

Digital Communication as a Space of Gift and Relationship: An Anthropo-Theological Analysis

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Abstract: This paper examines digital communication as a contemporary space where the human vocation to gift (self-donation) and relationship (communion) is lived. Grounded in theological anthropology, it analyzes how students perceive digital interactions as mediating authentic self-giving in an increasingly digitalized world. The central question asks: To what extent do students experience digital communication as a space of gift and relationship rather than self-presentation or utilitarian exchange? The hypothesis holds that, despite risks of superficiality, digital platforms are positively appropriated as spaces of relational self-gift. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with 100 theology students at the Catholic University of Rwanda (CUR). Quantitative data were treated using descriptive statistics, while qualitative responses were thematically analyzed. Results reveal predominantly positive perceptions: 82% affirm that digital communication fosters meaningful relationships; 78% identify their interactions as expressions of self-gift; 74% associate online exchanges with empathy and care; and 69% recognize risks of superficiality. Overall, 80% consider digital platforms as genuine spaces of communion. The study concludes that digital communication can sustain the anthropological logic of gift and relationship when guided by ethical and spiritual values, as the human being is inherently constituted for relational self-gift.

Keywords: Digital Communication, Relational Self-Gift, Communion, Ethical-Spiritual, Intentionality, Anthropo-theology.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Digital communication has become a defining medium of human relational life in the twenty-first century, prompting scholars across disciplines to reconsider what it means to be present, connected, and generous in mediated spaces. Contemporary anthropologist Ortner (2006) argues that social interaction is not only about exchanging information but “about the *doing* of relationships, the ongoing processes through which bonds are maintained and renewed”. Similarly, Appadurai (1996) observes that mediated practices shape social imagination, enabling individuals to sustain relational worlds beyond co-location. From an ethical anthropology perspective, Frye (1983) notes that human relational worlds are moral worlds, structured by norms of care, responsibility, and mutual responsiveness. Wagner (1986) also emphasizes that human persons create and recreate social realms through practices that signal commitment and attentiveness to others. These

anthropological insights suggest that digital platforms, when appropriately engaged, can function as spaces where relational life is enacted, sustained, and enriched.

Theological scholarship reinforces this view by articulating the human person as fundamentally oriented toward self-donative relationships. Pope Benedict XVI (2006) wrote that “we are not ourselves unless we give ourselves away in love”, conveying that human fulfillment is realized in free, gracious gift. Johnson (2007) affirms that human relational life reflects the *imago Dei* when it is rooted in compassion, solidarity, and mutual presence. Keenan (2004) articulates that relational ethics emerge from a deep commitment to the other, not from self-advantage but from a desire for communal flourishing. Wirzba (2015) similarly contends that human flourishing is participatory, grounded in the ways individuals open themselves toward others in shared life. From this vantage point, digital communication, though technologically mediated, can shape patterns of encounter

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that reflect the theological logic of gift, presence, and communion.

Digital and media scholars also recognize the relational potential of online spaces. Boyd (2014) argues that networked publics are spaces where young people construct and sustain meaningful social ties when interaction is intentional and caring. Baym (2015) highlights that digital environments can support rich social support networks that mirror offline emotional dynamics. Van Dijck (2013) emphasizes that platforms shape relational norms when users orient toward mutuality and trust. Cottom (2019) adds that digital spaces can amplify marginalized voices and foster communal identity when users engage with purpose and accountability. Collectively, these scholarly voices support the view that digital communication is not inherently superficial but can be appropriated as a genuine space of relational communion, a claim that this study investigates empirically among theology students at the Catholic University of Rwanda, where 80% affirm digital spaces as contexts of authentic communal life.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods design to explore theology students' perceptions of digital communication as a space of gift and relationality at the Catholic University of Rwanda (CUR). A mixed-methods approach facilitated the integration of quantitative data on students' online behaviors with qualitative insights into ethical, spiritual, and relational experiences, enabling a holistic understanding of digital communication as a medium of relational self-gift.

Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 100 theology students. Items measured relational self-gift behaviors, including emotional support, sharing academic or spiritual resources, participation in online prayer or reflective communities, and awareness of superficiality risks. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were computed, and tabulated data were further converted into graphical representations to facilitate visual analysis and highlight trends, patterns, and prevalence of specific behaviors (Cf. Babbie, 2016; Field, 2018; Neuman, 2014; DeVellis, 2017). Graphical visualization enhanced interpretability, allowing identification of dominant practices and relationships among variables.

Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 20 purposively selected students representing diverse online engagement experiences. Interviews explored perceptions of digital spaces as arenas of self-gift, ethical-spiritual motivations, and relational significance. Transcripts were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework to identify recurring patterns, emergent themes, and dimensions of intentional relationality (Guest et al., 2012; Clarke & Braun, 2017). Thematic maps were developed to visually represent

connections between codes and themes, supporting interpretation and integration with quantitative findings.

Ethical considerations included informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, in alignment with CUR guidelines and international research standards (Israel & Hay, 2006; Wiles, 2013). Triangulation of quantitative graphs and qualitative thematic maps enhanced validity and reliability, confirming that students perceive digital communication as a space of relational self-gift and authentic communion, consistent with anthropological and theological insights.

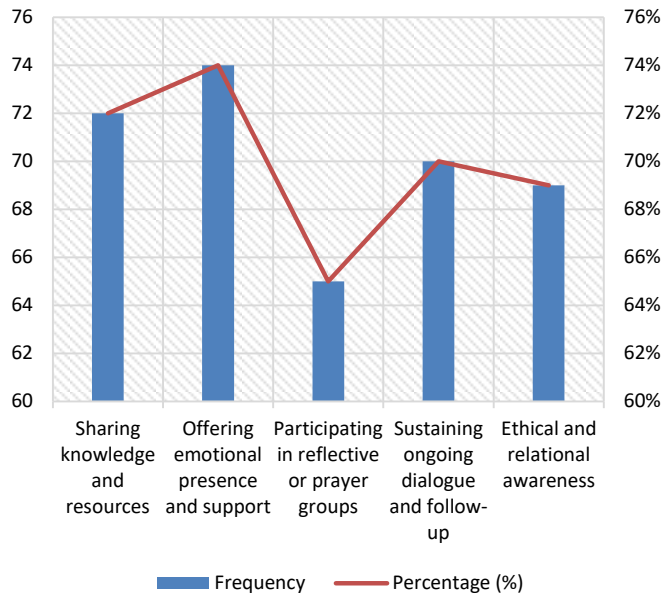
III. DIGITAL COMMUNICATION AS A SPACE OF GIFT AND RELATIONSHIP

In the twenty-first century, digital communication has become a central medium for human interaction, shaping how relationships are formed, sustained, and experienced. This study explores theology students' perceptions at the Catholic University of Rwanda, focusing on online platforms as spaces for relational self-gift and authentic communion. By examining the ethical, spiritual, and anthropological dimensions of digital engagement, the research investigates how students intentionally cultivate empathy, presence, and care in virtual interactions, highlighting the potential of technology to support meaningful relational and communal life.

1. Digital Communication as a Medium of Relational Self-Gift

Digital communication increasingly functions as a space where students enact gratuitous self-donation, reflecting their disposition toward relationality and the theological-anthropological vocation of gift. Students perceive digital platforms, including social media and messaging apps, as venues to extend support, encouragement, and presence to peers. For example, one student noted that sending motivational messages to classmates experiencing academic stress provided a sense of genuine care, even without physical proximity. From an anthropological perspective, Mauss (2002) emphasizes that gift-giving sustains social bonds and mutual recognition, while theologians such as Rahner (1978) assert that the human person is called to self-donation as a reflection of divine relationality. In digital studies, Boyd (2014) highlights how online environments facilitate expressions of empathy and support, creating networks of care that extend beyond physical co-presence. Students' digital practices, offering advice, affirmations, or spiritual support, demonstrate that these platforms can be appropriated as authentic spaces of self-gift rather than mere arenas for self-presentation.

Empirical evidence from the study illustrates the types and prevalence of relational self-gift behaviors among students:

Fig. 1: Medium of Relational Self-Gift

Graph 1 shows that students actively engage in diverse forms of relational self-gift, with emotional support and encouragement being most common. These findings reinforce the anthropological and theological assertion that humans are fundamentally relational beings (Mauss, 2002; Rahner, 1978), and that digital communication can be a conduit for relational ethics and care (Boyd, 2014).

