



Consecrated Life in the Digital Age: Navigating Social Media's Impact on Interiority, Community, and Vocation

Raymond Aina, MSP

Abstract

Across Sub-Saharan Africa, a silent revolution unfolds. Social media, a glittering siren song and a veiled serpent has woven itself into the fabric of consecrated life. This article investigates this "social media paradox," examining its multifaceted impact on the soul, the community, and the call to vocation within African religious communities. On the one hand, Facebook groups pulsate with shared prayers, Instagram showcases vibrant diversity, and WhatsApp bridges geographical chasms. These platforms foster a sense of belonging, empower marginalised voices, and offer new avenues for spiritual formation and discernment. Yet, amidst this digital chorus, shadows lurk. The constant hum can erode sacred silence, replacing inward contemplation with the pursuit of online validation. The delicate fabric of community life can be torn apart as the allure of virtual interaction eclipses the essential sustenance of shared spaces. This is not a call for retreat, but a clarion cry for discernment. We must analyse the ethical considerations of social media engagement for religious communities, crafting practical strategies to harness its potential while mitigating its risks. This critical exploration is not merely an academic exercise, but a tapestry woven with research, analysis, and open dialogue. It is a call to action, paving the way for a future where consecrated life and technology dance in harmony, enriching faith journeys and illuminating a vibrant path for African religious communities to thrive in the digital age.

Keywords: Addiction, consecrated life, faith formation, FoMO, social media, vocation

Introduction

The burgeoning digital landscape has swept across Sub-Saharan Africa, transforming not only communication but also the very fabric of consecrated life. This article investigates the complex interplay between social media and African religious communities, examining its impact on interiority, community, and vocation. While social media platforms offer avenues for prayerful connection, fostering a sense of belonging and bridging geographical divides, their potential pitfalls cannot be ignored. The constant digital hum can threaten the sacred silence crucial for contemplative orders, and the allure of online validation can impede the inward journey central to a life of faith. Moreover, the fragility of community bonds may be exposed in the hyper-connected world, where virtual interactions risk eclipsing the nurturing intimacy of shared spaces. This article meticulously examines these nuanced challenges and opportunities. We explore how social media shapes interiority, analysing its potential to both deepen and distract from the contemplative life. We investigate how online platforms can foster a sense of community and bridge geographical divides while questioning their ability to replace the irreplaceable bonds forged in physical spaces. Finally, we turn the lens to the critical role of social media in vocational discernment, analysing its potential to both illuminate and obscure the call to consecrated life. This is not merely an academic exploration, but a call to action. Through rigorous research, thoughtful analysis, and open dialogue, we can navigate this digital crossroads with wisdom and discernment. We can harness the power

of social media to enrich consecrated life without compromising its core values. In doing so, we can weave a tapestry where technology and faith dance in harmony, illuminating a vibrant path for consecrated life to thrive in the heart of Africa's digital age.

The Rise and Reach of Social Media: A Double-Edged Sword

Electronic and social media have woven themselves into the fabric of human interaction, fundamentally reshaping communication at individual, organizational, and community levels. With 4.2 billion internet users and over 3 billion actively engaging on social media, platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp handle a staggering volume of daily messages. These ubiquitous channels offer undeniable benefits. They streamline communication, fostering connectivity across continents and facilitating the instant exchange of information. However, this revolution in access comes with a complex set of challenges. The impact of social media on communication is multifaceted. While it fosters interactivity and immediacy, it can also erode face-to-face communication skills and exacerbate miscommunication. The potential for community building and global connection exists alongside the insidious realities of cyberbullying, harassment, and the rampant spread of misinformation. Studies reveal a darker side, linking excessive social media use to anxiety, depression, and loneliness, fuelled by warped perceptions of reality and unrealistic social expectations. So, the rise of social media presents a paradox. It democratizes information and amplifies human connection, yet simultaneously raises potent concerns about its influence on interpersonal communication,

relationships, and broader societal well-being.¹ As the digital landscape continues its relentless evolution, we must critically assess the effects of social media on communication and develop strategies to mitigate its potentially harmful aspects. Only then can we harness its power for good while safeguarding individual well-being and the integrity of our social fabric.

