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An Ecosystemic Approach to Digital Christianity: How Faith and Identity Formation Evolve Among Youth in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

This sociological and ethnographic study develops and employs an ecosystemic approach to examine the effects of digitalization on religious beliefs and practices among young Christians in a Pentecostal megachurch in Singapore. Through extensive fieldwork and qualitative data analysis, this paper uncovers how the religious identity of young Christians evolves within a dynamic ecosystem shaped by indirect and direct digitalization. It outlines how Christian beliefs and practices transform indirectly through the digitalization of faith-based communities and religious authorities, and directly through individual engagement with social media and communication apps. This research contributes to understanding the interplay between religion and digitalization in the lives of young Christians in Southeast Asia, which calls for further exploration in this diverse cultural context. Conceptually, this paper proposes a framework for a more systematic and comprehensive study of the blended nature of online and offline religion, digital religion.

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Keywords: *digital religion, digital Christianity, religious identity formation, religious authority, religious communities, ecosystemic approach*

1. Digital Religion in the Singapore Context

The widespread integration of digital technology into daily life has transformed various sectors of society, including religious practice. As digital media continues to evolve, the intersection of religion and technology is an increasingly prominent subject of inquiry in both academic and popular discourse. This digital revolution, as Negroponte (1995) observed, extends beyond the mere transmission of information; it reshapes the social, cultural, and behavioral dynamics of individuals and communities.

How does the pervasive nature of digital media influence religious life and spiritual engagement? To what extent has digital technology altered religious practices, particularly for younger generations? As digital spaces grow more central to communication and community life, what implications does this shift have for traditional religious institutions and the roles they play?

This study aims to address these questions through a case study of a Pentecostal megachurch in Singapore, anonymized as "SG Church". Using ethnographic methods, including participant observation and digital textual analysis, this research examines how digital media and technology shape the religious practices, beliefs, and identities of young people in SG Church. Conceptually, the study proposes an ecosystemic framework for understanding the intertwined impact of digitalization on religious life and identity formation. The methodological approach combines ethnographic research with digital ethnography. The increased use of social media by young people, coupled with their active participation in church activities, provides a rich opportunity for ethnographic inquiry. The concept of "virtual ethnography" (Hine 2000, 2008) enables the observation of digital spaces without disrupting the natural flow of online interactions, allowing for a deeper understanding of the hybrid nature of contemporary religious engagement.

Featherstone (2009) and others have noted that the boundaries between online and offline realms are increasingly difficult to maintain, especially

in an era of "ubiquitous media." This blending is evident in everyday religious practices, where digital technology mediates activities such as pilgrimages, rituals, and spiritual healing (Lim 2009; Cho 2015; De Sousa and Da Rosa 2020). Campbell (2013) coined the term "digital religion" to describe this new reality where religious experiences unfold across both digital and physical environments.

While digital religion has become a growing field of study, much of the existing literature has focused on institutional and global perspectives, often overlooking the diverse and localized experiences of religion in Asia. This study contributes to the expanding body of work on digital religion in Southeast Asia, particularly in Singapore, where the intersection of religion, media, and technology is uniquely shaped by local cultural and religious contexts (Han and Kamaludeen 2016; Lim 2018; Gomes and Tan 2020).

Singapore presents a particularly fascinating case due to its high levels of digital connectivity and the dynamic religious landscape, which is both diverse and increasingly syncretic (Mathews et al. 2021). Despite global trends showing declining religiosity, Singapore maintains high levels of religious engagement, making it an ideal setting for exploring the evolving role of digital technologies in shaping religious identity.

This research aims to deepen the understanding of digital religion by focusing on the lived religious experiences of youth in SG Church, exploring how digital media and online communities intersect with traditional faith practices and beliefs. By doing so, it seeks to offer new insights into how digitalization influences religious identity formation within a unique and highly religiously diverse context like Singapore.

1.1. Selection of Field Site(s)

SG Church was selected as the primary field site for this research due to its unique demographic and digital engagement. Founded in the late 1980s with a vision to "raise up a generation of young people who would take Asia by storm," at one point, SG Church grew from 20 youths to over 32,000 members, with a significant youth population—about 40% under 25. It's vibrant youth ministry, largely organized into cell groups, provides an ideal context for examining how digitalization shapes youth interactions with religious authority.

