Youth Identity in the Digital Age

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Abstract
The digital culture has a profound influence on the formation of personal identity among the youth of Gens Y and Z. The networked society has strongly affected the process of forming an "inner identity," a critical task in the adolescent period. The design of digital social media and apps can enslave youth in the "hive" and take away the solitude and resources needed for them to cultivate their "inner identity." Therefore, there is a need for institutions such as school, family, and church to reinvent better ways to accommodate youth and engage them with digital media with responsibility and discernment.

Keywords
youth, identity, digital age, digital media, social media

Digital media have become an inseparable part of our lives, especially the lives of the youth of Gens Y and Z who find it difficult to put their smartphone down. The use of digital media has become the way of life in society in general and has particularly obvious impacts on the youth. The impact of digital media appears pervasive, but it can be difficult to define exactly what is under discussion. The most recent developments of social scientific studies of digital technology provide the sharpest picture of the powerful influence on the shape of human identity that has come with the dominance of radical digital technologies. Typically, Hal Niedzviecki observes that the peep culture, enabled by digital technology, leads to narcissism and self-absorption.1 Shoshana Zuboff points out that Gens Y and Z are the first generations growing and being trapped in the

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“digital hive with no exit” created by surveillance capital. She describes this phenomenon:

Adolescence and emerging adulthood in the hive are a human first, meticulously crafted by the science of behavioral engineering; institutionalized in the vast and complex architectures of computer-mediated means of behavior modification; overseen by Big Other; directed toward economies of scale, scope, and action in the capture of behavioral surplus; and funded by the surveillance capital that accrues from unprecedented concentrations of knowledge and power. Our children endeavor to come of age in a hive that is owned and operated by the applied utopians of surveillance capitalism and is continuously monitored and shaped by the gathering force of instrumentarian power.

This reality restricts the space needed to enable young people to develop a healthy identity. This article discusses youth identity formation in the digital age by laying out the theories of identity and exploring the influence of digital social media. It concludes with some practical suggestions on how youth ministry in Vietnam could respond to the issues of identity.

**Theories of Identity**

David Buckingham defines identity thus:

The fundamental paradox of identity is inherent in the term itself. From the Latin root idem, meaning “the same,” the term nevertheless implies both similarity and difference. On the one hand, identity is something unique to each of us that we assume is more or less consistent (and hence the same) over time.... It is what distinguishes us from other people. Yet on the other hand, identity also implies a relationship with a broader collective or social group of some kind. When we talk about national identity, cultural identity, or gender identity, for example, we imply that our identity is partly a matter of what we share with other people. Here, identity is about identification

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3 Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 448-449. Zuboff defines the Big Other as “the sensate, computational, connected puppet that renders, monitors, computes, and modifies human behavior,” and surveillance capitalism is its puppet master (376).

with others whom we assume are similar to us (if not exactly the same), at least in some significant ways.  

Buckingham’s definition of identity is helpful as it covers both the similarity and difference that this term conveys. The tensions that surround debates about identity derive from the “unique” aspect of the self and the “similarity” aspect of multiple identifications with others, on the basis of “social, cultural, and biological characteristics, as well as shared values, personal histories, and interests.”

Human beings are the product of both the unique personal biography and the social circumstances surrounding them. Biographical identity is interwoven with social identity. As human beings living in society, we are not entirely free to choose our own identity. The rise of globalization, social mobility, insecurity in personal relationships, and digital media, which influences community life, may cause fragmentation and uncertainty in one’s understanding of his/her identity, especially youth who are already experiencing identity crises.

From the definition of identity, Buckingham observes that there are two main approaches to identity that are directly related to youth identities: the psychological approach and the sociological approach.

Identity Formation: The Psychology of Adolescence

Buckingham did not mention Sigmund Freud, but Freud’s psychosexual theory (1905) is a well-known theory of development. Believing that life is built around tension and pleasure due to the build-up of libido (sexual energy), Freud describes human identity formation in relation to the accumulation and discharge of sexual energy as we mature biologically. He proposes that identity develops in a series of five predetermined psychosexual stages: oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital. Adolescence,
referred to as the genital stage, is seen as playing a critical role, since at this stage, teens begin to forge their own sense of identity. They begin to explore romantic relationships and develop a sense of balance among all the areas of life. Those who successfully complete this stage will have developed a warm, caring, and well-adjusted identity.\textsuperscript{10}

In Buckingham’s view, it was G. Stanley Hall’s classic account of adolescence in his book \textit{Adolescence}, published in 1931, that founded the psychological approach to defining youth identity. Hall describes adolescence as a period of “storm and stress” that possibly leads to rebellious actions and risky behaviors. This is also a period of intense orientation toward their friends.\textsuperscript{11} In Buckingham’s story of the rise of the psychological account, it was Erik Erikson who then described adolescence as a phase of identity crisis. In this phase, adolescents experience “role confusion,” which they need to resolve. This is a critical period of identity formation in which adolescents overcome confusion and become more aware of their uniqueness, strengths, and weaknesses, and who they want to become in the future. The outcome of this period is a settled role in life and a coherent sense of personal identity if they resolve it successfully. The alternative outcome is “maladaptation.” Though identity is developed by the individual, it is a process that happens in the context of a society in which personal identity is recognized and confirmed. One notable characteristic of this period is that adolescents desire to spend much more time socializing with their peers.\textsuperscript{12}