Statement of the Problem and Delimitation of Study

The rapid ascent of social media in Sub-Saharan Africa presents a complex and multifaceted challenge for consecrated persons. While these digital platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for communication, community building, and global outreach, their pervasive presence also raises potent concerns about their impact on the core values and lived experiences of individuals dedicated to religious life. In the digital age, consecrated individuals face a central paradox: how to reconcile their vow of interiority and contemplative life with the constant stimuli of social media. This research explores this tension through three lenses. First, it investigates the challenge of maintaining silence, solitude, and introspection amidst online distractions, analysing how consecrated

¹ Priyanka Ahuja, "The Impact of the Internet on Communication and Social Interaction," LinkedIn, 2019, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/impact-internet-communication-social-interaction-priyanka-ahuja>; Krishna Giri, "The Impact of social media on society," LinkedIn, 2019, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/impact-social-media-society-krishna-giri>; "Social Media Effects on Communication," University of the People, <https://www.uopeople.edu/blog/media-communication/how-social-media-affected-communication/>; Yanyan Zhang, et al., "Does the Internet Bring People Closer Together or Further Apart? The Impact of Internet Usage on Interpersonal Communications," National Library of Medicine, 2021, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9687672/>

individuals navigate the impact of social media on their spiritual growth and fulfilment of vows. Second, it examines the complex relationship between social media and community, questioning whether it serves as a bridge for connection or fosters isolation through virtual interactions that replace genuine engagement and shared experiences. The research sheds light on the impact of social media on community dynamics within religious institutions and the overall well-being of consecrated persons. Finally, focusing on Sub-Saharan Africa, the study explores the role of social media in discernment and formation. It explores whether the ubiquitous digital landscape offers valuable resources and connections for spiritual growth and vocational exploration, or if it introduces new distractions and complicates detachment from worldly influences. Ultimately, the analysis aims to uncover both the potential benefits and drawbacks of social media in nurturing vocations and guiding individuals on their spiritual journeys. By investigating these interconnected themes, this research aims to:

- i. Provide a nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between social media and consecrated life in Sub-Saharan Africa.
- ii. Identify the challenges and opportunities presented by this evolving digital landscape.
- iii. Contribute to a more informed discussion about the future of religious communities and the role of social media in their continued growth and relevance in the region.

Offer practical recommendations and strategies for consecrated individuals and religious institutions to navigate the social media landscape effectively, safeguarding their core values while harnessing its potential for good.

The research ultimately seeks to answer a critical question: Can consecrated persons in Sub-Saharan Africa reconcile their commitment to interiority, community, and spiritual growth with the undeniable realities of a world increasingly dominated by virtual connections? Recognizing the paucity of critically acclaimed works on this specific topic, this research investigates the uncharted territory of consecrated persons and social media in Africa. Through meticulously analysing this complex interplay, we aim to bridge this knowledge gap and equip individuals and institutions with effective strategies. Our findings pave the way for a future where technology catalyses spiritual growth and community building, harmonizing with, rather than jeopardizing, the core values of consecrated life.

Social Media and Spiritual Formation in the Digital Age: A Critical Review

This review critically examines a diverse body of literature exploring the multifaceted impact of social media on religious life and spiritual formation in the digital age. It investigates the influence of digital media on human existence, the evolving role of social media in religious practice, the need for pastoral engagement with the online world, and the specific impacts on young people. This collection examines the intricate web of social media and religious life, weaving together diverse perspectives to explore its transformative potential and the challenges it presents to faith communities. This review explores the multifaceted relationship between digital media and religious life, drawing insights from Anita Cloete's "Living in a

Digital Culture"² and the Vatican's "Towards Full Presence."³ Cloete sets the stage by urging us to critically examine how online platforms shape our religious experiences and understanding of faith. This introspective lens guides us through both the transformative potential and unforeseen challenges that arise from the intricate intertwining of our religious lives and the digital landscape. The Vatican's statement serves as a clarion call for active spiritual leadership in online spaces, recognizing pitfalls that deepen various forms of division. These include the formation of individualistic "spaces" fostering extreme behaviours and aggressive speech (no. 16), the rise of digital tribalism and adversarial spirit (no. 55), and the ease with which misinformation and negativity spread through automated systems and pseudonymous actors (no. 16). These pitfalls highlight the urgent need for genuine human connection as the cornerstone of online ministry.

The review underscores the urgent need for consecrated religious leadership in the digital era. Cloete emphasizes the need for theological reflection, while the Vatican statement calls for a re-evaluation of formation processes to equip future shepherds with the skills and perspective needed to navigate the complexities of online interactions and nurture spiritual life within the digital fold (cf. nos. 1-3). This proactive approach to formation should be central to

² Anita L. Cloete, "Living in a digital culture: The need for theological reflection," *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 71, no. 2 (2015), Art. #2073, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i2.2073> (accessed January 6, 2024).

³ Dicastery For Communication, "Towards Full Presence. A Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with Social Media," Vatican News, May 29, 2023 (accessed January 5, 2024), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/dpc/documents/20230528_dpc-verso-piena-presenza_en.html

ensuring a future where technology enhances, rather than detracts, from our spiritual journeys. Pope Benedict XVI's 2010 World Communications Day message resonates strongly with this theme. He champions the use of digital technologies for pastoral ministry and evangelization while urging priests to maintain a robust spiritual foundation and be authentic witnesses in the digital sphere.⁴ This authenticity, rooted in a genuine priestly heart and closeness to Christ, should infuse the digital world with a much-needed "soul" and serve as the core message of our digital presence. This review highlights the critical need for religious leaders to engage proactively with the digital landscape. By acknowledging the pitfalls of online interactions and equipping future shepherds with the necessary skills and perspectives, we can foster a future where technology becomes a tool for building genuine human connection, nurturing spiritual life, and sharing the message of God's love in a way that is both tangible and engaging. Only then can we ensure that the digital world becomes a space where individuals, especially those experiencing uncertainty and confusion, can find true connection and belonging in Christ.

