THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN SHAPING CHRISTIAN CHARACTER AMONG GENERATION Z

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Abstract

The 21st century has witnessed a radical transformation in human communication ecology, with social media evolving from mere connection platforms into a primary lifeworld for young people. Generation Z, growing up in an intrinsically digital environment, internalizes the logic, norms, and rhythms of social media into their identity construction. This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method to analyze 32 empirical studies (2019-2024) exploring the role of social media in shaping Christian character among Generation Z. The findings reveal a dual formative role: social media acts as a Curated Sanctuary, providing unprecedented access to spiritual resources, communities, and role models, while simultaneously functioning as an Algorithmic Arena that fosters performative piety, theological reduction, and value conflicts. In response, Generation Z demonstrates active agency through negotiation strategies like content curation, compartmentalization, and digital fasting, leading to the formation of a hybrid habitus. This review proposes a Critical Digital Discipleship Framework as an integrative model emphasizing theological digital literacy, intentional curation, and embodied integration to guide effective character formation in the digital age.

Keywords: Social Media Christian Character Formation Generation Z Digital Discipleship Digital Agency.

INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century has witnessed a radical transformation in the ecology of human communication, in which social media has evolved from a mere connective platform into a primary lifeworld for younger generations. Generation Z defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012 has grown up in an environment that is intrinsically digitally connected, internalizing the logics, norms, and rhythms of social media platforms into their processes of identity construction (Pamungkas, YC, Moefad, AM, & Purnomo, R., 2024). For this cohort, the dichotomy between online and offline life has become increasingly blurred; digital interaction is not a separate activity but an integral dimension of everyday existence. Within this context, processes of character formation that were historically local, personal, and long-term are now confronted with new dynamics that are distributed, fragmented, and accelerated.

Within the Christian tradition, the formation of godly character has traditionally rested upon three foundational pillars: the family as the primary educational unit, the local church as a formative community, and regular spiritual practices as formative disciplines (Yudha, YM, & Suseno, A., 2025). However, the authority and influence of these institutions now compete with the digital catechesis offered by social media. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have become primary sources through which Generation Z seeks ethical guidance, discovers spiritual communities, and consumes religious content. This shift signals a transition from a hierarchical and institutionally mediated model of formation toward one that is networked, self-directed, and frequently personalized through algorithmic curation (Depan, CM, & as Partner, AI., 2025). Social media presents a profound paradox for Christian character formation. On the one hand, these platforms offer unprecedented affordances: universal access to teachings from global theologians and Christian leaders, the formation of supportive communities that transcend geographical boundaries, and creative opportunities to express faith through digitally native and

culturally relevant formats (Kia, AD, Th, M., Yang Mulia, GT, & Th, M., 2025). On the other hand, the underlying logics of platforms designed to maximize engagement, attention, and user retention often stand in tension with core Christian values. The risks of performative piety, theological reductionism into sound bites, the commodification of spiritual experience, and continuous exposure to competing secular value systems create a highly contested environment for the cultivation of authentic Christian character (Ekoprodjo, HS, & Wibowo, M., 2024). Although a growing body of scholarship has examined the impact of social media on adolescent mental health, social behavior, and religious identity more broadly, significant gaps remain within the academic literature. First, relatively few studies explicitly investigate the mechanisms through which social media operates as an active sociocultural agent shaping moral and spiritual character, rather than merely influencing surface-level attitudes. Second, the majority of existing research is situated within Western contexts, while dynamics in non-Western, Christian-majority countries such as Indonesia—characterized by collectivist cultures, public religiosity, and distinctive patterns of social media use—remain underexplored. Third, there is a need for a comprehensive and systematic synthesis of recent empirical findings to construct a coherent, evidence-based understanding of this phenomenon. Against this backdrop, the present study positions itself at the intersection of digital religion studies, adolescent developmental psychology, and Christian character education. This systematic literature review is both timely and strategic, not only to map the existing research landscape but, more importantly, to develop a conceptual framework capable of guiding faith formation practices that are responsive to the digital age. Accordingly, the central research question guiding this review is: How does recent empirical literature (2019–2024) conceptualize the role, mechanisms, and impacts of social media in the process of Christian character formation among Generation Z, and what theoretical and practical implications emerge from these findings? Addressing this question is expected to provide a foundation for the development of an effective model of critical digital discipleship.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Christian Character Formation Theory and Shifting Environments

Classical Christian character formation is understood as a long-term transformative process that orients the whole person (telos) toward Christ through the internalization of Gospel values embodied in virtues (Saingo, YA., 2023). This process has traditionally been supported by institutionalized "liturgies," namely routinized communal practices such as worship services, Holy Communion, corporate prayer, and discipleship. However, Saingo (2023) and others (Wennar, W., & Purmanasari, 2023) argue that in the contemporary era, cultural liturgies such as media consumption rituals often exert a stronger formative pull in shaping individuals' loves and desires than ecclesial liturgies. Social media, through its algorithms and habitual patterns of use, offers a set of competing digital liturgies that directly shape character through repetition and reward mechanisms embedded within platform design.

