

## **Beyond the Moral Risks of Social Media: Christian Digital Spirituality as a Pedagogical Paradigm for Moral Formation in the Digital Generation**

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### **Abstract:**

This study examines the internalization of Christian moral values in social media use among the digital generation through the lens of Christian education. This research is grounded in the tendency of previous studies to emphasize the negative impacts of social media—such as digital narcissism and ethical crises—without sufficiently exploring the pedagogical role of Christian education in shaping digital morality. The study aims to analyze strategies for internalizing Christian moral values—such as love, truth, responsibility, self-control, and wisdom—within social media practices. The method employed is descriptive qualitative research through a critical literature review of theological, pedagogical, and social studies related to digital media. The findings reveal that social media is not merely a space of moral risk but can also function as a medium for faith identity formation when integrated with contextual and transformative Christian education. The internalization of Christian morality requires synergy among character education, digital literacy, spiritual discipline, and faith-based communication ethics. The novelty of this study lies in the development of the concept of Christian digital spirituality as a new pedagogical paradigm within Christian education to cultivate a digital generation that is moral, critical, and responsible in its use of social media. These findings affirm that Christian education plays a strategic role in constructively responding to the challenges of digital culture.

### **Keywords:**

Christian morality, social media, Christian education, digital generation, digital spirituality

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## INTRODUCTION

The development of social media as a product of digital technological advancement has brought significant changes to contemporary society, particularly in communication, access to information, culture, and the formation of social identity (Amedia, 2015). On the one hand, social media offers significant benefits by expanding knowledge, accelerating the dissemination of information, and strengthening social connectivity. On the other hand, it also raises increasingly complex ethical issues. Huxley, as discussed by Postman (Postman, 2002), warned that the sheer volume of information could render people passive and self-centered, causing truth to be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. The massive flow of information without adequate moral control has the potential to create a crisis of values, in which truth, integrity, and personal responsibility are often distorted by the pursuit of popularity, manipulation, and a culture of instant gratification. In this context, social media should not be understood merely as a technological tool, but as a cultural space that shapes human moral orientation.

This reality can be seen in the various destructive consequences of irresponsible social media use, including the spread of hoaxes, hate speech, digital fraud, narcissistic culture, cyberbullying, and increasing social individualism. (Surjono, 2004) (Tandoc Jr et al., 2018). Social media often functions as a medium for circulating false information that shapes public perception and triggers social conflict. At the same time, the culture of digital self-presentation encourages individuals to construct artificial self-images in order to gain social recognition, thereby shifting human relationships from authenticity toward performativity. (Koentjaraningrat, 2002) (Vosoughi et al., 2018). These impacts affect not only the social sphere but also family life, work productivity, and individual spirituality. Thus, the problem of social media is fundamentally moral and spiritual, requiring serious ethical reflection.

Recent studies have examined social media from increasingly interdisciplinary perspectives. Avci, Baams, and Kretschmer (Avci et al., 2025), through a systematic review of social media use and adolescent identity development, show that social media has become a significant context for identity exploration, self-presentation, self-concept clarity, and identity distress among young people. Their study indicates that the impact of social media cannot be measured merely by the amount of time spent online, but must also be understood in relation to the quality of users' engagement, including authenticity, comparison, and modes of participation. From another perspective, Broda and Strömbäck (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024) demonstrate that misinformation, disinformation, and fake news have become major concerns in contemporary communication studies, particularly because digital platforms enable the rapid circulation of misleading information across social and political contexts. These studies show that social media is not merely a neutral communication tool but a formative environment that shapes identity, perception, public trust, and moral judgment.