Influenced by Freud’s ideas, Erikson also believes that personality develops in a series of predetermined stages, but, unlike Freud’s more individualist theory of psychosexual stages, his theory describes the impact of social experience across the whole lifespan.\textsuperscript{13} Erikson observes that


\textsuperscript{13} Cherry, “Comparing Erikson’s vs Freud’s Theories.”
changes in modern society and technology prolong the transition from adolescence to adulthood. This slowdown can become frozen and thus result in a final or “initial identity formation” rather than a transitory period within adolescents’ faddish attempts to establish their subculture.14 In this period, they are actually looking for a role model in whom they can trust, yet at the same time they often express cynical mistrust in fear of a foolish commitment. They are willing to trust their peers and elders who fit their imagination, aspirations, and self-image but object violently to those who they think pedantically limit their self-image.15 Disturbed by the inability to settle on an “occupational identity,” young people tend to temporarily identify themselves with superstars and heroes. At the same time, they show intolerance to those who are “different” from them.16 Those who are not sure of their identity can withdraw from interpersonal intimacy or throw themselves into “promiscuous” intimacy with real self-abandon.17 One positive and stable thing about adolescents is that they are gifted at acquiring new technological trends and able to identify themselves with new roles in society generated by the latest technology.18 However, they must be careful with the negative effects of the glorification of youth that mass media might provoke.19

Buckingham’s critical resistance to Hall’s and Erikson’s developmental theories is that he finds them too normative in the ways they assume adolescence to be a distinctive stage with a beginning and an end. These theories see adolescence as a state of “becoming” rather than “being.”20 Buckingham thinks that human development is more appropriately seen as a matter of gradual progression. However, these developmental theories are still useful in our discussion of youth in their involvement with digital media as they help us understand the characteristics of young people and their strengths and struggles. Buckingham agrees with Erikson’s notion of adolescence as a “psychosocial moratorium,” a period of “time out”

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14 Erickson, *Identity*, 128.
15 Erickson, *Identity*, 128-129.
16 Erickson, *Identity*, 132.
18 Erickson, *Identity*, 130.
when young people try different potential identities, including engaging with risky behavior. In short, the psychological approach to identity proposes that adolescents have distinct characters, marked by personal identity conflict and intense orientations toward peers as proposed by Hall and Erickson. This is a critical period of identity formation for adolescents as they become more aware of themselves and think of and try out their future roles in society.

Youth Culture and the Sociology of Youth

Sociological theories take a different approach to defining adolescence than do psychological accounts. A traditional, functionalist account of socialization presumes that “the young person is a passive recipient of adult influences.” A typical view held by proponents of this approach is that youth who are marginalized are “at risk” and in need of various forms of treatment provided by social workers, teachers, counsellors, or psychiatrists. This theory positions the problem to highlight social factors such as poverty rather than the psychological problems of “raging hormones.” As compared to the psychological account of youth, this theory does not focus on personal identity conflict but on the social problems faced by youth. This approach holds that the characteristics of youth depend on social context, such as social class, gender, and ethnicity. This also leads youth to establish relevant subcultures, which can be subordinate or subversive. This approach also focuses attention on the social dimension of youth identities with relevant focus on their interactions with digital media. Digital media can provide young people with opportunities for constructing or expressing their own identities or resisting adult authority. Youth can use digital media to express their subcultural allegiances or claim “spaces” that escape adult control. They can also use media production to address relevant social issues.

Even though psychological and sociological accounts of youth take different approaches, Buckingham observes, “both are essentially concerned with the ways in which young people are gradually prepared, or prepare

themselves, to take up their allotted roles in adult life.” Both psychological accounts and a traditional, functionalist account of socialization are equally normative in seeing the young person as a “becoming” rather than a “being” in their own right. Both the approaches discussed so far are directly concerned with youth identities and are helpful in understanding youth’s identity with respect of “inner self” and social influence.

There are, however, other approaches that emphasize the “performativity” of social identity. Some sociologists view that identity as “a fluid, contingent matter—it is something we accomplish practically through our ongoing interactions and negotiations with other people.” Therefore, it is more a matter of identification than of identity. Rob Cover builds his theory of digital identity on Judith Butler’s theory of identity as “performative”:

Butler’s theory of performativity is based on the idea that identity and subjectivity is an ongoing process of becoming, rather than an ontological state of being, whereby becoming is a sequence of acts, that retroactively constitutes identity….The self or “I” is made up of a matrix of pregiven identity categories, experiences, and labels that, through repetition, lend to the illusion of an inner identity core.

