




The Effectiveness of WhatsApp in Pastoral Counseling Service for Generation Z in the Digital Space

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Abstract

The digital age has significantly disrupted traditional church service models, presenting unique challenges in reaching Generation Z, a cohort of digital natives with a high prevalence of mental health issues. This study aims to analyze the contextual and theoretical effectiveness, ethical challenges, and theological implications of using WhatsApp as a pastoral counseling medium. Employing a qualitative method grounded in a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, this research synthesizes data from scientific journals, books, and conference proceedings published between 2021 and 2025. The analysis identifies three key thematic areas. First, regarding opportunities, WhatsApp offers increased accessibility, platform familiarity, and reduced psychological barriers for Gen Z seeking help. Second, regarding challenges, the study highlights data confidentiality risks, ambiguous professional boundaries, and limitations in building deep therapeutic alliances due to the loss of non-verbal cues. Third, the findings emphasize the urgent need for counselors to develop new competencies, specifically 'digital empathy' and cyber-ethical literacy. It is concluded that while WhatsApp cannot replace clinical intervention, it holds significant potential as an innovative support tool within a hybrid pastoral ministry model. However, its success relies heavily on the implementation of strict ethical guidelines and comprehensive counselor training.

Keywords: pastoral counseling, Generation Z, digital age, WhatsApp, wellbeing, mental health, higher education, pedagogy, teaching method, health care.

Introduction

Background: A Paradigm Shift in Services in the Digital Landscape

Digital transformation has become a determining force that is reshaping almost every aspect of human life, including religious institutions. The Church, as an entity that has historically relied on face-to-face communal interaction, is now at a paradigmatic crossroads. The COVID-19 global pandemic has served as an accelerator that has forced churches to adopt digital technology on a massive scale, transforming ministry from a mere choice to a necessity. Online worship, virtual discipleship groups, and other forms of digital ministry have now become a permanent part of ecclesiastical life. This shift is not just a change in medium, but a fundamental redefinition of how the church presents and serves its congregation in the 21st century.

In the midst of this digital landscape, a specific and urgent pastoral challenge arises, namely how



to reach and accompany Generation Z. In Indonesia, Gen Z (individuals born between 1997 and 2012) is the largest demographic group, accounting for 27.94% of the total population or around 74.93 million people. Most of these groups are currently facing higher education and early-stage career pressures, making them an important target for mentoring and mentoring. This generation is true *digital natives*; they don't know a world without the internet, smart devices, and social media. Their communication patterns are fundamentally different from previous generations. They prioritize instant, text-based, and visual interactions, with platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and especially WhatsApp being their primary social spaces. For Gen Z, “authenticity, speed, and ease of access are not a luxury, but a basic expectation in every interaction” (Williams, 2023, p. 45).

Paradoxically, this most digitally connected generation is also recorded as the generation that faces a significant mental health crisis. Globally, data shows an increase in cases of depression, anxiety, stress, and sleep disorders in Generation Z. Data from the Indonesian Ministry of Health as of October 2023 shows that 6.1% of Indonesians aged 15 years and older have mental health disorders. The National Survey of Indonesian Adolescent Mental Health (I-NAMHS) further revealed that one in three Indonesian adolescents (around 15.5 million people) has a mental health problem. However, what is more worrying is that “only 2.6% of adolescents with mental health issues have used mental health facilities or counseling to help them cope with their emotional and behavioral problems in the past 12 months” (I-NAMHS, 2022). Jonathan Haidt, in his work, even dubbed them “*The Anxious Generation*”, whose psychological growth was greatly influenced by the shift from “*play-based childhood*” to “*phone-based childhood*” (Haidt, 2024, p. 58). The digital hyperconnectivity they experience is often not directly proportional to the depth of interpersonal relationships, instead giving rise to the phenomenon of social isolation and mental fragility.