Digital Religion Studies: From Cyberspace to Platform Logics

The field of digital religion studies has evolved from viewing the internet as a separate space (cyberspace) toward an understanding that digital and physical practices are deeply intertwined (Zuhri, AM., 2021). The concept of networked religion is useful for understanding the characteristics of religiosity on social media, including networked communities, stored practices, convergent authority (from pastors to influencers), and diversified narratives. Furthermore, media ecology and critical platform studies approaches (Pratama, YH., 2023) emphasize that social media platforms are not neutral containers. Rather, they are environments shaped by platform logics technical, economic, and sociocultural principles that govern data flows and interactions. These logics (the drive for engagement, extreme personalization, and the commodification of attention) actively shape the possibilities of religious experience and expression, potentially encouraging the commodification of faith and performativity (Hariyanto, D., Dharma, FA, & Rodiyah, I., 2025).

Generation Z, Spiritual Seeking, and Digital Agency

Generation Z is a connected, pragmatic cohort driven by values of authenticity and social justice (Ismail, VY., 2025). In their spiritual seeking, they tend to be eclectic and self-directed, assembling beliefs from multiple sources, with social media functioning as both a primary library and forum (Sulaiman, S., & Neviyarni, S., 2021). They are not passive recipients but active and critical users who can develop strategies such as content curation, identity compartmentalization, or digital fasting. The gap this systematic review seeks to address lies in synthesizing empirical evidence on how these unique tendencies of Generation Z interact with social media platform logics to produce varied outcomes ranging from reinforcement to inhibition—in the process of forming a coherent and deep Christian character.

METHOD

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design to comprehensively and unbiasedly identify, evaluate, and synthesize all relevant empirical research. The review protocol was developed in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) guidelines, ensuring transparency, methodological rigor, and replicability. A systematic literature search was conducted extensively. To ensure broad and representative coverage, four leading academic databases were utilized: Scopus and Web of Science were selected for their multidisciplinary scope and high-quality indexed publications; the ATLA Religion Database was used to capture literature specific to the field of religious studies; and Google Scholar served as a complementary source to identify relevant publications in journals that are not yet well indexed or to capture pertinent grey literature that might otherwise be overlooked.

The search strategy was developed using Boolean operators. The core search string combined the following terms: ("social media" OR "digital media" OR Instagram OR TikTok OR "online community") AND ("Generation Z" OR "digital native" OR "young adult") AND ("Christian character" OR "moral formation" OR "spiritual formation" OR discipleship) AND (Christian)*, with syntactical adjustments made for each database. Articles were included if they met the following criteria: (1) original empirical research (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods); (2) a focus on Generation Z populations (aged 12–27 years) who self-identify as Christian; and (3) explicit examination of the relationship between social media use and aspects of Christian character formation, morality, or spirituality.

The selection process was conducted in two stages by two researchers independently to minimize bias. The first stage involved screening titles and abstracts of all identified records. The second stage consisted of full-text assessment of articles that passed the initial screening. Any discrepancies in evaluation were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. Data from eligible articles were then extracted into a standardized template, including bibliometric information, research methodology, sample characteristics, key relevant findings, and authors' conclusions. The extracted data were analyzed using a thematic synthesis approach. The analytical process proceeded through three sequential stages. First, inductive free coding was conducted on the text within the "findings" and "discussion" sections of each article. Second, similar codes were grouped to construct descriptive themes that remained grounded in the original data. Third, the researchers moved beyond descriptive themes to interpret them into more abstract analytical themes, which directly addressed the review's research question and enabled the development of a new conceptual framework.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Of the records identified through the database search, 32 empirical articles met all inclusion criteria and were included in the final synthesis. These studies originated from diverse geographical contexts (including North America, Europe, Asia, and Australia), with methodologies predominantly qualitative in nature (phenomenology, case studies, and netnography), alongside several quantitative survey-based studies. Platform focus varied, with Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Discord being the most frequently examined. The synthesis generated three interrelated analytical themes that collectively illustrate the spectrum of roles played by social media.

The Curated Sanctuary: Social Media as a Space of Access and Affirmation

This theme captures how social media facilitates character formation by providing access to formative resources that were previously limited. Generation Z actively curates their spiritual "feeds," following accounts that present biblical teaching through short-form videos, ethical infographics, theological podcasts, or daily devotional content. Platforms also function as community bridges, where closed WhatsApp groups or Discord servers become spaces for accountability, sharing struggles, and sustained prayer support, thereby overcoming geographical isolation (Kholili, A., 2025). In addition, Christian content creators and influencers emerge as role models and digital mentors whose "visible" lives offer concrete examples of living out faith within popular culture (Budi, 2024). Within this framework, social media operates as a "curated sanctuary"a chosen sacred space that supplies value input, community, and exemplars.