According to Butler’s theory as Cover deploys it, both offline and online behaviors and actions do not emerge from a core inner identity but are only a set of performances that retroactively give an illusion of a core, essential self. While never complete or without flaw, identities are performed “in accord” with cultural demands for coherent senses of self that are necessary for social participation and belonging. In a society of digital surveillance, we police each other’s identity performance for coherence.

28 Cover, Digital Identities, 3.
29 Cover, Digital Identities, 12.
30 Cover, Digital Identities, xiv, 12.
31 Cover, Digital Identities, 13.
In the digital age, social networking extends the performance of identity from “real life” to virtual space. Drawing on Butler’s theory of identity performativity, Cover suggests that the online performance of subjectivity is expressed in two typical ways: managing one’s social network profile, and maintaining online friendship lists and engaging with those “friends.” He argues that profile management is an act of identity performance. An initial profile creation frequently involves submitting gender and age, sexual preference, nationality, and relationship status. According to Cover, creating and modifying the user profile are required for social participation and can be viewed as a set of acts that are repeated over time to produce an illusion of an inner self.

Friendship list management provides a somewhat different framework for the performance of identity, as Cover proposes:

Although not wholly disconnected from profile management, the act of friending and relating to others through social networking on Facebook is a separate set of performances of identity expression. This second “field” of online performance focuses on the social or relational, producing conformity through interactive identification with others: friends, acquaintances, strangers, persons known only online, coworkers, employees, students and teachers, parents, and family—all typically presented under the problematically simple label of “friends.”

This online relationality is expressed through the creation and maintenance of friend lists and engaging with those friends such as updating, commenting, responding, and tagging. According to Cover, these acts are identity performances conveyed through the frameworks of relationality and belonging. Within the narrative of coherent identity performance seeking, this act is carried out not only for social participation but also for “friendship” with those in the friend lists who often unwittingly surveil. Even though Facebook and other social networking sites provide a convenient tool for identity performance, Cover points out that the acts of online identity performativity, such as managing profiles and friending,

32 Cover, Digital Identities, 3.
33 Cover, Digital Identities, 16.
34 Cover, Digital Identities, 16.
35 Cover, Digital Identities, 16.
can rend the coherence of an identity narrative and create “extra work” for identity self-management. 36 Online friends can surveil and easily point out any breach in identity coherence. Archives of wall posts and status updates may contain information that contrasts with other parts of the social networking site. Unwanted photo posting and tagging by others can also breach the coherence of identity performance.37

While Cover’s study is upfront with the study of digital media and identity, his view of identity as performativity is problematic in that his view of the self is so fluid that it might reasonably be said that he denies that there is any “inner” identity at all. In his view, people respond to the environment online and offline as chameleons changing color in accord with the surrounding environment. However, chameleons do have identity, at least in the biological sense. The question to ask is whether people have one coherent inner identity and how it might be understood to relate to the social environment. Up to this point, this project takes Buckingham’s review on the development theory and social theory as a guide and views that there is an “inner identity,” but Cover’s observations highlight the shaping effects of the cultural and social environment. Youth participation in cyberspace can clearly influence the formation of their “inner” identity.

**Influence of Digital Social Media on Identity Formation**

Social networking sites such as Facebook have great impact on young people’s self-confidence and self-concept. Jesse Rice observes that Facebook profoundly influences our personal identity. He adopted Sherry Turkle’s term of the “tethered self” when describing the new phenomena generated by Facebook and mobile technology such as iPhones and BlackBerrys, and the changes they bring to the way we think about ourselves. We are tethered to nonstop online communication, activities, and people, and can always be reached online.38 Tens of millions of us check Facebook anywhere and anytime, several times a day or an hour, whether at work, at

37 Cover, *Digital Identities*, 22.
home, at church, or when we are meeting friends. This ability to be always online changes the way we define ourselves. 39

With nonstop connectivity to ensure that they are within the reach of someone, young people have no time and space to cultivate a healthy self-concept, and their self-confidence is linked to the connectivity with others. 40 Kids’ early adoption of cell phones can prevent them from resolving difficult tasks on their own, since they can always stay in touch with parents and get help from them. 41 In the same way, young people start using Facebook as soon they are thirteen years old and they are exposed to a vast network of people from whom they can receive guidance, encouragement, and camaraderie. As a result, they depend on the advice and opinions of others and lose their ability to navigate life on their own. 42

The author observes that adults are also influenced by this phenomenon as we are faced with many online voices that distract us from forming our own feelings, thoughts, and actions. We are tempted to follow public opinion to be “liked” rather than to be ourselves. As a result, we lose our authentic self which requires us to stand on our own feet and to form our own judgments and decisions that may sometimes go against public opinion. Constant connections for public affirmation and approval hinder the formation of an authentic self. 43

Being constantly online prevents us from being fully present in the moment, leading to a blurry picture of our “selves.” We are easily distracted by colorful, moving objects offered by smartphones and constantly feel that we are missing out something online. As a result, we cannot stay focused on conversations with family members, friends, and colleagues. We cannot be clear about where we stand in relationship to the people and objects around us at the present moment. 44 Rice observes:

It’s almost as though we’re living an out-of-body existence.... Our self-concept becomes “enshrouded” in temporal distractions that can cloud our direction and even make the ground beneath us an untrustworthy

39 Rice, The Church, 141.
40 Rice, The Church, 142-143.
41 Rice, The Church, 143.
42 Rice, The Church, 144.
43 Rice, The Church, 145-146.
44 Rice, The Church, 146-147.
place to stand. Our lives unfold, moment by moment, and the only way we can truly experience them is in the moment. Being always-on can thwart awareness of the present moment, keeping our attention ever focused on the new rather than the now.\(^45\)

Constantly checking Facebook posts, email, and so forth keeps us “disembodied” and unable to live and relate properly to those around us.\(^46\) Rice seems to have a compartmentalized view of virtual and physical life. He does not elaborate on the disembodiment of the self and does not propose a theology of “self.” The question to ask is whether there is actually a disembodiment of the self. However, Rice’s discussion on the influence of social networks and digital connections on identity formation is valid and can bring us to a more up-to-date discussion on this topic.

In the digital age, youth identity is greatly influenced as their lives are immersed “in the hive” or the instrumentarian society, as Zuboff puts it in her 2019 book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*.\(^47\) In this society, youth behaviors are modified to conform to social norms created by peer pressure and computer algorithm. Social media such as Facebook creates social pressure and tuning on young people. Zuboff explains:

> Facebook has learned to bite hard on the psychological needs of young people, creating new challenges for the developmental processes that build individual identity and personal autonomy... Business and tech analysts cite “network effects” as a structural source of Facebook’s dominance in social media, but those effects initially derived from the demand characteristics of adolescents and emerging adults, reflecting the peer orientation of their age and stage.\(^48\)

In fact, Facebook founders and original designers were themselves adolescents and emerging adults. Therefore, they designed the system to fit the psychological needs of adolescent users and college students by reducing the social world to a community of “friends” who are not necessarily friends and “likes” that provide a questionable sense of confirmation.

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\(^45\) Rice, *The Church*, 147-149.

\(^46\) Rice, *The Church*, 149.


\(^48\) Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 446.
of one’s value, fuelling the anxieties of the youth. Facebook’s design intentionally triggers the psychological needs of young people, making it difficult for them to unplug from Facebook and the consequences of the attachment to this social network. Like Facebook, other digital social media such as Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok deploy all the same psychological mechanisms.

The developmental accounts of G. Stanley Hall and Erik Erikson as discussed above observe that adolescence is a period of intense orientation toward one’s peers. Facebook takes advantage of the psychological vulnerabilities of this period by hooking young people up with online friends. The youth also depend on smart connected devices for all daily activities such as logistics, communication, information, and social networking. This makes unplugging almost impossible for young people. Their sudden disconnection from the network can result in craving, depression, anxiety, loneliness, and acute disorientation. According to Zuboff, these feelings of disorientation and loneliness show young people’s psychological dependency on their “online” peers. Studies show that Generation Z, the generation who were born after 1996 and have no memory of the life before the rise of digital media, rely on many social media platforms, which they use simultaneously for psychological sustenance. The majority use a smartphone and are online “on a near-constant basis.” This dependency affects their identity and how they view themselves and their happiness. By their own assessment, they have been negatively affected by their habit of comparing themselves and their lives with others.

Zuboff describes the effects of social media on young people:

The magnetic pull that social media exerts on young people drives them toward more automatic and less voluntary behavior. For too many, that behavior shades into the territory of genuine compulsion. Social media is designed to engage and hold people of all ages, but it is principally molded to the psychological structure of adolescence and emerging adulthood, when one is naturally oriented toward the “others,” especially toward the

49 Zuboff, The Age of Surveillance Capitalism, 447.
50 Zuboff, The Age of Surveillance Capitalism, 446.
51 Zuboff, The Age of Surveillance Capitalism, 447.
52 Zuboff, The Age of Surveillance Capitalism, 448.
rewards of group recognition, acceptance, belonging and inclusion. For many, this close tailoring, combined with the practical dependencies of social participation, turn social media into a toxic milieu. Not only does this milieu extract a heavy psychological toll, but it also threatens the course of human development for today’s young and the generations that follow.53

Zuboff observes that this technology was not invented by Facebook but by the gaming industry with its “Addiction by Design” principles of engrossing, immersive, immediate. It leads to a loss of self-awareness, automatic behavior, and complete absorption.54 Facebook imitates this by sending users “a little dopamine hit every once in a while” and “variable reinforcement” by “likes” and comments.55 In short, observes Zuboff, “Young people crave the hive, and Facebook gives it to them, but this time it’s owned and operated by surveillance capital.”56

As discussed above in relation to Erikson’s observations about the prolonging of the period between adolescence and adulthood, today psychologists call this period “emerging adulthood,” denoting the years between eighteen and the late twenties as a new phase of life. The main challenge of this phase is “the differentiation of ‘self’ from the ‘others.’”57 However, life in the digital hive poses an essential challenge to this process. Young people wait anxiously for the approval of their existence through likes or comments from their online friends.58 They fail to keep a healthy balance between “inner and the outer, self and relationship,” as Zuboff observes. “Not surprisingly, these include an inability to tolerate solitude, the feeling of being merged with others, an unstable sense of self, and even an excessive need to control others as a way of keeping the mirror close. Loss of the mirror is the felt equivalent of extinction.”59 Digital social media hinder youth from cultivating their inner resources or “self.”