Other recent studies have approached digital media from the perspective of religion, ethics, and Christian education. Campbell and Evolvi (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020) argue that digital religion studies examine how online and offline religious spaces are increasingly bridged, blended, and blurred through digital culture. (Díaz, 2021) Further shows that digital technology offers opportunities for Christian religious education and evangelization, but its unreflective use may also hinder the formative and dialogical aims of Christian education. In a similar direction, Gulo and Tapilaha (Gulo & Tapilaha, 2024) emphasize the need to integrate

spirituality and critical reasoning in Christian religious education so that students can engage digital technology with both faith commitment and intellectual discernment. Scheid (Scheid, 2025) also highlights the ethical significance of social media algorithms, arguing that digital platforms can amplify hatred, misinformation, polarization, and extremism when they are not critically examined from a Christian ethical perspective. Nevertheless, these studies generally address social media identity, misinformation, digital religion, algorithmic ethics, and Christian digital pedagogy as separate concerns. They have not yet sufficiently developed a theological-pedagogical framework for the internalization of Christian moral values in social media use among the digital generation. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by examining how Christian education can contribute to the formation of a digital generation that is morally grounded, spiritually discerning, critically aware, and responsible in its use of social media.

This article aims to examine how Christians should approach social media in light of its various ethical and spiritual challenges. It seeks to promote critical awareness of the harmful effects of irresponsible social media use, particularly those that may erode Christian spiritual, social, and ethical values. Therefore, this issue needs to be evaluated from the perspective of Christian faith and education. (Luzbetak, 2000). This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach based on a critical literature review, integrating sources from Christian ethics, Christian education, and social studies related to social media use. This approach enables the study to examine social media not only as a social phenomenon but also as a pedagogical context for the internalization of Christian moral values. (Creswell, 2015).

## METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical method to examine the internalization of Christian moral values in social media use among the digital generation from the perspective of Christian education. A qualitative approach is appropriate because this study seeks to interpret meanings, concepts, and normative values within a particular social and educational context. (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The data were drawn from a critical review of relevant literature, including books on Christian ethics and Christian education, scholarly articles, and previous studies on social media and the behavior of the digital generation. A literature review is used as a research methodology because it enables the researcher to synthesize, evaluate, and critically interpret existing scholarly discussions related to a particular issue. (Snyder, 2019).

The analysis was conducted in three stages: first, identifying the characteristics of social media use among the digital generation as a sociocultural context; second, analyzing the principles of Christian morality and Christian education related to media behavior; and third, conducting an integrative interpretation to formulate strategies for internalizing Christian moral values in the critical, wise, and responsible use of social media. Through this approach, the study seeks to develop a theological-pedagogical framework relevant to the character formation of the digital generation in the era of social media.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Nature of Social Media and Social Media

Social media refers to internet-based digital platforms that enable users to communicate, participate, share information, and build social networks through various online spaces, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other virtual forums. The emergence of social media has introduced a new paradigm of social interaction by expanding communication beyond geographical boundaries and enabling broader forms of global connectivity. Hajli argues that social media provides new opportunities for consumers to engage in social interaction through the internet. These opportunities allow users to create friendship groups, participate in online communities, and develop social networks across various digital platforms (Baym, 1998).

Social media provides significant benefits for digital businesses, including ride-hailing services, food delivery platforms, online marketplaces, and other forms of internet-based commerce. Through social media, businesses are able to promote their services, reach wider audiences, build consumer engagement, and expand their commercial networks. Beyond its economic function, social media also serves as an information platform by enabling users to document, disseminate, and access information about various events and social issues. In addition, social media can function as an educational medium, as platforms such as YouTube provide diverse learning resources that can be accessed freely or through subscription-based services (Lumintang, 2015). Despite these advantages, social media also poses significant risks to society. Its global reach and rapid circulation of content may contribute to the erosion of ethical, social, and cultural values when it is used without critical awareness and moral responsibility (Mulawarman, A. D, 2017). Thus, social media should be understood as an ambivalent digital space: it offers opportunities for business promotion, information dissemination, and learning, while also generating ethical and cultural challenges that require careful reflection.