Problem Formulation

The above context reveals a significant *gap* between conventional pastoral counseling methods and the communication needs and preferences of Generation Z. Traditional models that generally rely on face-to-face, formally scheduled meetings in church rooms often feel unfamiliar, intimidating, and inaccessible to many young people of this generation. On the other hand, the communication platforms they use on a daily basis, such as WhatsApp, have not been widely explored and systematically adapted for the purpose of deep pastoral ministry. This gap raises a series of crucial research questions:

1. How can the theological principles and fundamental techniques in traditional pastoral counseling (such as empathy, mentoring, and relationship building) be adapted and effectively embodied into instant messaging platforms such as WhatsApp dominated by text-based communication?
2. What are the key opportunities and the most crucial ethical-practical challenges in using WhatsApp for pastoral counseling with Generation Z, especially related to issues of confidentiality, professional *boundaries*, and crisis management?
3. How effective is WhatsApp in building meaningful therapeutic alliances and supporting the spiritual growth of Generation Z congregations, when compared to its potential and limitations?



Research Objectives

Based on the formulation of these problems, this research has several main objectives, namely:

1. Systematically analyze the potential and limitations of the WhatsApp application as a medium to provide pastoral counseling services for Generation Z.
2. Evaluate the ethical and theological implications arising from digitally mediated pastoral counseling practices, with a focus on Christian pastoral principles.
3. Formulate a series of practical, evidence-based recommendations for churches, pastors, and pastoral counselors to be able to implement counseling services through WhatsApp effectively, safely, and responsibly.

Research Significance

The results of this research are expected to make a significant contribution to several parties. For the church and its leaders, this research provides a theoretical foundation and practical guidance for developing a model of pastoral ministry that is relevant, contextual, and able to reach young people in their digital environment. For pastoral counselors, this article offers in-depth insights into new competencies that are essential in the digital age, including digital literacy, cyber ethics, and the ability to practice “digital empathy.” For the development of practical theology, this research contributes to the academic discourse on the incarnation of church ministry in the digital world, expanding the understanding of *cybertheology* and contemporary pastoral practices that are responsive to the changing times.

Theoretical Studies

The Essence of Pastoral Counseling: From *Cura Animarum* to *Cura Vitae*

Pastoral counseling, in essence, is an ancient practice rooted in the tradition of *cura animarum*—“healing of the soul.” This ministry integrates theological sources, Christian spirituality, as well as behavioral science insights such as psychology and sociology. In contrast to secular counseling which focuses only on psychological wellbeing, pastoral counseling views this well-being in the human relationship with God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (quoted in Ginting, 2022) emphasizes that pastoral mentoring is a form of therapy that combines psychological and spiritual dimensions, as it “integrates theology and other social sciences” (p. 142). Its theological foundation is rooted in the image of God as the Shepherd and Christ as the Good Shepherd (John 10). From this metaphor, Howard Clinebell (2002), identifies the five main functions of pastoral counseling: *healing*, *sustaining*, *guiding*, *reconciling*, and *nurturing*.

In the contemporary era, the paradigm of *cura animarum* has undergone a significant expansion to *cura vitae* (healing of life). This shift emphasizes a holistic approach to the “whole” in spiritual healing, in which the soul (*nephesh*) is understood not as a separate entity, but rather as a relational concept embedded in the concrete existential reality of life. *Cura vitae* views healing not only as a moral issue, but also as an aesthetic one—related to meaning, value, and quality of life. This approach has become particularly relevant in the digital age, when human life is increasingly connected to virtual relationships and the pressures of modern lifestyles (Louw, 2014). Thus,



today's pastoral ministry focuses not only on the healing of the soul in the abstract, but also on the care of life as a whole—encompassing mental, relational, and spiritual health in the midst of an ever-changing world. In this sense, pastoral counseling serves as a vital spiritual complement to the broader health care system, addressing existential needs that cannot be fully resolved by medical intervention alone.