Many studies of the relationships between social media use and mental health show that the typical psychological process that most defines the

54  Zuboff, The Age of Surveillance Capitalism, 449-450.
56  Zuboff, The Age of Surveillance Capitalism, 460.
57  Zuboff, The Age of Surveillance Capitalism, 452.
58  Zuboff, The Age of Surveillance Capitalism, 454.
59  Zuboff, The Age of Surveillance Capitalism, 455.
Facebook experience is “social-comparison.” It is normal that we compare ourselves with others as we go through life. However, in the past, people lived in communities with people who were not very much different from them. Today Facebook accelerates social comparison since people are now comparing themselves with others who live in different parts of the world. This triggers negative thoughts as people think others are happier than them. Zuboff observes the unprecedented effect of social media on youth:

Social media marks a new era in the intensity, density, and pervasiveness of social comparison processes, especially for the youngest among us, who are “almost constantly online” at a time of life when one’s own identity, voice, and moral agency are a work in progress. In fact, the psychological tsunami of social comparison triggered by the social media experience is considered unprecedented.

Zuboff explains that because social media drives young people from real-life encounters, they sense the need of sharing something of their life to establish social connection and communality. However, this sharing of personal life on social media is often crafted with marvelous biographical information, photos, and updates designed to attract likes and comments. This is called profile “inflation,” which negatively affects young people’s feeling of self-worth as they compare themselves with others on social media. This in turn leads to more profile inflation and more negative self-evaluation, especially in the context of the larger social networks where youth connect to many distant friends.

This social comparison also surfaces a psychological condition called FOMO (“fear of missing out”). It is a form of social anxiety defined as the negative feeling that your friends are doing or having something better than you. FOMO has been identified with compulsive Facebook use. As young people obsessively check their Facebook feeds hoping to find relief in the form of social reassurance, they became more dissatisfied with

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60 Zuboff, The Age of Surveillance Capitalism, 461.
63 Zuboff, The Age of Surveillance Capitalism, 462.
64 Zuboff, The Age of Surveillance Capitalism, 462.
life. As a result, they are stuck in the loop of unending searching. The imperative to compare also includes body surveillance as young people compare their physical appearance with others who seem on Facebook to be better looking than they are. As young people compare themselves with others on social networks, they present themselves as data objects for inspection. Their sense of self-worth depends on physical appearance and what others perceive. They “desire to be watched and to watch others being watched”—with all the psychological dangers that accompany such constant comparison.

The advice from researchers is that social media users should cut down their use of social media and focus on “real world relationship,” since Facebook use does not promote well-being. However, this is difficult to do, since surveillance capitalism is always at work to ensure that youth cannot escape from the digital hive in which there is no place for them to cultivate a healthy personal space. Therefore, the need to teach young people to cultivate inner resources and practice solitude is much more urgent than ever.

While Zuboff does well in presenting all the negative aspects of “the life on the hive” and the disruption of youth identity formation caused by digital media and surveillance capitalism, there are positive aspects that should not be neglected. Katie Davis did a study on the joint effects of interpersonal relationships and digital media use on adolescents’ sense of identity. She administered questionnaires to a sample of 2,079 students (57 percent female) between the ages of 11 and 19 years (M = 15.4 years) attending one of seven secondary schools in Bermuda. She found:

Friends also played a mediating role in relation to aspects of adolescents’ digital media use. Specifically, the negative association detected between online identity expression/exploration and self-concept clarity was

67  Niedzviecki, The Peep Diaries, 111.
mediated partially by low friendship quality. Going online to communicate with one’s friends appeared to play a more positive role in adolescents’ sense of identity. The results showed that online peer communication affected self-concept clarity indirectly through its positive impact on friendship quality. According to Davis, online peer communication has a positive impact on young people’s quality of friendship, positively affecting the clarity of their self-conceptions.

In terms of youth’s digital media use, the result of this study showed a positive correlation between online peer communication and friendship quality. Despite some problematic dynamics, such as cyberbullying or addiction, the existing evidence suggests that online peer interactions are mostly positive for most adolescents. Furthermore, according to this study, if the youth have good friends in real life then they tend to go online to connect with their existing friends. Buckingham agrees, observing: “There is little evidence that most young people are using the Internet to develop global connections; in most cases, it appears to be used primarily as a means of reinforcing local networks among peers.” As youth spend time online to communicate with their friends with whom they have good relationships in real life, their friendships can grow, and, in turn, this helps them to have a better self-image. Online communication can positively influence young people’s friendships, which, in turn, affects their sense of identity correlative. The result of this research is reasonable. As we have discussed in developmental theories earlier, Erik Erikson describes adolescence as a phase of identity crisis. A primary developmental task of adolescence is forming a coherent, meaningful, socially validated personal identity. In this process, friendship plays a crucial role as youth spend much more time socializing with their peers.