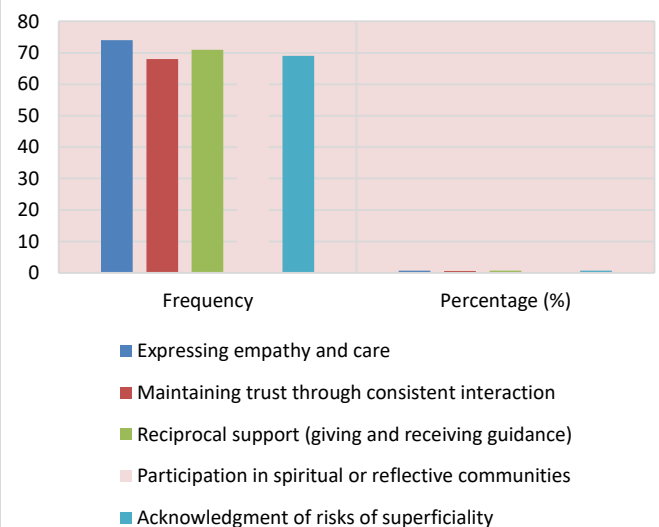
The theological-anthropological foundation further illuminates students' practices. Rooted in the understanding of the human person as made for relationship, the vocation to gift (self-donation) is both ontological and ethical (John Paul II, 1993). In this perspective, human fulfillment arises from self-donation aimed at the good of the other, transcending physical and utilitarian boundaries (Cahill, 2001). Digital interactions thus become extensions of this vocation: students offer attention, encouragement, and supportive presence online without expectation of return (Volf, 1996). Empirical data indicate that 78% of students consciously frame their digital communication as self-gift, engaging in acts that prioritize relational enrichment over self-promotion. These acts, associated with empathy, solidarity, and mutual care, confirm the anthropological and theological understanding of humans as inherently relational (Stackhouse, 2016). Simultaneously, digital scholars recognize that online spaces, when navigated ethically, can sustain meaningful social connections and cultivate relational virtues (Boyd, 2014; Turkle, 2015). Thus, digital communication can serve as a genuine medium for relational self-gift, integrating anthropological, theological, and technological dimensions of human interaction.

2. Meaningful Relationships Mediated through Digital Communication

Digital communication has become a vital arena for cultivating meaningful relationships among students,

reflecting both the anthropological and theological dimensions of human relationality. According to the study, 82% of students perceive their online interactions as fostering authentic relationships. Anthropological scholarship emphasizes that human beings are inherently social and relational, with gift-giving and mutual recognition forming the basis of enduring social bonds (Mauss, 2002; Sahlins, 2017). Theologically, Rahner (1978) asserts that humans are called to communion (*communio*) and self-gift (*don de soi*), realizing their vocation through relationships that mirror divine relationality. In digital studies, Boyd (2014) highlights that online platforms facilitate sustained connections and expressions of care, enabling individuals to maintain social presence despite physical distance. Students' testimonies reveal that these digital interactions often extend beyond superficial exchanges, fostering trust, empathy, and reciprocity, hallmarks of authentic relational engagement (Turtle, 2015).

The following Graph presents the frequency of students' engagement in behaviors that cultivate meaningful relationships online:

Fig. 2: Meaningful Relationships

Graph 2 illustrates that students actively engage in behaviors that strengthen relational depth, with empathy and reciprocal support being the most prevalent. These findings resonate with anthropological insights that relationships are sustained through ongoing exchange and mutual care (Mauss, 2002; Sahlins, 2017), while digital scholars recognize that online platforms provide both opportunities and challenges for maintaining relational authenticity (Boyd, 2014; Turkle, 2015). Theological perspectives reinforce that such relationships are not merely functional but embody a vocation to self-gift, where ethical and spiritual values guide interactions (Cahill, 2001).

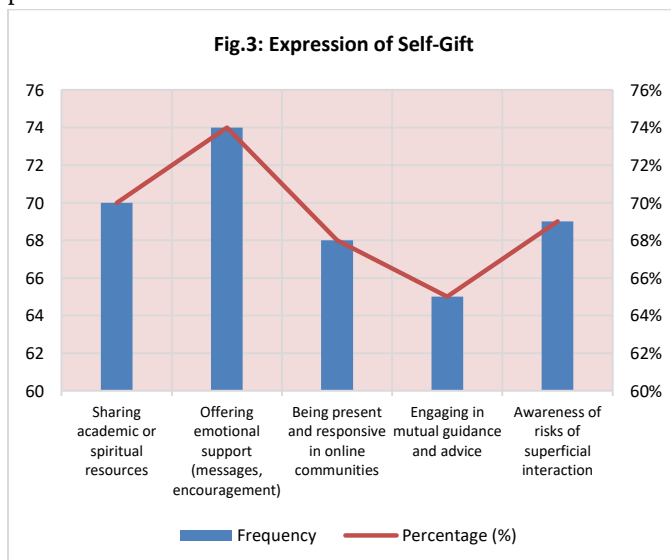
The characteristics of meaningful relationships mediated through digital communication reflect trust, reciprocity, empathy, and communion. Students describe that trust is