A Brief History of WhatsApp: From Status to Global Instant Messaging

To understand why WhatsApp is such a relevant platform for pastoral counseling, it's important to review its unique history. WhatsApp was founded in February 2009 by Jan Koum and Brian Acton (2009), two former Yahoo! employees. The initial idea was not as an instant messaging app, but rather as a simple app that allowed users to share brief statuses with their contacts. However, after Apple introduced the *push notification* feature, Koum adapted the app into an instant messaging platform. Its popularity skyrocketed as it offered an alternative to limited texting. This exponential growth caught the attention of Facebook (now Meta), which eventually acquired WhatsApp in February 2014 for about \$19 billion. Mark Zuckerberg (quoted in Bernas.id, 2021) sees great potential in his user base, stating, “WhatsApp is on a path to connect 1 billion people. The services that reach that milestone are all incredibly valuable”.

Characteristics of an Effective Pastoral Counselor

The success of pastoral counseling, both face-to-face and digital, is highly dependent on the counselor himself. The foundation of these qualities often refers to the “core conditions” identified by Carl Rogers (1957), which have profound relevance to pastoral practice. Rogers identifies three main attributes: (1) congruence (authenticity or sincerity), (2) unconditional positive acceptance (acceptance and caring), and (3) accurate empathic understanding. These three conditions become the pillars of an effective counseling relationship, where the counselor is present as a real person, able to accept counseling as it is without judgment, and strives to enter the counselor's internal world. Ultimately, all of these qualities must be rooted in the spiritual and psychological health of the counselor himself, because “the mainstay of a counselor is his or her healthy self. It is a medicine for his counsel.”

Pastoral Ministry in the Digital Age: Opportunities and Challenges

Digitalization has transformed the arena of pastoral ministry, opening up new horizons while presenting complex dilemmas (Ward, 2022). On the one hand, digital technology offers unprecedented opportunities, enabling services to transcend geographical boundaries and provide greater accessibility. On the other hand, digital mediation also brings serious challenges. The biggest risk is depersonalization, where rich pastoral interactions are reduced to textual exchanges, potentially eliminating warmth and physical presence. Simatupang and Suprabowo (2025) highlight the “*potential reduction in the depth of interpersonal relationships* due to the use of digital technology in counseling” (p. 12). Issues of cybersecurity and data privacy are also a major concern, given that pastoral conversations often contain highly sensitive information.



Effective Pastoral Counselor Profiles in Digital Spaces

A pastoral counselor in the digital age requires a blend of traditional competencies and new digital competencies. Traditional competencies such as empathy, integrity, and the ability to maintain confidentiality remain fundamental. Nendissa (2023) underlines four main ethical principles: confidentiality, responsibility, awareness of limitations, and knowing the basic needs of the congregation. However, the digital context demands additional crucial competencies:

1. **Digital Literacy:** An in-depth understanding of how platforms work, their culture, and their implications, not just technical capabilities.
2. **Digital Ethics:** An understanding of specific ethical issues in an online context, such as *informed consent*, data privacy policies, and the ability to maintain professional boundaries.
3. **Digital Empathy:** This is the ability to convey and feel care, understanding, and emotional warmth through limited digital mediums. Sakumoto and Krug (2021) define it as “an understanding of how the expression of empathy may need to evolve along with the adoption of modern technology and digital interaction”. It involves the skill of “listening” to what is not written, interpreting the nuances of word choices, and consciously projecting a supportive presence. Techniques expected to demonstrate digital clinical empathy include “reciprocal engagement, timely responses, genuine authenticity, and a balance between professionalism and informality” (Terry et al., 2024).

Theological Tension: The Presence of the Body vs. *Telepresence*

Beyond ethical and technical issues, digital pastoral ministry raises fundamental theological tensions regarding ecclesiology and incarnation. Critics argue that Christian ministry is inherently “incarnate”—requiring the presence of a physical body just as Christ took on the form of a human being. There are concerns that the mediation of grace through the screen could lead to a “disembodied” faith, or a form of modern Gnosticism that prioritizes the transmission of information over communal communion (*koinonia*). Ward (2022) warns that while the “liquid church” allows for flexibility, it risks diluting the sacramental density of face-to-face meetings. As a result, the church must rethink its Christian pedagogy; faith formation in the digital age cannot rely solely on monological sermons but requires transformative teaching methods that encourage dialogue and active engagement. Therefore, counseling via WhatsApp should be viewed theologically as “telepresence”—a valid extension of service, but still ontologically distinct from the fullness of a physical pastoral encounter.