Digital and screen media frequently present various forms of violence through films, cartoons, action dramas, and entertainment programs, which may contribute to children's aggressive behavior and lack of self-control. This problem is further intensified when media consumption reduces children's study time and shapes their daily routines through television schedules and other digital activities. Media should therefore not be understood merely as a source of entertainment; it has also transformed entertainment into a dominant format through which many aspects of life are represented (Teichman, 2000). Although such representations may appear attractive and pleasurable, they may also carry ideological influences, including the normalization of violence and the interests of particular groups.

Social media and other forms of online media may also become channels for the distribution of sexually explicit content, including videos, images, and narratives that are easily accessible across digital platforms. While the development of internet technology has brought significant benefits for communication, education, and social interaction, it also creates moral risks when access to digital content is not accompanied by critical awareness and ethical guidance (oecd, 2021). This issue is particularly significant for children and young people, who may be exposed to inappropriate content without sufficient maturity or discernment. Therefore, parents, educators, and faith communities need to play an active role in guiding children's use

of online media so that digital access does not lead to the uncritical consumption of harmful entertainment and information.

Social media is also frequently used as a platform for political communication, public persuasion, and the mobilization of support. In political contexts, digital platforms may be employed to strengthen influence, attract followers, and shape public opinion (Castells, 2009). However, when used irresponsibly, social media can also contribute to the circulation of biased, misleading, and conflicting information. Such information may weaken public trust, blur the distinction between truth and manipulation, and generate misunderstanding within society (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). For this reason, the problem of social media is not merely technological but also ethical, because it concerns the formation of truthfulness, responsibility, and moral discernment in public communication.

Another moral challenge associated with social media is its tendency to reshape social relationships. Although digital platforms connect people across geographical boundaries, they may also reduce the depth of face-to-face interaction when virtual communication replaces embodied social presence (Baym, 2015) (Arnd-Caddigan, 2015). This tendency is evident in everyday practices, such as the preference for text messages over direct conversation or online interaction over personal encounter. As a result, social media can create a paradoxical condition: it expands connectivity while also intensifying social distance. In this sense, social media may contribute to the weakening of communal life, interpersonal sensitivity, and shared social responsibility.

The rise of social media has also intensified the phenomenon of digital narcissism, in which users construct and display idealized images of themselves in order to gain recognition, admiration, or social approval. Studies on social networking sites show that online self-presentation is often related to the need for belonging, self-presentation, and, in some cases, narcissistic tendencies (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008) (Mehdizadeh, 2010). Self-love is not inherently problematic; however, when it becomes excessive and self-centered, it may encourage performative identity, materialistic display, and the pursuit of public validation. From a Christian ethical perspective, such tendencies need to be critically examined because they may shift the center of life from God and neighbor toward the self. Christian faith teaches that human identity is not grounded in appearance, popularity, or social recognition, but in one's relationship with God and responsibility toward others.

This ethical concern can be evaluated in light of the biblical teaching on humility and greatness. In Luke 9:48, Jesus teaches that true greatness is not found in self-exaltation, public admiration, or worldly status, but in humility and openness to others. This teaching challenges the logic of digital narcissism, which often encourages users to seek visibility, admiration, and superiority before others. Fedler argues that Christian ethics must be grounded in responsible engagement with Scripture as a source of moral guidance (Fedler, 2006). Therefore, the Christian life should not be centered on self-display but on Christ, who forms believers to live with humility, integrity, love, and responsibility. In this regard, social media use requires not only technical skill but also spiritual discernment and ethical formation.

## A New Paradigm of Communication

The development of new media has contributed to significant shifts in the understanding of mass communication. Communication is not merely the transmission of messages but also a cultural process through which meanings, values, and identities are formed. From this perspective, communication and culture are closely related, since every act of communication takes place within a particular cultural framework (Mawikere, 2022). More recent media scholarship also shows that digital communication increasingly shapes social reality, because media technologies do not simply represent the world but participate in constructing the conditions through which people perceive, interpret, and organize everyday life (Couldry & Hepp, 2018). Consequently, social media can influence people's beliefs, values, perspectives, attitudes, character, self-understanding, and perceptions of others. For this reason, social media users need to exercise critical awareness, media literacy, and moral discernment in responding to the ethical consequences of digital communication (Pasetti, 2021).