As an independent Pentecostal megachurch with charismatic leadership, SG Church enjoys flexibility in shaping innovative religious practices and embracing digital tools. Its hierarchical structure allows for swift adaptation, making it a fitting site to study digital culture in church contexts. Additionally, SG Church's extensive media ministry, including professional staff and volunteers, produces high-quality digital content for services and events. The church's strong social media presence, with pastors actively engaging congregants on platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, further enriches the study of digital religious authority. These factors combine to make SG Church a rich site for exploring the digital transformation of religious beliefs and practices.

1.2. Selection of Sample and Data Collection

This research is part of a larger project on the religious experiences of young, English-speaking Chinese Singaporeans. While the broader study collected extensive data, this paper offers a focused analysis, with further insights to be shared in future publications.

The study combines ethnography with digital ethnography. Data was gathered through participant observation at in-person church services, small group meetings, and interviews with 30 youth (ages 13-24) and 5 pastoral staff. Participants were selected using snowball sampling, and pseudonyms ensured confidentiality. Digital methods included analyzing social media content from Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and the church's online presence.

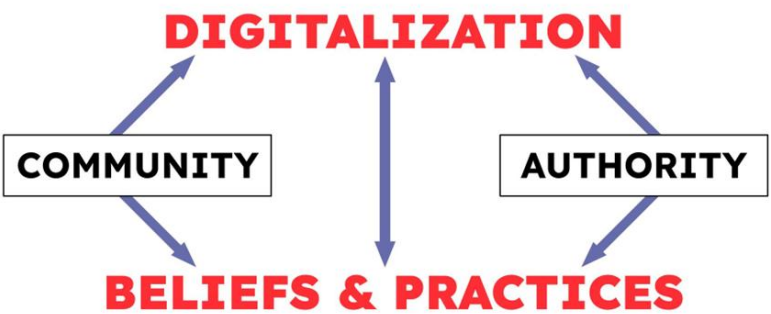
Data was collected across three periods: pre-pandemic, during the pandemic, and post-pandemic. A multi-method approach integrated qualitative interviews, participant observation, and digital textual analysis of social media activity to explore how digitalization impacts religious authority and young Christians' beliefs and practices.

2. An Ecosystem of Digitalized Religious Identity Formation

Through a process of abductive analysis, this paper presents an ecosystemic framework that elucidates the impact of digitalization on religious identity formation, by integrating empirical qualitative data and theoretical social science literature (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). It reveals that young

people's religious identity evolves within a dynamic ecosystem of direct and indirect digitalization. Specifically, it outlines how Christian beliefs and practices transform indirectly through the digitalization of faith-based *communities* and religious *authorities*, and directly through engagement with diverse social media and communication apps.

Diagrammatically this ecosystem of digitalized religious identity formation may be illustrated as follows:



Sociological identity studies tend to focus on collective identity and group membership, influencing individual roles and behaviours (Burke 2020). Psychological identity studies instead tend to emphasize individuality and self-concept (Buss and Cantor 2012). For this paper, religious identity is observed through an individual's religious beliefs and practices and is interpreted as both structurally shaped and individually negotiated.

The sociology of youth has developed a reflexive approach to studying young people, considering both the "socialization hypothesis" and the "individualized life course hypothesis", articulated by some as "structured individualization" (Plug et al. 2003, 140; Roberts et al. 1994). In my research, young people have shown awareness of the influence of digital media and technology and reflexive agency in their responses. For example, Yue Jing (junior college student, 18) strongly articulated her beliefs and religious identity as follows:

> *My belief is grounded in the Word of God and in my experiences with Him. A smartphone is just a facilitator of information to me... my belief must not depend on what other people share, or…are saying on social media, it must be a personal belief that is developed offline, with God alone…*

Qualitative responses like these also highlight the "mediation of meaning" among young respondents in this research, a concept attributed to Hoover (2002). This concept challenges earlier linear and deterministic theories on the mediatization of religion and emphasizes the agential interpretation and use of media in shaping religious beliefs, practices, and identities. A concept that aptly describes the observed phenomena among young people in this research.

The decision to conceptualize the digitalization of religious identity formation through an ecosystem approach is intentional. An ecosystem perspective recognizes the contextual influence on an individual and their active participation in that environment (Sullivan 2017). This dynamic interaction between the individual and the digital environment is crucial to understanding the relationship between young people and the digital environment in which they find themselves.