Psychological and Spiritual Characteristics of Generation Z

Understanding Generation Z is essential for effective church ministry, as they grow up in anxiety-inducing uncertainty, are pragmatic, socially aware, and value authenticity. The culture of “safetyism” and gadget-based childhood make them vulnerable to mental problems (Haidt, 2024). In Indonesia, their main concerns include inequality, economic pressure, and mental health. Spiritually, Gen Z tends to be “spiritual but not religious,” seeking meaning and connection with God personally and in the digital world. Because it is so easy to be exposed to superficial information, pastoral ministry needs to move from a dogmatic approach to dialogical



accompaniment that provides a safe space for them to ask questions and find faith authentically (Williams, 2023).

WhatsApp as a Counseling Platform: Feature Analysis and Implications

WhatsApp, as a very popular platform in Indonesia, has a series of features that can support or hinder the counseling process. Data from Meltwater (2024) confirms that the main reason for internet use in Indonesia is to “stay connected with friends and family (70.9%)”.

- Feature Analysis: End-to-end *encryption* provides a basic layer of security. Text message-based communication allows for reflection before responding, which helps introverted or anxious individuals. Voicemail can capture emotional nuances, while voice and video calls allow for richer synchronous interactions.
- Pros: The main advantages of WhatsApp are accessibility and familiarity. The platform is already integrated into everyday life, so it doesn't feel intimidating. A systematic review found that “WhatsApp is the most predominantly used platform... due to ease of access, familiarity with the user interface, and instant communication features that are private” (Hasanah et al., 2025, p. 2112).
- Disadvantages: The biggest risk is the potential for misinterpretation due to the absence of non-verbal cues. Alia et al. (2022) warn that online counseling can lead to “increased misunderstandings, miscommunication, and online security breaches” (p. 128). Another big challenge is the setting of *boundaries* and limitations in handling crisis situations.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This article uses a qualitative research method with the *Systematic Literature Review* (SLR) approach. This approach was chosen because of its ability to identify, evaluate, and synthesize all relevant and high-quality research evidence on a particular topic explicitly and systematically to minimize bias. This design is very suitable for mapping the existing research landscape on digital pastoral counseling for Generation Z.

Data Sources

The data collection process was carried out by tracing various relevant primary and secondary data sources, especially *peer-reviewed* journal articles from international (Scopus, Google Scholar, ProQuest) and national (GARUDA, SINTA) databases. Data sources also include relevant academic books and conference proceedings, with a publication period limited from January 2021 to December 2025 to ensure data up-to-date.

Data Collection Procedures

Literature searches were conducted systematically using keyword-based search strategies with Boolean (AND, OR) operators. The combination of keywords used includes: (“pastoral



counseling” OR “spiritual care” OR “pastoral counseling”) AND (“digital era” OR “online” OR “WhatsApp”) AND (“Generation Z” OR “Gen Z” OR “digital natives”). The inclusion criteria set are academic articles that discuss counseling or digital mental health for the adolescent/young adult population in the 2021 – 2025 time frame. From an initial pool of about 120 potential sources, a total of 21 articles were selected for final analysis based on relevance and quality.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data collected from the selected literature were analyzed using *thematic content analysis* techniques. This analysis process is carried out through several systematic stages: familiarization, open coding, theme search, theme review, and theme definition and naming. This process allows for a rich narrative synthesis of findings across the literature to answer research questions.

Results and Discussion

A systematic analysis of the relevant literature yielded four main interrelated themes: (1) adaptation of pastoral counseling models to WhatsApp platforms (e.g., Ward, 2022); (2) the level of effectiveness of WhatsApp in reaching Generation Z (e.g., Hasanah et al., 2025); (3) critical ethical and practical challenges (e.g., Nendissa, 2023); and (4) the counselor's new role as a digital shepherd (e.g., Williams, 2023). The following discussion will elaborate on each theme in depth, supported by synthesis from various sources. To provide a stronger context, the digital landscape and mental health of Gen Z in Indonesia is summarized in the following table.

