



UNDERSTANDING LOVE IN THE DIGITAL AGE AMONG GENERATION Z STUDENTS OF ST. LOUIS SCHOOL OF DON BOSCO, INC. (SLSDB) THROUGH THE LENS OF DEUS CARITAS EST

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how Generation Z students at St. Louis School of Don Bosco understood love in the digital age and in theological perspective. It aimed to describe how these students perceived and practiced love amid the influences of digital communication and social media. The research was grounded in the theological framework of Pope Benedict XVI's *Deus Caritas Est*, which emphasized divine love as the foundation of human relationships. The study employed a qualitative research design using in-depth interviews, and thematic analysis was employed to identify emerging patterns in students' experiences of love. Findings indicated that Generation Z students navigated love through digital platforms, while their understanding remained influenced by the concepts of romantic love (*eros*), familial love (*agape*), and social love (*communal care*). Their understanding was shaped by the notion of unconditional and sacrificial love as presented in *Deus Caritas Est*. The study also highlighted both challenges and opportunities in expressing authentic love in virtual spaces, where immediacy and connectivity coexisted with risks of superficiality and misunderstanding. This research contributed to educational and youth ministry approaches by offering insights on fostering deeper, faith-informed experiences of love among contemporary youth.

Keywords: *love, Generation Z, Deus Caritas Est*

INTRODUCTION

Love is a profound and universal force that shapes human existence and the cosmos itself. Teilhard de Chardin (1957) described love as "the most universal, the most tremendous and the most mysterious of the cosmic forces," emphasizing its role in uniting

and evolving creation. This cosmic dimension of love, deeply intertwined with both the physical and spiritual worlds, calls for a renewed understanding, especially in a world increasingly marked by division and digital connectivity. Following this tradition, St. Thomas Aquinas defines love as “to will the good of others,” highlighting that love is a deliberate, intellectual act rooted in discernment (Aquinas, 1273/1947). In today’s digital age, these timeless insights challenge us to rethink how love is experienced and expressed, particularly among young people who live at the crossroads of rapid technological change.

This research focused on understanding love among Generation Z students at St. Louis School of Don Bosco, Inc. (SLSDB) within the context of contemporary digital culture. This study was anchored in the theological framework of Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (2006), which presents love as both divine and transformative, calling people to self-giving and compassionate relationships. The problem addressed was the tension between Gen Z’s flexible, often casual approach to love, including phenomena like “situationships,” and the encyclical’s call for authentic, sacrificial love grounded in truth and charity. Current research indicates a shift in attitudes towards relationships among young people, marked by pragmatic, less committed approaches, raising questions about how these trends affect deeper emotional and spiritual connections (Twenge, 2017; McCrindle, 2020).

This research was highly relevant for multiple reasons. First, it addressed a critical gap in religious education by integrating theological perspectives with the lived digital experiences of youth, offering a comprehensive understanding of how young people in a Catholic educational context navigate love today. While quantitative studies have examined Gen Z’s digital dating behaviors (e.g., Vogels et al., 2020), few have explored the qualitative aspects of how these experiences align with or conflict with Catholic teachings. Second, the findings had practical implications for catechists, religious educators, pastoral workers, and Youth ministers aiming to foster healthy, faith-informed relationships amid changing social dynamics. Third, this study contributed to ongoing dialogues about the role of technology in shaping social and spiritual life, offering insights that balance respect for digital realities with the enduring values of Christian love.

The objectives of this study were threefold: (1) to investigate how Generation Z students understand and experience love in digital age and contrast these with the theological ideals of self-giving love (agape) and desire (eros) as outlined in *Deus Caritas Est*; (2) to provide insights that can inform Youth Ministry and religious educational programs aimed at promoting healthy relationships suited to the unique challenges of the digital age; and (3) to gather rich, qualitative data that complement existing quantitative research about digital-age relationships.