Consecrated Life and the Challenges of the Post-Modern World

Pope Francis's words in *The Strength of a Vocation: A Conversation with Fernando Prado*,⁵ that ““it is more difficult to live as a

⁴ Benedict XVI, “Message for the 44th World Communications Day: The priest and pastoral ministry in a digital world: New media at the service of the word,” May 16, 2010, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20100124_44th-world-communications-day.html (accessed January 6, 2024).

⁵ (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2018).

consecrated person in today's world''⁶ resonate deeply with many in consecrated life. The digital landscape, with its endless possibilities and pitfalls, presents a unique challenge for maintaining strong communities and personal spiritual growth. While technology offers valuable tools for evangelization and connection, its misuse can lead to information overload, isolation, and dependence, hindering authentic interpersonal relationships and fostering addiction to virtual realities. This essay explores these challenges through the lens of *The Gift of Fidelity*, seeking to understand the root causes and potential solutions for navigating the digital world in a way that strengthens our communities, deepens our faith, and remains true to the core values of consecrated life.

Digital Connectivity and Fragility of Community Life

The seductively interconnected world of digital technology presents both a glittering promise of evangelization and connectivity and a lurking threat of isolation and dependence. While social media platforms offer the potential to reach vast audiences and foster global communion, their constant churn of information can overwhelm our capacities for discernment, leading to the consumption of unfiltered content that distorts reality and hinders authentic expression (GFJP, no. 21). This, coupled with the insidious lure of virtual interaction, fosters a sense of isolation, a withdrawal from the present moment and genuine connection with fellow human beings (GFJP, no. 21). The consequences of this digital escapism are tangible. Social and relational skills atrophy as eyes become glued to screens, even during shared meals or recreational periods. Conversations

⁶ Francis, *The Strength of a Vocation*, 39. Cited in Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *The Gift of Fidelity, The Joy of Perseverance: Guidelines* (Abuja: Paulines Publications Africa, 2021).

fragment, punctuated by the constant need to check notifications or reference online happenings. The once-prized space for community dwindles, replaced by a yearning for the curated realities of social media and the fleeting thrills of fictional dramas like Zee World or Telemundo. This dependence, unfortunately, can manifest in starkly disruptive ways. I recall a painful experience where a visitor—a nun—to our community relentlessly prioritized Zee World over shared meals and communal activities, forcing uncomfortable negotiations and highlighting the potential for such addiction to fracture the very fabric of our lives. Even the absence of a television subscription could not deter her pursuit of these virtual realities, as she sought them out in other spaces. This incident, though anecdotal, serves as a stark reminder of the potential pitfalls of unchecked digital engagement.

Beyond the realm of social media and fictional escapism, the darker aspects of the digital world pose even more insidious dangers. The proliferation of pornography and exploitative content threatens to erode our spiritual and emotional well-being (GFJP, no. 21). Beyond the physical screens lies a hidden virtual reality, one saturated with hyper-stimulation and instant gratification. This virtual world, encompassing pornography, sexual exploitation, and addictive gambling, is not merely entertainment; it is a manipulative landscape that distorts our perception of intimacy, relationships, and risk. This constant exposure to exaggerated emotions and unrealistic scenarios desensitizes us to real-world experiences. It fosters impatience and an inability to delay gratification, hindering our ability to build healthy relationships and cope with challenges. We become accustomed to quick fixes and emotional shortcuts,

overlooking the deeper complexities of human connection and personal growth. This virtual reality is not confined to a fringe group; it is increasingly infiltrating mainstream culture, affecting individuals of all ages and backgrounds. This widespread exposure raises concerns about affective maturity, our ability to manage emotions effectively and navigate the complexities of real-world relationships. The pervasive virtual environment of our age, characterized by its unrelenting stimulation, instant gratification, and distorted perceptions, poses significant challenges to consecrated life within the Roman Catholic Church. This digital realm can subtly undermine the very foundations of religious commitment, impacting the core vows and spiritual well-being of consecrated individuals.