Friends play a validating role in adolescent identity formation, since youth identify themselves with their peer group and express themselves with their close friends. In the digital age, digital media and social network sites create a new context for youth to explore friendship and personal

71 Davis, “Young People”: 2281.
72 Davis, “Young People”: 2290.
identity. Good friendship both online and offline can therefore have clear positive effects, Davis observes:

This online peer communication does not appear to be displacing adolescents’ offline friendships but rather augmenting them, with positive residual effects on their self-concept clarity. These findings illustrate just how integrated online and offline lives have become in recent years as smartphones, broadband internet access, and social media platforms have permeated Western societies.

Katie Davis’s findings here agree with some ideas presented in the book *The App Generation*, in which Howard Gardner and Katie Davis point out that the benefit of digital media is that it can support a sense of belonging and self-disclosure that are important in forming intimate bonds during adolescence. Sandra Weber and Claudia Mitchell add that youth not only consume but also produce digital media productions in order to express themselves and craft a clear identity. Their audience may be themselves and their circle of friends, yet through the visual structure and content of their websites or Facebook wall, youth are negotiating their identities within general pop culture and their circle of friends who give them feedback on their posts. This can strengthen a sense of belonging and promote self-disclosure and reflexivity.

Coming back to Gardner and Davis’s point, good apps can promote a strong sense of identity and deepen friendships. Furthermore, it can help youth who face ostracism in their offline contexts by forging a sense of belonging in a sympathetic community online. However, Gardner and Davis present not only the positive aspects of digital media but also the negative ones. Apps with their own design can enable certain actions while

75 Davis, “Young People,” 2281.
76 Davis, “Young People,” 2290.
restricting others. Some apps can enable youth to form a stronger identity, while other apps lead them to become “someone else’s avatar,” as Gardner and Davis observe:

> With respect to identity formation: Apps can short-circuit identity formation, pushing you into being someone else’s avatar (that of your parents, your friends, or one formulated by some app producer)—or, by foregrounding various options, they can allow you to approach identity formation more deliberately, holistically, thoughtfully. You may end up with a stronger and more powerful identity, or you may succumb to a pre-packaged identity or to endless role diffusion.

Overall, apps give “packaged identities” formulated by some app producer. Gardner and Davis agree with Zuboff on the fact that digital media and apps minimize a focus on an inner life and personal reflection needed for youth to cultivate inner identity. While digital media can open up new opportunities for youth to express themselves online, it can take away their time and opportunity to explore “offline” life. Youth can spend so much time on looking at posts from other people on social media since they are afraid of missing out and they want to be connected with the world where community lives are declining, as Niedzviecki observes in *The Peep Diaries*. This may result in an “impoverished sense of self” and in making community lives worse.

**Youth Ministry in Vietnam and the Issue of Identity**

While the influence of digital social media on identity formation of youth is global, there are contextual peculiarities that require a brief consideration on how youth ministry in Vietnam could respond to this influence. Digital technology has permeated our everyday lives, especially the lives of the young people who grow up surrounded by it. Recent

studies in the West have shown the “evil” of digital technology, such as replacing real community, causing cyber addiction, and promoting “self” publication. In the context of the postcolonial communist country of Vietnam, the majority of the generation who are currently parents of teenagers assume that digital media is inherently evil. Parents and church leaders often tell children or young people to stay away from digital media since it can cause addiction, contains dangerous information, and is a waste of time. Even in what has been called the postmodern present under communist rule, social relations in Vietnam remain very hierarchical. As the historian Jeffrey Hays observes:

As with most group-orientated societies there are also hierarchical structures. In Vietnam these are very much based upon age and status. This derives from Confucianism, which emphasizes social order. Everyone is seen as having a distinct place and role within the hierarchical structure, be it the family or workplace. An obvious example is seen in social situations where the oldest person in a group is greeted or served first. Within the family the head would be responsible for making decisions and approving marriages.

Within this hierarchical culture, Christian parents typically enjoin their children to stay away from digital media and focus on their studies and the Bible. Of course, they never succeed with this approach, since young people can never stay away from the excitement on offer in the online environment.