Table 1. Digital Landscape and Mental Health of Generation Z in Indonesia (Preliminary Data 2024 - Note: this is secondary synthesized data and not original empirical findings)

Indicators	Concrete Data	Source	Pastoral Implications
Gen Z Demographics	74.93 million people (27.94% of the total population of Indonesia).	IDN Research Institute (2024)	The largest group that the church should reach; Service strategies should be prioritized for this cohort.
Internet Penetration	79.5% of Indonesia's total population are internet users.	APJII (2024)	The assumption that almost all Gen Z can be accessed online is valid; Digital services are no longer an option, but a must.
Prevalence of Mental Health Problems	1 in 3 adolescents (15.5 million) have a mental health problem.	I-NAMHS (2022)	The need for pastoral assistance and counseling is very high



			and urgent among this generation.
Help-seeking behavior	Only 2.6% of adolescents with mental health problems use professional services.	I-NAMHS (2022)	There are major barriers (stigma, accessibility) that prevent Gen Z from seeking help; Low-risk services such as via WhatsApp can be a solution.
Favorite Communication Platforms	Instagram (51.9% of Gen Z accesses frequently) and TikTok.	APJII (2024)	Communication should be visual and instantaneous; However, for private conversations, other platforms may be preferred.
Platforms to Stay Connected	WhatsApp is the main platform used to stay connected with friends and family (70.9% of internet users).	Meltwater (2024)	WhatsApp is a space that is already considered “safe” and “private” by Gen Z, making it a strong candidate for early counseling.

Theme 1: Adaptation of the Pastoral Counseling Model to the WhatsApp Platform

The first challenge in utilizing WhatsApp is translating the rich and relational principles and practices of pastoral counseling into an inherently limited medium. This is not just a transfer of conversation, but a creative and conscious process of adaptation. Traditional pastoral functions need to be reimagined: sustaining functions can be realized through the sending of scheduled messages of reinforcement, while guiding functions can be facilitated through a slower exchange of text-based reflection.

The key to this adaptation is the development and practice of digital empathy. This concept goes beyond traditional empathy by consciously adapting empathic skills to virtual platforms such as video calls, messages, and custom apps. In text-based communication, where non-verbal cues are absent, counselors must actively “listen” for silences, pauses, and changes in writing style as emotional cues. Digital empathy involves two main components: cognitive empathy (understanding the feelings of others through digital communication) and affective empathy (experiencing emotional responses based on virtual interactions). This practice requires counselors to intentionally use empathetic language, paraphrase for validation (“So, if I understand it correctly, you feel...”), and withhold judgment to build therapeutic alliances. Although research shows that empathy can decrease in online sessions compared to face-to-face,



theoretical frameworks such as *computer-mediated empathy* suggest that the process of transmission, experience, and perception of empathy can still occur effectively through digital mediums.

Theme 2: The Level of Effectiveness of WhatsApp in Reaching Generation Z

The literature on *cyber counseling* shows that instant messaging platforms are very effective in facilitating *self-disclosure* among adolescents. Formats that feel private, informal, and are under the control of the user can reduce social anxiety. For Gen Z, typing a message is a natural action, so starting a pastoral conversation feels much less intimidating. A systematic review found that *cyber counseling* interventions were shown to “increase *self-disclosure*, psychological well-being, and adolescents' active involvement in the counseling process” (Hasanah et al., 2025, p. 2112).

The asynchronous nature of text messages also provides a unique advantage, giving counselors time to reflect and organize their thoughts, which can lead to deeper disclosure. Thus, WhatsApp's strategic role is as a **low-risk “gateway” or first point of contact**. Many members of Generation Z will probably never proactively seek out a pastor, but are willing to send text messages when struggling. In this role, WhatsApp becomes a crucial bridge that connects the pastoral needs of the younger generation with church resources, where once trust is built, counselors can lead to deeper interactions.

Theme 3: Critical Ethical and Practical Challenges

The use of WhatsApp for pastoral counseling is fraught with ethical and practical minefields. The American Counseling Association (ACA) in *its Code of Ethics* (2014) dedicates an entire section (Part H) to remote counseling, which emphasizes several critical areas.