Firstly, the vow of chastity faces a constant barrage of temptations in the form of readily accessible pornography and hyper-sexualized content. These unrealistic and sensationalized portrayals of intimacy can skew perceptions of authentic relationships, making it difficult to maintain a healthy and balanced perspective on human connection and sexuality. Similarly, the vow of poverty can be challenged by the allure of immediate gratification and quick fixes offered by virtual experiences. This constant pursuit of novelty and excitement contradicts the values of simplicity and detachment embraced by consecrated life, potentially undermining the commitment to a simple and God-centred existence. Moreover, the virtual world's emphasis on individualism and self-reliance can nurture resistance to communal living and shared decision-making, posing a threat to the vow of obedience and submission to the will

of God and superiors. Secondly, the virtual world's potential to become a substitute for genuine human connection and authentic relationships can lead to isolation and a sense of loneliness within consecrated communities. The focus on immediate gratification and instant connection can hinder the investment of time and effort in building deep, meaningful relationships with fellow members, weakening the sense of shared purpose and communal bonds that are vital to consecrated life. Additionally, the distorted perceptions of intimacy and relationships presented in the virtual realm can negatively impact real-world interactions within the community. This can lead to unrealistic expectations, increased conflict, and difficulty in experiencing genuine intimacy and vulnerability.

***Addiction to Social Media and the Impossibility of
Interpersonal Communication***

As the gift of fidelity weakens, the once vibrant tapestry of community life begins to unravel, its threads woven with the chilling hues of isolation and discontent. Members, lured by the siren song of social media, find themselves drawn into a vortex of curated personas and fleeting digital connections. The laughter that once echoed through shared meals is replaced by the click-clack of keyboards and the hypnotic glow of screens. Conversations dwindle to hollow exchanges of emojis and status updates, a pale imitation of the genuine warmth and vulnerability that once graced the air. Cliques form, invisible walls erected by shared online interests and anxieties, further fracturing the sacred space of brotherhood. The joy of spontaneous conversations and shared silences evaporates, replaced by a sterile parade of "formal reciprocal respect" and "common acts punctuated by the clock" (GFJP, no. 18).

Even within the bustling tapestry of community life, some members find themselves drifting towards the fringes, cloaked in an invisible shroud of isolation. They become ghosts amidst the laughter, their eyes glued to screens or lost in internal battles. Conversation, once a shared river, dwindles to a hesitant trickle, their silence a chasm that distances them from their brothers. This self-imposed exile breeds discontent, a slow poison that seeps into the community spirit. Resentment creeps in, fuelled by unspoken frustrations and the gnawing loneliness of unshared moments. Cliques harden around shared anxieties, further fracturing the bonds of brotherhood. This isolation is not a mere inconvenience; it is a fertile ground for "a kind of isolation and dissatisfaction, a sadness that slowly gives rise to resentment, to constant complaint, to boredom" (GFJP, no. 19). Yet, amidst the shadows, flickers of hope remain. By extending a hand of understanding, nurturing open communication, and offering solace to those adrift, the community can weave a new thread of inclusivity, one that embraces vulnerability and mends the tears of isolation, reminding each member that they are not alone in the tapestry of shared faith and brotherhood. This descent into digital isolation mirrors the anxieties Pope Francis outlines in *Christus Vivit*.⁷

The Digital World: A Double-Edged Sword for Consecrated Persons

Christus Vivit, in the section "The Digital Environment" (nos. 86-90), paints a nuanced picture of the digital environment, highlighting its profound impact on all aspects of human life. Like a multifaceted

⁷ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, *Post-Synodal Exhortation* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019).

coin, the digital world casts a profound shadow on all aspects of human life, offering both gleaming possibilities and lurking dangers. On one side, it gleams with connection and knowledge, fostering dialogue across continents, empowering marginalized voices, and providing access to information like never before. Its platforms become vibrant squares where young people gather, engage in social and religious initiatives, and forge new bonds. But flip the coin, and the glimmer fades into a darker hue. Shallow online interactions can leave us feeling isolated and disconnected from reality, hindering the development of genuine human relationships. The digital landscape becomes fertile ground for manipulation, misinformation, and violence, a breeding ground for cyberbullying and the dark web's insidious activities. Addiction and exposure to harmful content like pornography further cloud the picture (nos. 89-90).

Navigating this complex terrain requires a mindful approach. We must harness the digital world's immense potential for connection and empowerment while remaining vigilant against its pitfalls. Balancing these two sides is crucial. We must foster genuine human connection, built on meaningful communication that transcends fleeting online interactions. We must prioritize critical thinking and discernment, ensuring that the information we consume doesn't manipulate or mislead. And we must protect ourselves from the darker side, shielding ourselves from addiction and harmful content. Ultimately, acknowledging the digital world's duality is key. It is a powerful tool, but it is also a double-edged sword. Only by wielding it with awareness and responsibility can we harness its potential for good and protect ourselves from its dark side. This is the challenge we face, the delicate dance we must perform as we navigate this ever-evolving landscape. Pope Francis offers consecrated persons today what he offers the youth in *Christus Vivit*

(nos. 104-108). Amid a digital landscape brimming with both pitfalls and possibilities, Pope Francis' message rings with hope and empowerment. While acknowledging the dangers of isolation, consumerism, and conformity, he urges them to embrace the potential for creativity and value transmission within this very realm. Venerable Carlo Acutis serves as a beacon of inspiration, reminding us that technology when wielded with purpose, can become a tool for spreading faith and beauty.