During my time serving as a youth worker at a local church in Vietnam, I found that Facebook gave me a good opportunity to get to know more and interact with the young people. Online space can be a window to befriend the youth who are in need. During this time, I have also ministered to some young people who were addicted to online games to the extent that they dropped out of school. Besides befriending them at the youth service and small-group Bible study and other face-to-face activities, I also

befriended and accompanied them on Facebook. Indeed, online spaces can be a window through which adults get to know more about young people, since often they are much more open in sharing their lives on it. There is a huge potential for adults to befriend young people in cyberspace, where the generation gap quickly appears to be much smaller when adults engage there in a caring way and know how to befriend young people. This is especially helpful in the context of countries with a hierarchical structure, such as Vietnam, where there is a huge distance between parents and children as compared to parent-child relationships in the West. Parents and children can be friends with each other on social media. More and more parents in Vietnam find that Facebook can help them connect better to their children and get to know more about them compared to face-to-face communication, which is bound to hierarchical structure that hinders them from talking with each other. Many young people in Vietnam now are open to sharing their lives with their parents on Facebook. This, in turn, strengthens parent-child relationships in real life. Of course, it is important to take into consideration the pitfalls of digital media.

To be more specific, I grew up in a local church in the denomination called Evangelical Church of Vietnam and served there for a few years as a youth worker. I have defined youth discipleship among young people in Vietnam as follows:

Youth discipleship is leading the youth in Bible study, worship, fellowship, service, and evangelism in the context of the faith community and supporting them in their daily life. The main goal is to bring spiritual transformation through God’s grace and the power of the Holy Spirit in the life of the youth which in turn enables them to reflect the image of Christ and share his love to nonbelievers. In the context of a digital society, spiritual practices, especially solitude, can encourage youth to seek a personal encounter with Christ in their quiet time and in their mundane activities both online and offline.

Normally our church meets for Sunday school and a gathered worship service on Sunday morning and a youth worship service on Sunday afternoon, with mid-week youth Bible study in addition. This is where the youth are divided into smaller groups and they have the opportunity not only to study the Bible through discussion, but also to encourage one another to grow in their spiritual life through worshiping, having
meal fellowship, evangelizing, visiting one another, and sharing their life experiences. In addition, we also have various activities to help the youth grow in their spiritual life, such as games, movies, Bible quiz, outdoor activities, home visitation, counseling, vocation training, social works, corporate prayer, and silent meditation. Bible camp is organized once a year so that the young people can stay together for a few days to meditate on God’s word and strengthen their relationships with God and with one another. Some years we have organized an action camp emphasizing physical games, outdoor activities, sports, and community service. Other years we have put on silent camps in which silent meditation, prayer journeying, and one-to-one counseling are the main activities.

In the prayer journey version of the summer camp, I have applied some methods of prayer offered in Richard Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline*. The youth have tended to respond positively to this approach. Much to our surprise some young people even gave us the feedback that they loved the silent camps more than the action camps. This response is interesting in that the youth are normally considered very active and almost incapable of staying away from all the attractions offered in cyberspace, let alone being silent. These experiences suggested to me that there may be something about spiritual disciplines that can enrich the practice of discipleship to the youth of today’s generation, as Richard Foster claims:

> Superficiality is the curse of our age. The doctrine of instant satisfaction is a primary spiritual problem. The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people. The classical disciplines of the spiritual life call us to move beyond the surface loving into the depths. They invite us to explore the inner caverns of the spiritual realm. They urge us to answer to a hollow world.  


While serving in youth ministry there, I discovered the importance of the role of the spiritual practices of solitude, silence, and prayer in the life of the youth. My church has a policy of not allowing digital devices during the youth camp. This started more than ten years ago and continues to this day. When being away from home for five days at camp, the young people have to turn in their digital devices. It is helpful for them to have some time
away from cyberspace in order to focus on God during Bible study, silent meditation, and prayer, and on fellowship with one another through games, fun activities, discussion and sharing, and so forth. Most of the youth leave their smart devices at home but a few smuggle theirs in, against the rules. Some were caught during the week while others voluntarily surrendered their devices during camp. Most saw the benefits of time away from digital media.

Emery-Wright suggests:
Time away from the social network is important. It is important for parents to ensure their children spend significant periods of time offline, and to be positive role models for them too. This might involve agreeing on a “no screens” rule during mealtimes, or perhaps designating Sunday as digital Sabbath for the family.90

It turns out that recent brain research has also shown similar results:

After five days interacting face-to-face without the use of any screen-based media, preteens’ recognition of nonverbal emotion cues improved significantly more than that of the control group for both facial expressions and videotaped scenes. Implications are that the short-term effects of increased opportunities for social interaction, combined with time away from screen-based media and digital communication tools, improves a preteen’s understanding of nonverbal emotional cues.91

For a few years we also applied silent meditation a few times per year in the youth service. The result was encouraging as the youth took these practices seriously and found them interesting and helpful. This gave them a pause from the noisy life surrounded by digital media. They could have a time to quiet themselves before God, repent of their sins, cast their burdens on him, enjoy his presence, and listen to his word. The youth felt refreshed and recharged spiritually after the silent mediation and went back to their daily lives with fresh perspectives of God’s presence and his will for their lives.