1. **Confidentiality and Privacy:** WhatsApp's end-to-end *encryption* protects data in transit, but not when it's stored on the device. Your conversation history can be accessed if your device is lost or hacked. The issue of *informed consent* becomes more complex; counselors must explicitly explain these privacy risks to counselors (congregations) before the session begins, in accordance with the ACA (2014) code of conduct.
2. **Setting Boundaries:** This is probably the biggest practical challenge. WhatsApp's “always-on” nature risks blurring professional boundaries. Without firm limits on digital work hours and response times, counselors are at risk of *burnout*, while counselors can develop unhealthy dependencies. A clear Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) is needed.
3. **Limitations in Communication and Crisis Management:** The absence of non-verbal cues hinders the counselor's ability to accurately assess the counselor's emotional state. The platform is severely inadequate to handle acute crisis situations such as suicidal thoughts. Any WhatsApp counseling protocol should include clear emergency triage procedures, including local emergency services contact information, and counselors should be able to refer to more appropriate services if needed, as recommended by the ACA (2014).

Theme 4: The Role of Counselors as Digital *Shepherds*

The practice of digital counseling has given birth to a new role, that of *the digital shepherd*—a spiritual guide who navigates the digital space with theological wisdom, pastoral sensitivity, and professionalism. This role demands *telehealth* competencies such as empathic communication, effective use of technology, and maintaining privacy and ethics. Digital shepherds create “sacred spaces” on secular platforms through conversations that focus on meaning, hope, and faith. This



implies a shift in the pastoral teaching method, moving from authoritative instruction to empathetic mentoring. This role challenges traditional ecclesiology, as pastoring can now take place outside the church building. Ward (2022, p. 112) asserts that “the church is no longer just a place to visit, but a community that is formed,” both online and offline—in line with the way Generation Z is building relationships and searching for meaning in the digital age..

Conclusion

Summary of Findings

This study confirms that the use of WhatsApp as a pastoral counseling tool for Generation Z is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it offers tremendous innovative potential to reach generations that are difficult to approach through traditional methods. Its accessibility, familiarity, and ability to lower psychological barriers make WhatsApp a valuable bridge. On the other hand, it comes with a series of serious ethical and practical challenges related to privacy, limitations, and limitations of communication. The answers to the research question show that WhatsApp is not a panacea, but rather a powerful but risky support tool. Its effectiveness does not lie in the platform itself, but rather in the competence of the counselor and the ethical-theological framework that underpins the practice.

Practical Implications for the Church

Based on these findings, several practical implications can be recommended for the church:

1. **Development of Digital Pastoral Counseling SOPs:** The Church should develop strict and comprehensive SOPs for pastoral counseling via WhatsApp, including *informed consent*, privacy policies, the establishment of service hours, crisis handling protocols, and case escalation guidelines.
2. **Training for Pastors and Counselors:** Training for pastors and pastoral counselors is a must, with a focus on developing *telehealth competencies* such as digital ethics, cybersecurity, digital empathy practices, and text-based counseling techniques.
3. **Implementation of a Hybrid Approach:** The most sensible model is the hybrid approach, where counseling via WhatsApp serves as a complement, not a replacement, to the pastoral ministry as a whole. It can be an initial point of contact or an ongoing mentoring tool, but for complex cases, face-to-face meetings (physical or video) should remain a priority.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The study has limitations, particularly its reliance on secondary data from a systematic literature review, which may not fully capture the dynamic nuances of real-time pastoral interactions in the field. In addition, its coverage is limited to publications between 2021 and 2025. Future research should prioritize empirical studies, such as qualitative interviews with Gen Z congregations in higher education settings or quantitative surveys on counselor efficacy. In addition, further studies can explore how digital pastoral ministry can be integrated into health care framework to better support youth mental well-being.

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Linda Mutiara Lumban Tobing: Conceptualization, Methodology, Software. Data curation, Writing- Original draft preparation, Supervision, Recourses, Review and editing, Formal analysis, **Sondang Sirait:** Review and editing, Methodology, Data curation, Formal analysis.

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