The output of this research includes a detailed account of SLSDB Gen Z students’ conceptions and lived experiences of love, presented through the lens of the Catholic magisterial document, the encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* by Pope Benedict XVI. This output offered practical recommendations for pastoral animation, youth ministry, and religious education at SLSDB and similar institutions. Additionally, it contributed to academic discussions on theology, youth culture, and digital media by bridging empirical inquiry and

theological reflection, ultimately fostering a more holistic approach to understanding and nurturing love in the 21st century.

To achieve these goals, the study used a pure exploratory qualitative method to examine participants' personal understandings of love. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect in-depth narratives from Generation Z students at SLSDB. The collected data underwent thematic analysis which helped identify patterns and themes related to digital love, its challenges, and its resonance with Deus Caritas Est's teachings. Through this analysis, the study sought to provide a nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of love's meaning and practice in a digital world shaped by both technological innovation and timeless spiritual values.

Research Questions

1. How do SLSDB Gen Z students understand the complexities of love in digital age?
2. How does SLSDB categorize and analyze Gen Z students' understanding of love in the digital age in relation to the theological ideals of love outlined in Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical Deus Caritas Est?
3. How does this study provide insights for religious educational programs, curricula, and youth ministry?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a pure exploratory qualitative research approach to explore Generation Z students' understanding of love through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with seven purposively selected respondents at a Catholic Salesian school in Dumaguete City, Negros Oriental, Philippines—a province renowned for values like courtesy, compassion, and communal solidarity shaped by Catholic missions. Pure exploratory qualitative research is appropriate because it emphasizes understanding the depth and complexity of human experiences. The target population consisted of Generation Z students (born late 1990s–early 2010s, aged 12–24, baptized Catholics actively participating in religious programs). Purposive sampling identified relevant participants meeting inclusion criteria: enrolled during the study, Catholic background, voluntary consent, and ability to articulate love experiences influenced by technology. This small sample enables rich examination through frameworks like Deus Caritas Est (Benedict XVI, 2006). Limitations include site-specific context curbing broader applicability to non-Catholic groups.

The primary researcher-made instrument was a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions (e.g., "Can you describe what love means to you?") crafted from Deus Caritas Est (Benedict XVI, 2006), Love and Responsibility (John Paul II, 1993), and On Love & Happiness (Teilhard de Chardin, 1960), validated by an expert in Salesian Youth Formation; it included individual interviews (45–60 minutes, audio-recorded via iPhone Voice Memos, transcribed with Apple Intelligence then polished) and one 60–75-minute FGD with all seven in a secure office. Ethical standards were upheld: clearance from St. Paul University Ethics Committee, informed consent/assent, anonymity codes,

right to withdraw, sensitivity to emotional topics, and secure data storage (password-protected, to be deleted post-publication). Procedures spanned two months: recruitment, interviews/FGD, transcription, and cleaning. The study applied Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) reflexive thematic analysis in six phases: (1) familiarization via repeated readings; (2) initial coding of meaning units (deductive from framework); (3–5) theme collation, review, and refinement; (6) interpretive report linking to Deus Caritas Est. Scope is limited to seven Gen Z students at one school, providing nuanced qualitative insights for religious education but not generalizable quantitatively.

RESULTS

Gen Z students' understandings of love in digital contexts align with and tension Deus Caritas Est, revealing purification of digital eros, sacrificial agape, ontological gaps, and communal caritas. For most participants (e.g., P7, P4), digital love starts as sensory attraction to curated profiles on platforms like Tinder, reflecting unpurified eros that risks superficiality (C.S. Lewis; Benedict XVI, 2006); yet they seek "true identity" beyond screens for authentic union. Agape emerges as deliberate sacrifice of sleep and time (P2, P3), like constant reassurance and "pro-existence" listening, countering casual digital pragmatism with self-giving love mirroring divine charity. A key "digital gap" (P6, P4) limits virtual bonds to "50/50" presence, hiding flaws behind aesthetics and blocking full body-soul communion, as love demands embodied reality.