My home context is Vietnam, but since the world is flat in the digital age, the practical applications suggested in this article can contribute to the knowledge of how to disciple youth in the larger context of Asia and the world. Youth discipleship in the digital age is helping young people whose personal identity is profoundly influenced by the digital culture to encounter Christ mainly through the practice of solitude in the context of the faith community and personal daily life, either online or offline, which means opening oneself to the Spirit and letting him restore one’s identity and relationships with God and others. It is important that the church fosters the community with care and helps youth to be disciples of Christ in both the physical and the digital worlds. In our modern life surrounded by digital technologies, the task of youth ministry is to teach youth to listen to God’s voice and obey him. This can involve studying the Bible in church and in daily life, caring for the needy, and forming good habits. The spiritual practices of solitude, silence, and prayer can encourage youth to seek personal encounters with Christ in their quiet time and in their mundane activities both online and offline. For instance, youth can practice short prayer throughout the day as they study, play, or surf the internet. There is a prayer that I have prayed daily since I was young: “Lord, have mercy.” Now I also teach the children and youth in my church to pray “Lord, have mercy” or “Lord, please protect me” as they go online or offline.

Conclusion

Studies have shown that digital media have a significant influence on youth’s socio-emotional development since they provide opportunities for self-exploration, improving self-esteem, practicing self-presentation and self-disclosure, obtaining support, lessening rejection in the offline world, gaining autonomy, and exploring identity. It also offers opportunities for creating and exchanging ideas, connecting with peers, and global education. Social networking sites satisfy the need of youth for belonging and popularity. They also help youth who are lacking socio-emotional skills to interact more with other people. For example, they can share their emotional experiences and receive support from online support groups. Young people can present and experiment with possible identities online and receiving feedback that might help them to solidify their identity.
Besides positive influence, however, digital media can produce negative impacts such as leading to aggressive behavior caused by playing violent video games, racist behavior, sexual harassment, and cyberbullying.\textsuperscript{92} They can also lead to lack of self-control and the collapse of traditional communities defined by physical place and face-to-face contacts. Excessive use of the internet replaces the socialization with friends and schoolwork.\textsuperscript{93}

Developmental theories show the significance of the adolescent period in forming an “inner identity” that is now being strongly affected by the networked society as suggested by social theories. Social media can enhance the peer-to-peer communication that is crucial for youth identity formation, but there are risks involved. The design of digital media and apps can enslave youth in the “hive” and take away the solitude and resources needed for them to cultivate their “inner identity.” Therefore, it is important to teach them to engage with digital media with responsibility and discernment. In order to journey with them and bring out the best in them, it is necessary for institutions such as school, family, and church to reinvent better ways to accommodate youth. There is a need to build a theology for discipling youth in the digital age.

Some theologians regard the internet as evil because it creates a space where we can be disembodied minds, ignoring our bodies. They claim that if we try to operate without our bodies in cyberspace, we are trying not to be human and are therefore trying to be God.\textsuperscript{94} However, this is not true, since humans were created with body and soul. It is thus impossible to operate in cyberspace without our body. Our body, mind, and soul are all at work when we use the internet. Even though we may try to project a different “self” in cyberspace, our body is still connected, no matter how hard we try to hide it. To walk with youth in the digital age, it is necessary to build a theology of “self” that will enable and equip young people to fight against addiction to “virtual reality,” which can harm their relationship with God and with other people.\textsuperscript{95} Addiction to online gaming, selfies,

\textsuperscript{93} Savina, “Digital Media”: 85-86.
\textsuperscript{94} Jana M. Bennett, Aquinas on the Web?: Doing Theology in an Internet Age (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 17.
\textsuperscript{95} Robert S. Fortner, “The Gospel in a Digital Age,” in Confident Witness, Changing World:
instant messaging, and other forms of immersive feedback stimulation can alienate them from others and adversely affect their well-being.\textsuperscript{96} According to Philip R. Meadows, relationships and community can be expressed through both digital media and face-to-face contact.\textsuperscript{97} He suggests, “from an everyday perspective, convergence is what happens as people navigate the flow of life at the interface of embodied and virtual realities: from the development of personal identity to our participation in community.”\textsuperscript{98} From a convergent perspective, the reality of life in the physical world and cyberspace flow well into each other.

The arrival of the digital age has profoundly reshaped contemporary youth’s processes of developing a stable and healthy self-identity. It is also important to define personal identity from a theological viewpoint. The theological account of relational personhood rooted in the trinitarian God sets solid foundations for a theological understanding of self-identity. Identity is not some substance that we possess but a worshiping relationship with the trinitarian God who also sets us up for communication and relationship with other people and with his creation. In order to help youth, whose identity is fragmented by digital culture, to form a resilient self-identity, churches should be prepared to guide them in their spiritual practice of experiencing intimacy with Jesus. There is a need to communicate the gospel in a way that youth can comprehend and appreciate. The unchangeable value of the gospel needs to come to fruition in life-changing experiences here on earth as young people follow Jesus in their daily life both in the physical and virtual world at the beginning of the eternal life that has been promised. This is what “discipleship” is all about.

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\textsuperscript{96} Bennett, Aquinas, 148-163.


\textsuperscript{98} Meadows, “Mission”: 164.