical Policy Development:*** Churches must establish clear codes of conduct for virtual counselling. These ethical guidelines are crucial in protecting the public from unethical practices and providing pastors with a framework for making sound ethical decisions. Additionally, these policies will safeguard against potential misuse, such as manipulating counselees for personal gain or asking inappropriate questions out of curiosity. These codes should align with scriptural provisions and uphold the ethical standards expected in Christian counselling.
3. ***Contextual Theology:*** Seminary curricula and pastoral formation programs should integrate technological ethics to prepare pastors for the digital age. Introducing a course on technological ethics alongside Christian ministry can bridge the knowledge gap. Interdisciplinary workshops or seminars that bring together experts in theology, law, communication, ethics, and technology would foster a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and responsibilities of digital pastoral care.
4. ***Accountability Systems:*** Peer supervision and digital ministry oversight are essential to maintaining transparency and accountability in digital pastoral counselling. These systems will ensure that pastoral practices remain ethical, responsible, and aligned with the values of the church.
5. ***Spiritual Discernment:*** Pastors should be encouraged to engage in prayerful reflection and seek divine wisdom when utilizing digital tools. Spiritual discernment is vital in ensuring that digital practices align with the deeper spiritual mission of the church and that the pastoral care provided remains faithful to Christian teachings.

Conclusion

The digital technology has transformed the pastoral counselling in Nigeria to an extreme level extending beyond the physical walls of the church. This change presents new possibilities of spiritual care, particularly to younger and urban populations although it raises complicated ethical and theological questions. Such aspects as confidentiality, authenticity, and spiritual integrity should be paid close attention. No longer founded on personal interaction, pastoral counselling needs to be transferred to the realm of a digital environment without forgetting its relational and incarnational core. Ethical responsibility, digital competence, and theological acumen should be integrated by pastors to remain effective. Finally, technology must serve as the means that enhances care and connection rather than a barrier that is undermining the sacred trust between the pastors and their counselees.

Recommendations

1. ***Ethical Guidelines:*** Church authorities and denominational leaders should develop and enforce clear ethical standards for digital pastoral counselling, ensuring confidentiality, informed consent, and responsible data management.
2. ***Ministerial Training:*** Theological institutions should include digital literacy, counselling ethics, and communication technology in their curricula to equip clergy for contemporary ministry.
3. ***Digital Competence:*** Pastors should receive continuous professional development in online communication, data protection, and ethical conduct to prevent misuse of digital tools.

4. ***Hybrid Counselling Models:*** Churches should promote blended counselling approaches that combine in-person and online sessions, ensuring accessibility while maintaining personal connection.
5. ***Accountability Structures:*** Establish supervisory and peer review mechanisms within pastoral teams to monitor online conduct and uphold ethical integrity.
6. ***Theological Reflection:*** Ongoing dialogue and research should explore how technology can be used faithfully within Christian ministry, emphasizing compassion, justice, and authenticity.

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