Religious community and authority shape religious identity, as seen in interviews with the youths and staff. Therefore, an ecosystemic approach that considers the interplay of community and authority is vital to an accurate understanding of how digitalization impacts religious beliefs and practices. Therein lies the salient contribution of abductive analysis to the scholarship on digital religion. Abductive analysis in digital religion scholarship integrates ground-up phenomenological ethnographic data and social scientific concepts. This leads to theories that (1) better fit empirical data, (2) are more plausible and contextually explanatory, and (3) are relevant to the larger bodies of work in digital religion, sociology of religion, and communication studies (Tavory and Timmermans 2014).

Building on this ecosystemic theory of religious identity formation, the rest of this paper presents and discusses the findings in the following sections: 1) Indirect effects of digitalization on religious beliefs and practices through smartphone-enabled communities of faith; 2) Indirect effects of digitalization on religious authority and its consequences on individual beliefs and practices; 3) Direct effects of digitalization on the beliefs and practices of young individuals through social media and communication apps. The paper ends with a reiteration of the need for further research on the effects of digitalization in each domain of the ecosystem and its relationship with individual religious identity in our rapidly evolving digital world.

3. Smartphone-Enabled Communities

Kai Ling (university student, 21) said:

> *No Christian is a lone ranger. It's a journey with God, but also one with fellow Christian peers… Having a strong community and godly relationships is important...*

The consensus among the respondents is that relationships and community are integral to their Christian faith in SG Church. This is institutionalized through its cell group system and is described as crucial for Christian identity formation. The church's mission statement also highlights the importance of "Experiencing Family" through cell groups. Riley (university student, 22) asserted:

> *Christianity is not just about a God that we serve, but also about the community that we are in, and the relationships that we foster with one another.*

Understanding the role of faith community and peer group socialization is imperative in comprehending religious identity formation among young individuals. What follows is the logical conclusion that digitalization is having an indirect but profound impact on the beliefs, practices and religious identity of Christian youths by affecting their highly-valued relationships and communities, which they affectionately refer to as "fellowship" and "cell group".

Existing research on the effects of digitalization on religious communities reveals valuable insights. For instance, Clark (2004) found that online friendships among teenagers complement and support offline religious interactions, influencing religious life. Gorrell (2016) highlighted how social media shapes communal life and contributes to religious identity formation. In Asia, marginalized religious minorities use the internet and social media to foster digital religious communities (Lim and Sng 2020). This study builds on Ling's (2014) concept of "Mobile Phones and Digital Gemeinschaft," interpreting young people's communities of faith as smartphone-enabled communities. While offline cell groups serve as a form of community, the young respondents also acknowledged the crucial role of smartphones in sustaining their fellowship and cell group communities as smartphone/digitally-powered gemeinschafts.

Part of the reason young people's faith communities are smartphone-enabled is due to the pervasive use of smartphones and consequent societal

expectations of constant accessibility. As Jun Xiang (university student, 24) highlighted (albeit with slight exaggeration):

> *It's the de facto form of communication of the modern era. Without our mobile smartphone devices, we [the cell group] won't be able to effectively communicate with one another.*

Given the centrality of community to Christian beliefs and core Christian practices, smartphones are not only reshaping religious communities but inevitably shaping religious beliefs and practices in the process. While further research into the effects of digitalization on religious community is warranted, the young respondents in this study revealed some of the prominent ways smartphones are changing their engagement, cultivation, and perception of Christian community.

Yue Jing (junior college student, 18), for instance, highlighted the role of smartphones in enabling her to care for and so "strengthen relationships" with her cell group:

> *…through Whatsapp-ing my church friends I can find out about how their exams were… If they didn't do so well and are feeling discouraged… I can make arrangements to meet them personally to encourage them… without a smartphone, is hard to accomplish… it is like a convenient "channel" to strengthen relationships.*

Examples like this illustrate how smartphones empower community engagement, reshape perceptions, and raise expectations of participation. However, some expressed caution and scepticism about their usefulness in this context. Shane (university student, 23) said:

> *…the bad thing about such devices is that it can also ruin relationships as people will get so used to this convenience that they are lazy in maintaining a physical face-to-face relationship. They will always feel that texting alone will suffice… we will never know if the conversations… are genuine as they can always draft their messages to perfection…*

Despite the risks, even sceptics of smartphones still prefer them in their communities due to the belief that the benefits of smartphone-enabled communities outweigh the drawbacks of shaping religious identity.