Participants counter digital superficiality (Hancock, 2009; Turkle, 2011) by demanding real-life verification, transparency, and boundaries (P5–P7), yearning for truth-grounded eros and agape. Love ripples outward (P3, P2) from private digital connections to communal empathy and responsibility, fostering caritas that transforms society. Psychologically, this bridges passionate eros (Sternberg, 2006; Berscheid, 2010), commitment/agape (Rusbult, 2012), intimacy gaps (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016), and self-expansion (Aron et al., 2013), showing Gen Z pursues dignified, self-giving love despite technology's challenges.

Thematic Mapping of Digital Love (Gen Z Perspectives)

Theme	Meaning Units (Initial Codes)	Connection to Deus Caritas Est
1. The Digital Eros	Aesthetic backgrounds, "hotness," excitement, physical attraction via photos/profile.	<i>Eros</i> in its raw form; needs purification to move beyond mere "falling in love" with an image.
2. Agape as "Quality Time"	Sacrificing sleep, replying fast, constant reassurance, "being present" despite the screen.	Love as <i>descending</i> and sacrificial; the gift of self through the medium of time.
3. The Digital-Gap	Missing "sparkle," cold vibes, physical touch, "FaceTime 24/7" vs. reality, hiding flaws.	The limitation of the digital body; love requires the "whole" person (body and soul).
4. Communal Love	Softening hearts, helping strangers, family empathy, and energy to serve others.	Love for the "other" leading to love for the "all"; <i>Caritas</i> as a social force.

DISCUSSION

The findings from thematic analysis align closely with Deus Caritas Est (Benedict XVI, 2006), revealing Gen Z students' digital love as a journey from superficial eros to sacrificial agape amid an "ontological gap," consistent with the Introduction's timeless views of love as cosmic force (Teilhard de Chardin, 1957) and "willing the good of others" (Aquinas, 1273/1947), yet contrasting Twenge's (2017) portrayal of pragmatic Gen Z relationships by showing counter-cultural depth through time sacrifice and authenticity pursuit. The "Purification of Digital Eros" theme (Table: P7/P4 seeking "true identity" beyond profiles) interprets initial visual attractions as raw eros needing elevation, mirroring Benedict's call to discipline desire—consistent with C.S. Lewis's warnings on idolatry and Prensky's Digital Natives, but extending them theologically to demand embodied verification over curated facades. "Digital Agape: Sacrifice of Time" (P2/P3's sleep loss for "pro-existence") embodies descending self-giving love, validating Rusbult (2012) on commitment effort while innovating agape for digital voids, unlike Turkle's (2011) "alone together" isolation.

The "Ontological Gap" (P6's in-person "vibes") highlights screen limitations blocking sacramental unity (body-soul integration), echoing Choi & Bazarova (2015) on online anxiety but affirming Benedict's psycho-somatic wholeness against purely virtual bonds. Finally, "Communal Caritas" (P3/P2's ripple to empathy) shows private digital affection fostering social love, aligning with the encyclical's overflow to charity and Aron's (2013) self-expansion—transforming Twenge's casual trends into Salesian service. These interpretations support educational implications: curricula teaching Personalistic Norm for online habits, youth ministries bridging digital-to-embodied spaces, and programs channeling caritas into community action, filling the Introduction's gap in qualitative Catholic-digital integration.

Conclusions

This study explored how Generation Z students at St. Louis School of Don Bosco understand and experience love in the digital age through Deus Caritas Est (Benedict XVI, 2006), directly addressing its threefold objectives. First, investigating Gen Z understandings reveals a "hybrid" journey from superficial eros (sparked by curated profiles) to sacrificial agape (time sacrifice for "pro-existence"), contrasting digital "ontological gaps" with the encyclical's call for purified, psycho-somatic unity—showing students actively seek ascending/descending love beyond screens. Second, insights for Youth Ministry and religious education urge shifting from restriction to accompaniment: teach Personalistic Norm (John Paul II, 1993) to elevate online habits, create "unplugged" embodied spaces, and channel digital empathy into communal caritas via Salesian service integrating reason, religion, and loving-kindness. Third, these qualitative narratives complement quantitative research (e.g., Twenge, 2017; Vogels et al., 2020) by uncovering counter-cultural depths, proving digital arenas grace-filled where hearts yearn for authentic, self-giving communion. Ultimately, while mediums change, the human heart's orientation endures; Salesian pedagogy guides Gen Z to true flourishing.