Recent developments in critical communication and cultural theory have drawn attention to the relationship between media, ideology, consciousness, and hegemony. Ideology may be understood as a system of ideas that shapes how messages are produced, circulated, and interpreted, while hegemony refers to the process through which particular meanings and values become dominant within society. Media institutions do not simply transmit neutral information; they also participate in the production and circulation of meanings that may reflect particular social, cultural, political, or economic interests (Xie et al., 2022) (Fiske, 2010). In the contemporary digital environment, this process has become more complex because digital platforms increasingly function as infrastructures that organize social interaction, public communication, economic exchange, and cultural visibility (Van Dijck et al., 2018). Thus, media should be understood not only as instruments of communication but also as cultural spaces in which meaning, identity, power, and public values are negotiated.

The rise of social media also reflects a broader process of platformization, in which social, cultural, and economic activities are increasingly shaped by the technological, commercial, and algorithmic logic of digital platforms (Poell et al., 2019). This means that communication is no longer mediated only by messages and institutions but also by data, algorithms, visibility mechanisms, and platform governance. As a result, social media can shape not only what people communicate but also how they form identity, build relationships, gain recognition, and participate in public life. This condition requires ethical reflection because digital platforms may amplify certain values, interests, and forms of behavior while marginalizing others.

Quentin J. Schultze argues that communication technologies often become sites of cultural and religious tension because they shape the way individuals, families, and communities understand identity, morality, and social life (Schultze, 2000). In the context of digital religion studies, Campbell and Evolvi (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020) similarly show that emerging technologies influence lived religious practices, spirituality, and the ways religious communities engage contemporary culture. This tension can be seen in the recurring conflicts between religious and secular values, morality and immorality, traditional and modern lifestyles, family life and the wider public sphere, as well as low-technology and high-technology cultures. Similar tensions appeared in earlier media forms such as the printing press, radio, film, and television, and they continue today through the internet and social media.

Therefore, social media should be approached not merely as a technological development but as a cultural, moral, and spiritual environment that requires ethical reflection, spiritual discernment, and responsible educational guidance.

## **Communication and Ethics**

A discussion of communication cannot be separated from the realm of ethics, since ethical norms are an integral part of responsible communication. Communication is dynamic because it always involves ongoing interaction among individuals, communities, and institutions. It is not a static process, but an accumulation of meanings, responses, and social relations formed through continuous interaction (Teichman, 1996) (Trusted, 2020). Since human beings are social creatures whose existence is closely connected to others, communication becomes essential for building relationships, sharing meaning, and sustaining communal life. Therefore, effective communication requires ethical principles that guide how messages are produced, transmitted, received, and interpreted.

The dynamic nature of communication also implies that communication ethics continues to develop in response to changes in media technology and social practice, even though its fundamental principles remain relatively stable. When newspapers became an important medium of public communication, journalistic ethics emerged to regulate the production and dissemination of news. Later, when radio and television became influential broadcasting media, broadcasting ethics developed to guide the standards of public communication and determine what kinds of content were appropriate for public consumption (Watie, 2011) (Rizky & Setiawati, 2020). The emergence of social media has introduced new ethical challenges because information now circulates more rapidly, interactively, and widely through user participation. Information producers are no longer limited to formal news organizations or broadcasting institutions; individuals, communities, and social groups can also produce, distribute, and respond to public information. Thus, social media has transformed communication ethics by shifting the control of information from centralized institutions to more participatory and decentralized digital networks.

## **The Role of Ethics in Media and Christian Education**

Every form of news and communication media requires ethical norms that guide the production, circulation, and reception of information within society. This need becomes particularly important in a pluralistic context such as Indonesia, where society consists of diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious communities, each with its own values and moral traditions. In such a context, ethics does not eliminate difference; rather, it provides a shared moral framework that enables individuals and communities to communicate responsibly, respect one another, and participate constructively in public life.