Another significant consequence of smartphone-enabled communities is that it allows young people to identify with a larger collective group identity. As Yue Jing (junior college student, 18) observed:

> *In modern times, I think mobile phones have shaped the way we "do church" - the way church members connect with each other, the way information is being passed down, the way communities are being*

> *constructed. There's a much wider online presence, so that you feel you are connected to many many many people of the faith all at once, from my cg, to my usher team, to my church... there's even a greater sense of the overall Christian identity, as being part of the global Body of Christ…*

The church/cell group communities in SG Church among the youth should be understood as smartphone-enabled communities or digital gemeinschafts, characterized by interactive spaces with porous boundaries where members share space, practices, resources, identities, and interpersonal relationships (Baym 2010).

Arguably, the most salient impact of smartphone-enabled communities on young people's religious beliefs and practices is that they provide them with access to a wider range of cultural tools for identity formation that were previously unavailable. The concept of a "cultural toolkit" describes how young people acquire cultural tools from their socio-cultural milieu that shape their evolving identity (Fine 2004). In the context of a digital cultural milieu, as Yue Jing aptly stated earlier, it positions young people in a much larger milieu online, giving them access to a much wider selection of resources, cultural tools, and scripts that they can accept, reject, and repurpose in the curation of their religious identities.

However, young people do not form their religious selves in communities without interruption. There are rules, conventions, and principles that guide their reflexive projects of identity formation. The reliability and authority of these guides and guidelines are important considerations in the ecosystem of digitalized religious identity formation and will be addressed in the next discussion.

4. Overlapping Spheres of Authority

The youth of SG Church, akin to young people in other faith communities globally, are leveraging the diversity and accessibility of new and alternative voices of religious authority in the wake of digitalization (Han and Kamaludeen 2016; Cheong 2017). This exposure allows them to shape their religious beliefs and practices with religious-cultural tools beyond their local faith community.

The young people in this study represent a distinct cohort of "new" digital natives, unlike earlier generations, who did not have the same level of

exposure and access. They have grown up in a world that is digitally very different from the one over two decades ago when the term "digital natives" was first coined by Prensky (2001). This generation of "new" digital natives is proficient in the language of digital technology and engages with religion and forms their religious identities in digital spaces (Wang et al. 2013). The relationship between spirituality and digitality for these "new" digital natives is best described as "embodied, embedded, and every day," echoing Hine's (2015) characterization. The symbiosis of spirituality and digitality is so intricate that even overt reliance on digital technology recedes into the background and fades into the subconscious.

Other religious communities and individuals may also be undergoing a similar digitally induced evolution of religious authority. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that digitalization can impact religious authority in diverse ways across and within different faith communities, resulting in unique dynamics of authority. Exploring potential contributing factors such as theology, community culture, age, and others that shape these nuanced differences in authority dynamics across religions is a promising area for future research.

The responses of young people in SG Church suggest that the digitalization of religious authority has both adversarial and supportive effects on traditional religious authority. This aligns with the struggle noted by Campbell and Garner (2016, 67) between "traditional religious leaders and… a new breed of religious authorities appearing online", as well as the internet reinforcing and extending the legitimacy and authority of established religious hierarchies, as Cheong (2013) noted. This section focuses on unpacking the effects of digitalized religious authority on the religious beliefs and practices of young people, as part of the ecosystem of digitalized religious identity formation.

Conceptually, existing literature on the impact of digitalization on religion and everyday religious life (e.g. Campbell 2013; Hutchings 2015; Cheong 2017) tends to lack nuance in the analysis of religious authority, often conflating multiple forms and sources of power. However, the data collected from respondents in this study suggests that they mainly refer to three distinct but overlapping spheres of authority—*systems*, *leadership*, and *theology*—when discussing the concept of "authority."

Each sphere will be further explained in the subsequent exploration and discussion of their interactions with digital culture. Briefly, "systems" encompass institutional structures of authority such as formal lines of

communication, clergical hierarchies, and traditional/officialized religious practices. "Leadership" refers to individuals who hold positions of authority or influence, whether through formal roles or informal means, but have sway over religious followers. "Theology" as a sphere of authority focuses on the intrinsic authority attributed to sacred texts and their interpretations, in this case, the authority Christians ascribe to the Bible and its teachings.

4.1. Subverting Systems and Structures

In SG Church, as in other megachurches in Asia, the cell group system and weekly church service are integral institutional practices with manifest functions and objectives. However, these systems also involve latent processes of socialization that occur in person and on-site, which are being disrupted by the adoption of digital alternatives.