Recommendations

For Stakeholders:

Young people should build intimacy through vulnerable self-disclosure, commitment via real-world effort, and face-to-face interactions to bridge the digital divide. Guidance counselors should establish "Digital Relational Literacy" using Sternberg's Triangular Theory in peer circles, teaching passion-to-intimacy-commitment balance. Parents should shift to accompaniment via seminars on online boundaries. Pastoral animators should redesign retreats with C.S. Lewis's *The Four Loves* and *Deus Caritas Est* to purify eros into agape/philia. Religious educators should teach John Paul II's Personalistic Norm against utilitarianism. Curriculum developers should integrate "Education to Love" addressing the "ontological gap." Salesian ministry should create "unplugged" spaces, and administration should channel "communal transformation" into service via Self-Expansion Theory.

Application of Findings:

Findings apply to Salesian formation by elevating digital agape (e.g., time sacrifice) into embodied caritas, filling religious education gaps with theological tools for hybrid digital-physical love—countering superficiality while fostering responsible service.

Proposed Intervention: "Education to Love" Action Plan

(Grounded in *Deus Caritas Est* and Love and Responsibility, for junior/senior high students via Religious Ed/Campus Ministry/Guidance.)

Phase 1 (Purify Eros): "Person, Not Profile" workshop teaches Personalistic Norm against using peers as "aesthetic profiles."

Phase 2 (Descent of Agape): "Metrics of Sacrifice" modules + device-free spaces address ontological gap, emphasizing body-soul unity.

Phase 3 (Public Caritas): "Screen to Streets" outreach channels empathy into service (e.g., feeding programs).

Phase 4 (Accompaniment): Parent seminars for Preventive System guidance.

Expected Impact: Intellectual maturity, relational health, spiritual fruitfulness.

Future Research:

Replicate with larger/non-Catholic samples or mixed methods (e.g., surveys + interviews) to verify sacrificial agape trends; explore reasons for "ontological gap" persistence or longitudinal effects of digital caritas on community involvement.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

This study adhered to strict ethical standards to protect the rights, privacy, and well-being of all participants. Prior to data collection, the research proposal was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of St. Paul University and the school administration of St. Louis School of Don Bosco, Inc. Participation was entirely voluntary, and no rewards or incentives were provided to avoid coercion. All seven Generation Z students and their

parents or guardians received and signed informed consent and assent forms before any recordings began. These forms clearly outlined the study's goals, procedures, and potential benefits, such as improved youth programs and Religious Education curricula. Furthermore, participants were assured of their right to skip questions, decline to answer, or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Given the personal nature of discussing eros, agape, duty, and commitment, the researcher prioritized participant well-being. Interviews were scheduled at the participants' convenience in safe, comfortable environments, such as the Pastoral Animation Office or through secure online platforms like Zoom and Google Meet. The researcher continuously monitored for any brief emotional stress or discomfort during the interviews, remaining fully prepared to pause the session or refer participants to counseling if necessary. All interactions were conducted non-intrusively and with deep sensitivity to the participants' religious beliefs and personal experiences. Finally, privacy, confidentiality, and data security were strictly maintained. Personal identifiers, such as names and contact details, were immediately removed or coded in the transcripts. All research data, including audio recordings and transcripts, are stored in password-protected, backed-up folders accessible exclusively to the researcher. To ensure permanent data safety, all files will be securely deleted following the study's publication. These comprehensive measures build trust, respect the school's faith values, and maintain a rigorous ethical environment in line with institutional standards.

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