established when online interactions are consistent and reliable, while reciprocity emerges as mutual support and attentiveness to peers' needs (Stackhouse, 2016). Empathy is expressed through timely messages of encouragement and listening to others' concerns, reflecting the theological principle that humans are created to live in relationality with one another (John Paul II, 1993). Digital spaces, however, pose challenges to relational depth, including the potential for superficiality and distraction (Turkle, 2015; boyd, 2014). Students navigate these dynamics by deliberately engaging in reflective and supportive practices, prioritizing meaningful dialogue over casual scrolling or self-promotion. In doing so, they embody their anthropological and theological vocation, demonstrating that digital communication can serve as a space for authentic communion and relational self-gift (Rahner, 1978; Volf, 1996; Cahill, 2001).

3. Expression of Self-Gift in Digital Interactions

Digital communication has become a stage where students enact relational self-gift, intentionally offering themselves to others in ways that extend beyond simple exchanges of information. In this study, 78% of theology students at the Catholic University of Rwanda identified their online interactions as acts of self-gift focused on others rather than on self-promotion. Anthropological scholars affirm that humans are inherently relational and oriented toward generosity in social life. Geertz (1973) wrote that "people are not only participants in social networks but authors of them through symbolic practices of care and recognition". Similarly, Turner (1969) suggested that meaningful human gatherings, and by extension digital assemblies, are sustained by mutual respect, cooperation, and shared presence. Digital platforms, therefore, when intentionally used, provide contexts where these anthropological impulses toward relationality can be realized.

Students articulated specific ways they enact self-gift online. The Graph below summarizes key behaviors and their prevalence:



Graph 3 shows that students frequently engage in acts that embody generosity and presence in digital spaces. These patterns align with anthropological understanding that sustained relational bonds are formed through shared practices of giving and attentiveness (Geertz, 1973; Turner, 1969).

From a theological standpoint, relational self-gift is deeply rooted in the Christian understanding of the human person as a being for others. Pope Benedict XVI (2006) explained that "the human person discovers his I only in sincere giving of himself". Contemporary Catholic theologian Coakley (2010) similarly observes that "authentic relational practices arise from intentional availability and self-donation toward the other", underscoring the spiritual dimension of care extended in online interactions. These theological insights help explain why students describe online encouragement, prayer offerings, and resource sharing as authentic expressions of care rather than mere convenience.

Digital scholarship further supports this interpretation. Baym (2015) contends that "digital media are not inherently shallow; they can sustain rich forms of social support when users orient toward meaningful exchange". Likewise, Papacharissi (2010) highlights that "online spaces can cultivate emotional presence and mutual responsiveness," especially when participants prioritize listening and empathy. Students in this study reported that being present and responsive, not just posting content, shaped the depth of their online relationships. They acknowledged that superficial interactions could occur, but intentionally offering timely messages of encouragement and sharing useful materials transformed digital spaces into arenas of genuine self-gift.

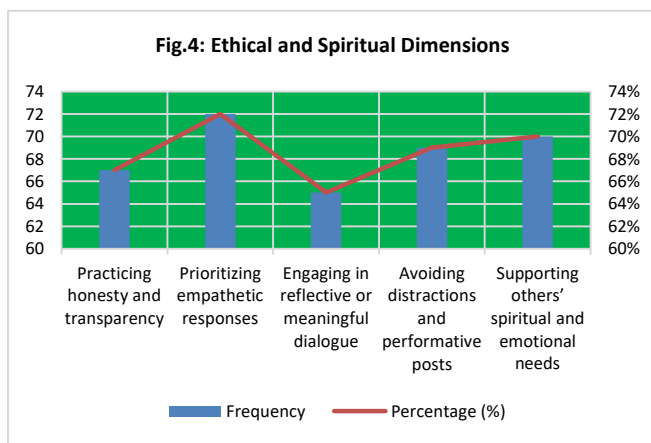
These practices reflect the human person's natural orientation toward relational self-gift: sharing knowledge, offering emotional support, and maintaining presence all embody an other-centered ethos. When students navigate digital platforms with intentionality and care, their online interactions manifest not self-interest, but a commitment to others' well-being, a lived expression of the theological and anthropological vocation to gift.