The Algorithmic Arena: Social Media as a Space of Fragmentation and Struggle

The findings consistently indicate that the same environment also functions as a contested arena. The platform logics that enable this "sanctuary" simultaneously generate what may be described as an algorithmic shadow. First, engagement-driven incentives (likes, shares, comments) encourage performative piety, whereby expressions of faith may shift from sincere internal motivation toward the pursuit of external validation (Johannes, 2024). Second, algorithms that prioritize short, viral content promote theological reductionism into appealing sound bites that lack context, nuance, and depth, thereby hindering the development of critical theological reflection. Third,

a highly personalized yet fragmented information environment produces ongoing value dissonance and identity conflict, in which content promoting humility may appear alongside advertisements encouraging material pride, complicating the formation of a coherent self (Hardiyanto, FE., 2020).

Negotiated Integration: Strategies of Agency and the Formation of a Hybrid Habitus

In response to the tension between Themes 1 and 2, the reviewed studies indicate that Generation Z is not a passive victim of digital influence. Rather, they are active agents who develop a range of strategies to negotiate digital impacts. These strategies range from selective integration (e.g., using online content as a catalyst for offline youth group discussions) to intentional compartmentalization (separating a public online identity from private faith struggles shared only with real-world mentors) (Sinaga, BA., 2025). Particularly notable is the emergence of new spiritual disciplines such as digital fasting or periodic curation of followed accounts, reflecting critical awareness and intentional efforts to discipline digital consumption (Husain, 2020). These practices point to the formation of a hybrid habitus a set of dispositions shaped by, and mediated through, the constant interaction between digital and physical worlds.

Taken together, these findings confirm that social media constitutes a formative yet ambivalent environment for the Christian character formation of Generation Z, functioning simultaneously as a facilitating "curation" and a disruptive "algorithm," navigated through diverse strategies of "negotiation." To advance both theoretical and practical understanding of these dynamics, we propose a Critical Digital Discipleship Framework. This framework argues that effective character formation in the digital age requires a synergistic three-layered approach: (1) Deconstruction, equipping Generation Z with theological digital media literacy to critically interrogate platform logics, recognize algorithmic impacts on spirituality, and evaluate religious content; (2**)** Intentional Cultivation, encouraging active and deliberate curation of social media environments as a spiritual practice such as intentionally following accounts that deepen faith and creating healthy digital community spaces; and (3) Embodied Integration, intentionally integrating digital experiences into embodied faith communities by providing safe spaces within churches to discuss online struggles, test digital insights against biblical truth, and remain rooted in authentic offline relationships and spiritual practices. Without layers of deconstruction and integration, digital content and communities risk being compromised by platform logics, while without recognition of negotiated agency, individuals are easily swept along by digital currents. Accordingly, this framework serves as a navigational map for churches, educators, and families to proactively accompany Generation Z not by rejecting technology, but by equipping them to use it wisely and purposefully.

CONCLUSION

Based on the systematic synthesis of 32 recent empirical studies, it can be concluded that:

1. Social media functions as a dual formative environment for the Christian character of Generation Z: it operates as The Curated Sanctuary, providing unprecedented access to religious resources, communities, and exemplars, while simultaneously serving as The Algorithmic Arena, which generates unique challenges in the form of performativity, theological shallowness, and value conflicts.
2. Generation Z responds to this ambivalence not with passivity but with active agency, employing negotiation strategies such as curation, compartmentalization, and digital fasting that reflect the formation of a hybrid habitus.
3. To mitigate risks and maximize potential, an approach that moves beyond simple technological adoption is required. The proposed Critical Digital Discipleship Framework offers an integrative model that emphasizes critical literacy, intentional curation, and embodied integration as the core pillars of character formation in the digital era.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Theoretical Implications

1. Validation and Model Development: The Critical Digital Discipleship framework needs to be tested and refined through further empirical research, both qualitative and quantitative.
2. Longitudinal Studies: Long-term research is critically needed to understand how patterns of social media use during adolescence influence character development and religious commitment in young adulthood.
3. Cross-Cultural Research: Comparative exploration across diverse cultural contexts and Christian denominations is necessary to understand variations in experiences and negotiation strategies.
4. Focus on Specific Platforms: In-depth studies are needed to examine how the unique logics and cultures of particular platforms (such as ephemerality on Snapchat versus deep community formation on Discord) influence character formation.

Practical Implications

For Churches and Christian Educational Institutions

Develop a theologically integrated digital media literacy curriculum within discipleship programs and Sunday schools. Train leaders and mentors to guide conversations about digital struggles and to integrate online insights into teaching practices. Create safe spaces within physical communities for honest and reflective sharing and discussion of faith experiences in the digital sphere.

For Families and Individuals

Implement family curation practices: encourage dialogue about followed accounts and content, and engage in shared curation of the family's social media environment. Practice shared digital disciplines: implement a "digital Sabbath" or device-free family time as a form of modern spiritual discipline.

For Content Creators and Digital Leaders

Prioritize depth alongside accessibility: develop content that stimulates critical thinking and invites concrete action, rather than passive consumption alone. Transparency and accountability: build online communities that emphasize mutual accountability and collective growth, rather than fostering a culture centered on individual figures.

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