However, Francis warns against the seductive lure of conformity in a world obsessed with trends and fleeting pleasures. He poignantly states, "everyone is born an original, but many people end up dying as photocopies" (no. 106). This stark call to individuality encourages young people to resist the pressure to blend in and instead nurture the unique gifts bestowed upon them by God. They are not defined by possessions or appearances but by the potential for greatness within their souls. Pope Francis's call to young people to embrace a life of meaningful purpose resonates deeply with the struggles faced by many within consecrated communities. The fear of missing out and pressure to maintain a perfect online persona, so prevalent in the digital age, not only contribute to the anxieties of young people seeking their place in the world but also erode the very foundations of authentic connection within consecrated communities. The constant buzz of notifications and curated online personas can foster isolation and disengagement, hindering the shared laughter and quiet moments that once bound these communities together.

Yet, amidst this digital wasteland, a flicker of hope remains. Both young people and consecrated communities can find solace in reclaiming the power of shared silence, rediscovering the joy of face-to-face encounters, and embracing the vulnerability of authentic

connection. By harnessing technology for good, prioritizing genuine interactions over fleeting online validation, and fostering a supportive environment for open communication and spiritual growth, both communities and individuals can transcend the superficiality of the digital age and carve their unique paths towards a fulfilling and authentic existence. In navigating this complex landscape, the role of formators, teachers, and leadership within consecrated communities becomes crucial. They must maintain a steadfast commitment to education and guidance, ensuring that young people entering consecrated life are equipped with the tools and discernment necessary to navigate the digital world without compromising their spiritual growth and community bonds. This necessitates:

Persistent Dialogue and Mentorship: Open and ongoing discussions should foster a nuanced understanding of both the opportunities and pitfalls inherent in the digital environment. This continuous engagement provides a crucial avenue for discernment, equipping consecrated persons with the necessary tools to navigate this evolving terrain.

Heightened Discernment: Leaders must sharpen their ability to identify individuals susceptible to the negative influences of the digital world. Vigilance, coupled with compassionate understanding, can prevent members from becoming ensnared by excessive digital engagement.

Proactive Intervention: Should fragile communication patterns or a weakening sense of community life emerge due to digital immersion, leaders must move beyond passive observation. Direct and proactive interventions, tailored to everyone's needs, are essential to support healthy reintegration into communal life.

By prioritizing ongoing dialogue, refined discernment, and proactive intervention, formators, teachers, and leadership can empower consecrated persons to navigate the digital world with awareness and responsibility, safeguarding the integrity of their commitment and nurturing their spiritual growth. However, understanding the specific challenges and opportunities presented by social media in Africa is crucial. By prioritizing ongoing dialogue, refined discernment, and proactive intervention, we can empower consecrated persons to navigate the digital world with awareness and responsibility, safeguarding the integrity of their commitment and nurturing their spiritual growth.

Social Media and Consecrated Life in Africa

This section explores the under-researched but significant topic of social media's influence on consecrated life in Africa. Drawing from existing literature, it paints a complex picture of both challenges and opportunities within this specific context. For instance, Mutuku, Nyandiwa, and Ngundo's study⁸ critically examines the challenges faced by the Missionary Benedictine Sisters of Tutzling (MBST) in Kenya as they navigate the integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) into their monastic way of life. Spanning challenges and opportunities, the study illuminates the intricate dance of integrating ICTs and social media into African-consecrated life. Emphasizing conscience formation, responsible use, and core value preservation, the study acknowledges potential

⁸ Catherine A. Muthoki Mutuku, Chispine Ouma Nyandiwa, and Bibiana Ngundo, "Information Communication Technology Use Related Challenges and their Coping Strategies in Monastic Religious Life," *Journal of Sociology, Psychology & Religious Studies* 3, no. 4 (October 2021): 23-39, at 31, <https://doi.org/10.53819/810181025022>.

conflicts with vows, addiction, and community strains. Uniquely regional considerations, like social media's impact on community formation and legal frameworks, necessitate intergenerational dialogue. Ultimately, the study's insights offer valuable strategies for navigating the digital landscape while safeguarding the essence of consecrated life in Africa. This article offers a valuable contribution to the ongoing discussion of ICTs and religious life by providing a critical analysis of the specific challenges faced by the MBST, proposing practical strategies for navigating the digital landscape, and acknowledging the complexities beyond simplistic solutions.