The proliferation of social media and communication platforms has enabled church leadership to communicate directly and frequently with the congregation. Paradoxically, this ease of direct mass communication facilitated by digital technology has diminished the authority and perceived significance of structural systems such as the cell group and weekend service.

Previously, the cell group played a central role, alongside the weekend service, in facilitating communication of spiritual direction and religious knowledge from the senior leadership to the congregation. This was achieved through exclusive cell group leaders-only meetings and the provision of resources for cell group meetings. However, with the emergence of direct and media-rich means of engagement, such as YouTube videos, Instagram posts, and podcasts, the role of the cell group leader and cell group system can sometimes be inadvertently diminished as an unnecessary intermediary between the senior leadership and the congregation.

Digitalization has not only brought "religion online" as Helland (2000) described but has also led to a social (re)construction of the core Christian practice of "*going to church*". Traditionally, this practice involved physically going to a church building, but now it can also involve participating in online services through the internet. For instance, Zach, a 20-year-old national serviceman, expressed gratitude for the opportunity to "still get to go to church online" when he is "stuck in camp."

The sermon is a central element in the exercise of religious authority during the weekend church service. It serves as a cornerstone of the church

service experience, with individuals sitting under the guidance and authority of an appointed preacher. However, digitalization has disrupted this closed system, transforming it into a more open and accessible one. Online platforms now provide young people with options to participate in different church services, listen to teachings from various leaders, and explore different theological perspectives. Not only does this resemble the convenience of online shopping, but it also offers the option to easily disconnect and skip church services altogether.

The subversion of these two systems embedded into the structure of the church has led to the emergence of alternative processes of socialization and new systems of religious identity formation: digital discipleship. These disruptions to the authority structure of the church have multifaceted consequences that require further exploration. Nonetheless, digitalization has significantly impacted the structural systems of authority and the formation of religious beliefs and practices.

4.2. Innovating Leadership

The second sphere of authority concerns the leaders of SG Church, specifically pastoral staff and cell group leaders, whose perceived legitimacy and efficacy are affected by the media-saturated societies in which we live. While digitalization provides new opportunities for leaders to exercise authority through online channels, it also poses challenges. Digitalization offers new platforms for evaluating the competence of religious leaders and empowers the public and average churchgoers with alternative resources that may challenge a leader's interpretation of religious texts and teachings. As Roger (university student, 22) expressed:

> *Google has made everyone a pseudo-theologian, now everything can be googled, checked, verified… I have [cell group] members who sometimes ask me how come what they hear online is different from what is preached…*

Disconnecting from online platforms may seem like a way for church leaders to avoid scrutiny, but it also hinders their ability to engage with the youth who are actively present on these platforms. Connecting with youth through online platforms is essential for effective communication and ministry, as highlighted by Lisa, a youth pastoral staff:

> *The weekend service is about two to three hours, and cell group meetings another three hours, that's a total of six hours, we miss out on the what, hundred over hours in the rest of the week if that's all we do… They [the*

youth] spend more time on their phones, on Instagram, TikTok, than in CGMs and services… I think it's important that we meet them there too…

As noted earlier, being a digitally engaged leader comes with increased scrutiny and criticism, as illustrated by Yong Jie's (university student, 22) personal account as a youth cell group leader:

I am careful that I don't post shots of me drinking or anything… It's not that we are legalistic about it and that we cannot drink… I know my limits and I'm responsible enough to drink moderately… but I just don't want the parents of the youth I lead or the youths themselves to think that that's where I'm gonna bring them to fellowship!

Yong Jie's self-censorship on social media highlights the scrutiny leaders face in the digital era, prompting discussions on conventional leadership values like authenticity and integrity.

Furthermore, the observation of authority in the context of digitalization reflects parallels with Weber's concept of charismatic authority, but in a digitally transformed form. Traditional pathways of leadership within SG Church are no longer solely based on recognized rituals and legal-rational processes. In today's digital mediascapes, religious personalities who successfully navigate the online space are legitimized and authorized through likes, shares, and attention, exemplifying a unique brand of leadership and authority. This can be understood as charismatic authority in Weberian terms.

One example of an innovative religious personality/leader mentioned by respondents is Annette Lee (a local singer-songwriter and YouTube personality). Krystal (secondary school student, 16) commented on Annette Lee saying:

I feel like she's [Annette's] very real and she gets me…I personally feel like she connects… it is just more relatable? You know? Not just preaching…but like she's young and the way she talks and her experiences are just more…relevant? You know? Like she knows what's going on for us [youths] today?