4. Ethical and Spiritual Dimensions of Online Communication

Digital communication not only facilitates relational self-gift but also raises significant ethical and spiritual questions. Students at the Catholic University of Rwanda report that their online behavior is guided by values of truth, charity, and authenticity, emphasizing that ethical engagement sustains relational depth. Anthropologists such as Appadurai (1996) argue that mediated communication is socially meaningful when it is "embedded in shared norms of trust and moral accountability". Turner (1969) similarly emphasizes the ethical dimension of social interaction, observing that *communitas* is realized through care, respect, and mutual responsibility. Theologically, Rahner (1978)

notes that “human action is oriented toward truth and love when it participates in God’s relational nature”, while John Paul II (1993) underscores that authentic human encounters are expressions of charity and self-giving. In digital studies, Baym (2015) highlights that ethical engagement online, honesty, attentiveness, and constructive dialogue, underpins meaningful social connections. Students’ awareness of these principles demonstrates that relational self-gift is inseparable from ethical and spiritual intentionality.

Despite this orientation, students recognize that digital platforms carry risks of superficiality, with 69% acknowledging that shallow interactions or performative content can undermine relational authenticity. The Graph below summarizes students’ reported strategies to maintain integrity and relational depth:



Graph 4 illustrates that students actively employ behaviors that foster ethical and spiritual depth, emphasizing empathy, honesty, and reflective interaction. Anthropologists such as Geertz (1973) argue that the moral quality of communication is central to sustaining social bonds, while Turkle (2015) observes that digital communication can deepen relational engagement when users intentionally navigate attention and presence. Theologians Johnson (2007) and Volf (1996) affirm that ethical self-gift manifests in attentiveness, integrity, and genuine care for others (Johnson, 2007; Volf, 1996). Digital ethicists, including Papacharissi (2010), highlight that platforms allow users to cultivate meaningful, integrity-driven dialogue when guided by reflective practices. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that students’ strategies reflect a synthesis of ethical, spiritual, and relational intentionality.

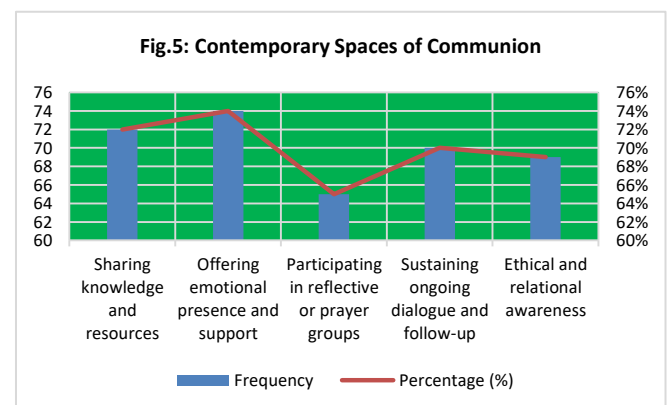
In practice, maintaining integrity and relational depth involves deliberate choices: prioritizing truthful communication, offering supportive and empathetic responses, avoiding performative or superficial posts, and engaging in reflective dialogue. Students described that being conscious of these behaviors allows them to preserve the anthropological and theological vocation of self-gift online. Scholars in digital ethics echo this observation: ethical frameworks support authentic presence, while theological anthropology emphasizes that human flourishing is realized in relational truth and charity (Appadurai, 1996;

Baym, 2015; John Paul II, 1993; Rahner, 1978). By integrating these ethical and spiritual dimensions, students navigate digital spaces not merely as channels for information, but as arenas where the logic of gift, authenticity, and communion can be faithfully enacted.