Talla's study from Cameroon⁹ vividly illustrates the rapid intrusion of digital technology into even remote communities, highlighting the tension between its potential for outreach and the risk of compromising contemplative spaces for consecrated religion. Matenga's South African study¹⁰ further emphasizes this tension, with young discerners expressing ambivalence towards social media's role in their spiritual development. These qualitative studies offer valuable human perspectives on how this tension manifests in diverse African contexts. While African religious communities share the global challenges and opportunities presented by social media, they also face unique regional considerations. Cloete's article¹¹ sheds light on the broader theological implications of networked

⁹ Jean Paulin Talla, "Digital Technology in Cameroon: Documenting the Tensions between Opportunities and Challenges among Rural Users," *African Journal of Science, Technology, Innovation and Development* 12, no. 3 (May 2020): 279-286, doi:10.1080/20421338.2019.1610482.

¹⁰ Jennifer Matenga, "Into the Deep: Young Adults' Perspectives on Social Media's Role in Religious Vocation in South Africa," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 162 (March 2019): 116-132.

¹¹ Cloete, "Living in a digital culture" (accessed).

individualism, questioning how it impacts community formation and traditional religious authority structures in the digital age. This resonates with Madu's Nigerian study,¹² which highlights the need for intergenerational dialogue and understanding of evolving legal frameworks to effectively navigate these digital complexities within African communities. Despite the challenges posed by individualistic trends and excessive social media use, Madu highlights a persistent hunger for meaningful community among individuals in consecrated life in Africa. This hunger reflects the complex and multifaceted nature of their experience, where questions about the meaning and relevance of community life and mission can arise. Notably, the focus on individual expression, prevalent in post-modern culture and selfie culture, can clash with the evangelical counsels of Chastity, Poverty, and Obedience.¹³

A Synopsis of Consecrated Life in Africa and the Digital Crossroads

Until recently, the intersection of social media and consecrated life in Africa remained largely uncharted territory. Now, a growing body of research illuminates this dynamic landscape, offering a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities presented by digital technologies within this unique context. While diverse in focus and methodology, these pioneering studies coalesce around several key themes.

¹² Wenceslaus Madu, "Inter-generational Dialogue: Towards Building Synergy in Consecrated Life in Nigeria," *The Catholic Voyage: African Journal of Consecrated Life* 20, no. 2 (2023): 79-101, DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/tcv.v20i2.5>

¹³ Madu, "Inter-generational Dialogue," 80.

Acknowledging the Complexities: Firstly, all the reviewed texts recognize the under-researched nature of this topic, highlighting its critical significance in the evolving world of African religious life. Regardless of their specific focus, each study grapples with the multifaceted impact of social media on consecrated communities, acknowledging both its potential pitfalls and inherent possibilities. This balanced perspective underscores the need for a nuanced approach, one that neither demonizes technology nor embraces it uncritically.

Diversity of Perspectives: Secondly, the studies emphasize the importance of viewing the issue through a multifaceted lens. Mutuku *et al.* delve deep into the specific challenges faced by the Missionary Benedictine Sisters of Tutzing in Kenya, offering practical strategies for navigating the digital landscape within their context. Talla and Matenga provide broader qualitative insights from Cameroon and South Africa, respectively, highlighting the tension between online outreach and the preservation of contemplative spaces. Cloete and Madu, meanwhile, step back to analyse the broader theological and legal implications of networked individualism in the digital age. This diversity of approaches enriches our understanding of social media's influence, demonstrating its varied manifestations across different African contexts.

Regional Considerations: While the studies share global challenges and opportunities, they also underscore unique regional considerations. Cloete's article studies the theological implications of networked individualism on community formation and traditional religious authority structures in the digital age, a perspective echoed by Madu's Nigerian study. Madu emphasizes the need for intergenerational dialogue and understanding of evolving legal frameworks in navigating digital complexities within African

communities. Despite challenges posed by individualistic trends and excessive social media use, Madu identifies a persistent hunger for meaningful community among individuals in consecrated life in Africa. This underscores the complex nature of their experience, where questions about the meaning and relevance of community life and mission arise.

Finding a Balanced Path: Notably, the texts highlight the clash between individual expression, prevalent in post-modern and selfie culture, and the evangelical counsels of Chastity, Poverty, and Obedience. The solution lies in fostering nuanced approaches, including intergenerational dialogue, understanding legal frameworks, and building intentional communities that embrace diversity and address contemporary challenges. While Madu indirectly addresses the potential drawbacks of social media for vocations and spiritual journeys, it provides a starting point for further exploration. Talla's study demonstrates the potential for online outreach, emphasizing the need for discernment to harness the positive aspects of social media while mitigating potential drawbacks.