The use of social media is shaped by various moral perspectives that often compete with one another. Each perspective may advance its own claims regarding freedom, truth, responsibility, and the limits of expression. In this context, ethics plays an important role in guiding social media users toward responsible freedom. Drawing on Kant's distinction between

autonomy and heteronomy, ethical action may be understood as action that is not merely driven by external pressure, social approval, or impulsive desire, but by rational and responsible moral awareness (Kant, 1998). Thus, freedom in communication should not be separated from responsibility. Social media users have the freedom to express opinions, share ideas, and participate in public discourse, but this freedom must be exercised with accountability toward others and toward the common good.

Education plays a central role in cultivating ethical awareness and positive values within society. This formation does not take place only in formal educational institutions, but also in families, churches, and local communities. Both formal and non-formal education contribute to the preservation and development of cultural, social, and religious values. Since values shape character, attitudes, and patterns of behavior, education becomes an important means of forming individuals who are intellectually mature, morally responsible, and socially aware.

From a Christian educational perspective, the formation of values is not limited to social morality but is also directed toward the formation of persons in the likeness of Christ. Christian education has a distinctive theological orientation because it seeks to form believers who love God, serve others, and participate responsibly in society. The history of Christian education, particularly since the Reformation, shows that the church has consistently regarded education as an essential part of its ministry. The Reformers emphasized the importance of biblical instruction, catechesis, preaching, congregational worship, and the education of both children and adults as means of nurturing faith and shaping Christian character (Anthony & Benson, 2011) (Boehlke, 1997).

In this sense, Christian education is not merely the transmission of religious knowledge, but a process of spiritual and moral formation. It teaches believers to depend on God not passively, but actively and dynamically, as they seek to know God more deeply and respond faithfully to the challenges of life (Pazmino, 2008). Such education forms Christians who do not rely solely on their own abilities, but who live in dependence on God while participating responsibly in society. Applied to the context of social media, Christian education should guide believers, especially young people, to use digital platforms with wisdom, truthfulness, self-control, humility, and love. Therefore, ethics and Christian education together provide an important framework for shaping responsible digital citizenship and faithful Christian witness in contemporary media culture.

## **A Christian Ethical Perspective**

Ethics concerns questions of moral right and wrong, while Christian ethics examines such questions from the perspective of Christian faith. According to Geisler (Geisler, 2010), Christians ground their moral beliefs in God's revelation as recorded in Scripture; therefore, this study treats the Bible as the primary authority for ethical reflection. Christian ethics is rooted in God's moral will as revealed through both general revelation (Rom. 1:19–20; 2:12–15) and special revelation (Rom. 2:18; 3:2). God reveals Himself through creation (Ps. 19:1–6) and through Scripture (Ps. 19:7–14). While general revelation discloses God's moral order to all people, special revelation makes His will more explicit for the people of faith. Thus, divine revelation provides the foundation for human ethical responsibility. In this sense, Christian

ethics contains a deontological dimension, since moral norms are grounded in God's revealed will and serve as a framework for evaluating human action.

From the perspective of Christian ethics, the antisocial tendencies associated with social media use should be evaluated in relation to the Christian calling to live in right relationship with God, others, and society. Christian ethics is not merely concerned with individual morality but also with the formation of communal responsibility. The church is called to be holy and universal, meaning that its life and witness are not restricted to a particular place, culture, group, or medium. This view challenges forms of antisocial behavior that isolate individuals, weaken embodied social participation, and reduce responsibility toward others. The idea of the universal church affirms that Christian community should not be confined to digital interaction alone but should extend across places, generations, nations, and cultures (Boland, 1992). In this regard, antisocial behavior may be understood as a form of relational disconnection within the body of Christ, in which members become detached from one another. From a Christian ethical perspective, such a condition stands in tension with the Christian faith and with the teachings of Christ as transmitted through the apostolic witness.