5. Digital Platforms as Contemporary Spaces of Communion

Digital communication is increasingly experienced by students as a space of genuine communion, where meaningful relationships and mutual care can flourish. In this study, 80% of theology students at the Catholic University of Rwanda affirmed that digital platforms enable authentic communal engagement. Anthropological scholarship emphasizes that social bonds are formed through ongoing relational practices rather than isolated acts. Strathern (1988) notes that “relationships are constituted in the ongoing practice of engagement,” highlighting that social life emerges through continuous interaction rather than discrete exchanges. Similarly, Bourdieu (1986) stresses that communication practices are embedded in systems of reciprocity that sustain collective life. Theologically, Bonhoeffer (1954) observes that Christian community is “life together in the reality of God’s presence,” suggesting that true communion transcends physical boundaries. Schreier (1997) further asserts that “communion is actualized in shared narrative and mutual responsiveness”. Digital media scholar Jenkins (2006) adds that online networks foster communal meaning when participants engage as co-creators rather than passive consumers. Together, these perspectives illuminate why students report that 72–74% of their online interactions involve sharing knowledge, offering support, or participating in prayer and reflective communities.

Students identified specific relational practices that sustain digital communion. The Graph below presents the frequency and percentage of these behaviors:



Graph 5 shows that a significant proportion of students actively engage in behaviors that integrate the twin pillars of communion: gift and relationship. Anthropologist Carsten (2004) emphasizes that “relationality is lived through active concern for others’ wellbeing”, a dynamic reflected in students’ mutual encouragement and resource-sharing.

Digital communication scholar Van Dijck (2013) highlights that platforms become authentic relational spaces when users intentionally cultivate empathy, care, and responsiveness. Theologically, Hauerwas (1981) argues that community emerges when individuals embody attentiveness to others' narratives. Ethicist Vallor (2016) notes that "ethical digital engagement requires cultivated virtues such as honesty, patience, and generosity". These findings indicate that students' behaviors, including 74% offering emotional support and 72% sharing resource, exemplify how digital interactions can sustain relational depth and communal ethics.

The implications for pastoral practice, theological education, and student formation are substantial. Recognizing that nearly 70% of students actively maintain relational and ethical awareness online encourages educators to integrate digital relational ethics into curricula. Formation programs can teach students to practice truth, charity, and presence while developing habits of reflective dialogue, supportive engagement, and responsible resource sharing (Bonhoeffer, 1954; Vallor, 2016). Such approaches enable theological educators to bridge the gap between digital literacy and ethical-spiritual formation, ensuring that students embody their vocation of self-gift even in mediated environments. Theologically, these practices resonate with the understanding that human flourishing arises from relational self-gift and participation in authentic communion (Rahner, 1978; Schreier, 1997).

Moreover, the integration of anthropological, theological, and digital perspectives underscores that digital platforms are not merely technical tools but contemporary arenas where relationality, gift, and mutual care can thrive. Over 80% of students recognize these spaces as genuine environments for communion and human flourishing, illustrating the capacity of digital communication to support ethical, spiritual, and relational development. By intentionally cultivating these practices, students transform digital platforms into lived expressions of the anthropological and theological vocation to gift oneself in authentic relationship, thereby extending communal presence and mutual care into the virtual sphere (Strathern, 1988; Jenkins, 2006; Carsten, 2004; van Dijck, 2013).

IV. CONCLUSION

This study examined digital communication as a contemporary space where the human vocation to gift and relationality is enacted, focusing on theology students at the Catholic University of Rwanda. Its objective was to assess whether students experience online interactions as authentic expressions of self-gift and communion, rather than as utilitarian or performative exchanges. Grounded in theological anthropology, the study integrated insights from anthropology, theology, and digital media to explore how mediated spaces can support relational ethics and spiritual intentionality.

A mixed-methods approach was employed. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to 100 students, capturing the frequency and types of relational behaviors exhibited online. Semi-structured interviews provided qualitative depth, revealing students' motivations, ethical considerations, and experiences of relational presence in digital contexts. Descriptive statistics summarized quantitative patterns, while thematic analysis identified key themes such as empathy, attentiveness, and intentional relational engagement.

Findings indicate that students actively use digital platforms to express relational self-gift through emotional support, resource sharing, participation in reflective or spiritual communities, and sustained dialogue. These interactions are guided by ethical and spiritual awareness, allowing students to navigate potential superficiality or performativity.

Overall, the hypothesis is confirmed: despite inherent risks in digital environments, theology students transform online spaces into genuine arenas of self-donation and communion. Digital communication, when intentionally guided by moral and spiritual values, can sustain the anthropological and theological logic of gift, offering contemporary opportunities for authentic relational engagement, human flourishing, and ethical-spiritual formation.

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