A Call for Further Exploration

While highlighting both the challenges and opportunities presented by digital technologies, these studies reveal the need for further exploration in several crucial areas. Firstly, the influence of specific platforms and trends on vocations and spiritual journeys remains largely uncharted. Longitudinal studies examining the impact of platforms like Facebook or WhatsApp on young aspirants and established communities would be invaluable. Additionally, understanding how trends like "selfie culture" interact with the evangelical counsels of Chastity, Poverty, and Obedience requires

focused investigation within specific charisms and missional activities. This deeper understanding would equip religious communities to navigate the digital landscape thoughtfully, harnessing technology's positive aspects while safeguarding their core values. Secondly, the studies emphasize the need for open dialogue, legal awareness, and intentional community building. Building upon the preliminary roadmap outlined in existing research, communities can engage in ongoing discernment about integrating technology into their daily lives. This requires fostering open conversations across generations, understanding evolving legal frameworks, and constructing intentional communities that embrace diversity and address contemporary challenges.

By taking these steps, African religious communities can ensure that social media serves their unique needs and realities, shaping a vibrant future for consecrated life in the 21st century. However, the unique pulse of Africa demands a context-specific lens. Can technology not only illuminate existing paths of faith but also forge new ones? This intriguing question beckons further exploration. While established frameworks offer valuable knowledge, sustained research, agile adaptation, and a steadfast dedication to fostering meaningful community in the digital era remain essential. Only through such unwavering efforts can we fully comprehend technology's potential to sculpt a vibrant and dynamic future for consecrated life in Africa.

Vistas for Further Research for InCLA Journal

Debuting on the academic and publishing stage, *InCLA: Insights on Consecrated Life* boldly steps onto the scene, aiming to claim its place as a leading platform for scholarship on African consecrated

life. This inaugural issue sets the course, prioritizing interdisciplinary dialogue in this distinct context, particularly through the lens of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and social media. Recognizing the profound interplay between these digital forces and consecrated life in Africa, the editorial board envisions the journal as a crucial resource, fostering both cutting-edge research and its dissemination. This final section, outlining avenues for further exploration, underscores the journal's unwavering commitment to navigating the complexities and opportunities inherent in the integration of ICTs and social media into African-consecrated life.

Beyond the pixelated shadows of the African savannah, where ancient traditions meet the echoes of the digital age, a crucial question arises: how can consecrated life harness the potential of social media to nurture its spirit and thrive in the 21st century? While global frameworks offer valuable insights, the vibrant pulse of Africa demands a context-specific exploration, delving deeper into the emerging themes that beckon us forward. This exploration unfolds in five interwoven paths:

Interiority and Contemplation: Can technology illuminate existing paths of faith by curating sacred spaces online for reflection and mindfulness? How can online meditation communities, guided prayer apps, and social media platforms enhance traditional practices like silence and solitude, while fostering responsible online interactions? This requires investigation into how religious orders utilize social media for both individual and communal prayer, analysing its impact on

focus, engagement, and the overall contemplative experience. The ethical implications of virtual reality experiences for consecrated life also demand attention, prompting us to consider safeguards against potential harm and embrace responsible digital practices.

Navigating Community and Isolation: Social media presents both a bridge and a chasm. We must analyse how platforms like Facebook groups and online forums can foster connection and belonging within geographically dispersed communities, encouraging inclusive practices and communication that nurture a shared identity and support. Yet, we must also move beyond idealizations, exploring how social media can be used to portray the diverse realities and challenges faced by consecrated communities. By encouraging authentic storytelling and representation of different backgrounds, cultures, and perspectives, we can bridge the gap between online and offline communities through shared activities and retreats.

Discernment and Formation in the Digital Age: The digital world can be a powerful tool for vocational discernment. We must explore how online resources, communities, and communication platforms can provide support and guidance to individuals exploring a call to consecrated life. Formation programmes, equipped with digital literacy and ethical discernment training, can empower future religious leaders with healthy online habits. However, amidst the noise of information overload, strategies for fostering critical thinking, silence, and

reflection within these programmes are crucial to ensure responsible engagement with online resources for both discernment and spiritual growth.

Contextual Considerations in Africa: Africa's unique landscape presents exciting possibilities. We must move beyond limitations and explore how social media can bridge geographical and cultural divides within religious communities, promoting education, healthcare access, and social justice initiatives across the continent. Embracing diversity demands culturally sensitive and context-specific approaches to digital engagement within religious communities. Finally, local research initiatives led by African scholars, religious leaders, and community members are essential to ensure culturally relevant research and empower local voices to shape the conversation on how social media and consecrated life can forge a vibrant future in Africa.