In Romans 12:4–5, Paul describes the church as one body composed of many members, each having different functions yet belonging to one another in Christ. This idea is further reinforced in Ephesians 4:4, where believers are said to be called to one body, one Spirit, and one hope. Paul's teaching indicates that the unity of the body of Christ does not eliminate diversity of function; rather, it establishes relational and spiritual interdependence among believers. Therefore, the suffering of one member is shared by the whole body, just as the joy or honor of one member becomes a reason for communal rejoicing. The body of Christ is ultimately sustained by the love of Christ (Gill, 2004).

Carl F. H. Henry, in his discussion of the distinctive virtues of the New Testament, portrays believers as those who, like a tree planted by streams of water (Ps. 1:3), bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23): love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Henry, 1957). Through the gift and work of the Holy Spirit, believers are enabled to cultivate these virtues and embody them in their daily lives within society (Brunner, 2025). Thus, Christian ethics calls believers not only to avoid antisocial attitudes that weaken communal bonds but also to cultivate Spirit-formed virtues that sustain mutual care, participation, and responsibility within the body of Christ.

In the context of the rapid and widespread use of social media, Christian moral values serve as an important guide for maintaining integrity, truthfulness, and love in social interaction. Social media provides opportunities for individuals to share information, opinions, and experiences, but it also has the potential to encourage negative behaviors such as slander, envy, and the spread of false information. Therefore, Christian education plays a significant formative role in guiding young people to understand and apply moral principles in their online activities. Philippians 4:8 states, "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable if anything is excellent or praiseworthy think about such things." This teaching emphasizes the importance of directing one's thoughts and actions, including in the digital world, toward what is good, truthful, and edifying.

The cultivation of Christian values in social media use also requires an awareness of love and responsibility toward others. Every form of communication should reflect the love of Christ, respect the dignity of others, and avoid the dissemination of content that harms others' reputations or undermines moral responsibility. Ephesians 4:29 provides an important ethical principle for digital communication: "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear." This verse emphasizes that Christian communication should be constructive, appropriate, and grace-giving. Similarly, Proverbs 4:23 teaches the importance of guarding the heart, since the moral condition of the heart shapes the quality of one's interactions, including those that occur in digital spaces. Colossians 3:17 further affirms that whatever believers do, whether in word or deed, should be done in the name of the Lord Jesus, indicating that online conduct should also reflect faith, gratitude, and accountability before God. Matthew 5:16 likewise teaches that believers are called to let their light shine before others so that their good works may glorify the Father. In this sense, the wise and responsible use of social media can serve as a visible expression of Christian moral witness in contemporary society.

Social media often circulates misleading, distorted, irrelevant, and fragmented information, shaped by illusions and provocations that can turn individuals into pawns and victims of baseless claims (Satria & Arifin, 2014). In response, Christian ethics should emphasize practices that build community rather than actions that destroy relationships, spread slander, and generate social disorder. It calls believers to live as witnesses who reflect the image of God through goodness and mercy, while rejecting destructive behavior, the violation of others' rights, and support for those who undermine social stability and moral responsibility. Therefore, social media use should be understood not merely as a matter of technological competence but as a field of moral formation, spiritual discernment, and Christian witness.

## CONCLUSION

Social media offers significant opportunities for communication, education, and social interaction, yet it also presents serious moral challenges, including hoaxes, digital narcissism, cyberbullying, and the erosion of ethical values. Therefore, the digital generation requires a strong moral foundation to exercise digital freedom critically, wisely, and responsibly. In this context, Christian education plays a strategic role as a pedagogical framework for internalizing Christian moral values, such as love, truth, self-control, responsibility, and wisdom, within social media practices.

This study affirms that social media is not merely a space of moral risk but can also become a medium for shaping faith identity when integrated with contextual and transformative Christian education. The scholarly contribution of this study lies in its development of the concept of Christian digital spirituality as a pedagogical paradigm that integrates Christian ethics, character education, and digital literacy. This paradigm contributes theoretically to the development of Christian education in the digital age and offers practical implications for churches, families, and educational institutions in forming a morally grounded, critical, and responsible digital generation.

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