Re-examining Smartphone Use and Potential Addiction: In their exploration of the challenges posed by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) within consecrated life, particularly monastic settings, Mutuku *et al.* pinpoint two prevalent addictions associated with ICT use among consecrated individuals: internet addiction and smartphone addiction. They posit that excessive engagement with social media on smartphones, coupled with the duration of smartphone ownership, fear of missing out (FoMO), and the frequency of social media checking, exhibit correlations with smartphone

addiction within this unique population.¹⁴ Navigating the digital crossroads requires a balanced approach, propose Mutuku *et al.* Their six-pronged strategy prioritizes moderation to counter internet addiction, fostering genuine relationships over tech-induced isolation, and mastering tools to minimize misuse. Personal checklists comparing ICT use to spiritual exercises and regular community evaluations hold everyone accountable, while Pope Francis's *Rejoice* reminds them to inhabit this new environment rooted in scripture and their Rule of Life. This holistic approach empowers communities to harness technology's potential while safeguarding their core values and vibrant way of life.¹⁵

While Mutuku *et al.*'s study undoubtedly offers valuable insights into potential addictions and their mitigation strategies within consecrated life, its reliance on a purely cause-effect approach warrants critical re-evaluation. This approach, while contributing to foundational understanding, risks oversimplifying the complex factors contributing to addictive behaviours in this unique context. The passage raises several critical concerns regarding the potential for smartphone addiction and its impact on individuals and communities. Firstly, the passage relies on a simplistic cause-and-effect relationship between various factors and smartphone addiction. While age, social media usage, and smartphone ownership may

¹⁴ Mutuku, Nyandiwa, and Ngundo, "Information Communication Technology," 32, 35.

¹⁵ Mutuku, Nyandiwa, and Ngundo, "Information Communication Technology," 33-35.

indeed correlate with addiction, the underlying mechanisms and individual differences require deeper exploration. Furthermore, the singular focus on the fear of missing out (FoMO) as a predictor overlooks other potential motivators for excessive smartphone use, such as social validation, information seeking, or escapism. Secondly, the passage's reliance on sleep duration and checking frequency as predictive factors fails to consider the qualitative aspects of smartphone use. Assessing the content, purpose, and emotional engagement associated with smartphone activities would provide a more holistic understanding of addictive behaviours. Additionally, the framing of "confirming concerns" among parents, educators, and young people suggests a pre-existing bias towards smartphone addiction, potentially overlooking the potential benefits and responsible use of these technologies.

Hence, further research is needed to explore the specific factors contributing to smartphone addiction within diverse contexts, including the role of individual motivations, content engagement, and cultural influences. Additionally, acknowledging the potential benefits and responsible use of smartphones is crucial to avoid falling into simplistic narratives of technology as inherently addictive. Only through a comprehensive and balanced approach can we understand the complex interplay between technology, individual behaviour, and potential addiction, paving the way for healthier and more productive relationships with our digital companions.

Conclusion: A Tapestry Woven in Pixels and Prayers

The digital sun has risen, painting the African savanna in shades of possibility. Its rays dance on the intricate tapestry of consecrated life, where threads of faith intertwine with pixels of connection. Once a distant echo, the hum of technology now vibrates within the very fabric of these vibrant communities. It is here, in this fertile ground where tradition meets innovation, that we stand, poised at the precipice of a future teeming with potential. But the path forward is not a preordained script, it is a tapestry yet to be woven. Each stitch, each pixel, each whispered prayer holds the power to shape a future where consecrated life not only survives but thrives, its vibrant colours bursting forth from the digital canvas. Let the InCLA Journal be our loom, not a dusty relic of the past, but a vibrant platform where researchers and communities weave their threads of knowledge and experience. Here, let us explore the nuanced ways technology bridges geographical chasms, ignites spiritual connections, and amplifies voices for justice. Let us probe the sacred spaces where virtual communities gather, and where online platforms become altars for prayer and contemplation.

Imagine the scene: a chorus of voices rises from across the continent, not from ancient cathedrals, but from pixelated screens, united in prayer and purpose. Imagine isolated communities, once separated by miles, now linked by digital threads, sharing stories, wisdom, and support. Imagine young hearts, ignited by the spark of faith online, finding their path to consecrated life guided by a virtual hand-stretched across the digital divide. This is the future we weave with each click, each keystroke, and each line of research published in the pages of the InCLA Journal. Let this not be a static list of possibilities, but a dynamic dance of inquiry and action. Let us be

the artists, the weavers of code and compassion, who paint a future where consecrated life and technology move in perfect harmony, a vibrant tapestry shimmering under the African sun.

As we stand on the precipice of this digital age, a captivating vista unfolds before us. It is a landscape where the echoes of social media's influence beckon us beyond the pixelated shadows, urging us to illuminate new pathways for consecrated life in Africa. Let us embark on this journey of exploration, embracing the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead with courage and collaboration. Our voices must not be confined to praise alone. Let them rise in the spirit of inquiry, pushing the boundaries of what is possible. We are called to weave a tapestry not just of pixels and prayers, but of daring creativity, woven with the threads of a shared vision. In this vision, consecrated life in Africa takes centre stage, a vibrant testament to the enduring power of faith in the digital age. Technology is merely the canvas. It is the human spirit, guided by faith and fuelled by inquiry, that will determine the colours of this tapestry. Let us paint it with the vibrant hues of hope, weave it with the unyielding threads of love, and dance together, united in our consecration, on the African stage of the digital future. The time for exploration is not tomorrow, nor the next day. It is now.