Social media influencers like Annette Lee, despite not conforming to traditional religious leadership roles, hold significant influence over young people's religious beliefs and practices due to their prominent online presence. This decoupling of religious authority from traditional church structures, as argued by Hjarvard (2013), is a result of mediatization. Observing the young respondents of SG Church, there also seems to be a shift towards more personalized and independent forms of religious

leadership, resulting in "a multiplication of competing authorities" (Possamai and Turner 2014, 200). This requires religious leaders to adapt and evolve to remain effective in today's changing landscape of religious authority.

These observations prompt two key points for further exploration. Firstly, what qualities beyond digital innovation and online content creation are necessary for effective religious leadership in the digital age? Secondly, does the heightened scrutiny and accountability faced by leaders in the digital age have positive or negative effects on leadership quality for both leaders and congregants?

4.3. Tinkering with Theology

Drawing on the works of Berger et al. (1973), Turkle (1997), Wuthnow (2010), and McClure (2017), the youth of SG Church exhibit a "tinkering attitude" towards theology, practice, and religious affiliations, in line with the increased use of technology and online engagement. As "new" digital natives, tinkering is a normative skill in their cultural toolkit, and is evident in their approach to various aspects of life, including spirituality and theology.

The argument is that digitality fosters tinkering, leading individuals to evolve and edit their religious beliefs, affecting the authority and stability of established theological beliefs or local church teachings. While church leaders may view internet use as problematic "because it encourages multiple voices and personal freedom" (Campbell 2007, 1053), the youths tend to perceive this diversity as less problematic, as evident in the interviews. Jian Wen (secondary school student, 13) stated:

> *"I think it's ok… I mean it is their personal opinions and they can do what they want in their life."* According to Jimmy (secondary school student, 17), *"Freedom of choice… Everyone has their own personal views on different things."*

Young people often engage in tinkering with established theological doctrines and teachings, as highlighted in Cornelio's (2016) study of "creative Catholics" that attend evangelical church services, adopt evangelical worship songs, and welcome non-Catholics into their community. However, in this paper, I argue that digitalization further encourages and intensifies this practice. While the authority of theology in Christianity remains largely intact, what constitutes a young person's theology is less certain and should be understood as fluid in the context of digitalization.

It is worth remembering that religious authority is just one aspect of the wider ecosystem of digitalization that influences young people's religious beliefs and practices. A noteworthy observation among the youth of SG Church is that the theology that shapes their beliefs and practices is not solely determined by airtight logical coherence and reasoning, but also by how tightly they are attached to their faith community. Grace (university student, 20) mentioned:

> *I think that a lot of this right, is based on the [church] culture that we are in, like the groups that we belong to… social media and all can…influence the way we think… I think a lot of it still comes from "Is this what my church agrees with?" And "Is this what my zone, my cell group practises?" … I personally will not do it if like… my community doesn't do it.*

The level of attachment and trust the youths have with their community affects the authority attributed to a particular set of theology, beyond its doctrinal soundness or logical articulation.

When considering the overlapping spheres of authority—systems, leadership, and theology—one observes the process of meaning mediation among the youth (Hoover 2002). Digitalization impacts the beliefs and practices of young people as they discerningly interpret, select, and apply religious authority. We now take a closer look at how young people negotiate their Christian beliefs and practices as digitalization and digital culture seep into their every day (religious) lives at a more direct and immediate level.

5. Digitalized Beliefs and Practices

In earlier discussions, we examined how the digital realm interacts with Christian identity formation, particularly through community and authority. Building upon these insights, this section focuses on the direct influence of digitalization on the religious beliefs and practices of young people within SG Church. By exploring the usage of two key categories of smartphone applications—social media platforms (Instagram, YouTube, TikTok) and communication apps (WhatsApp, Telegram)—we investigate how digital tools directly shape religious engagement.

5.1. Digitalized Beliefs

The young people in this study highlighted how smartphone apps play an influential role in the formation and articulation of their Christian beliefs. These platforms offer access to a wide range of religious content, enabling users to expand their spiritual horizons far beyond the physical boundaries of SG Church. In this way, digital media act as a vehicle for believers to reimagine and redefine their religious identities in dynamic and rapidly evolving ways.

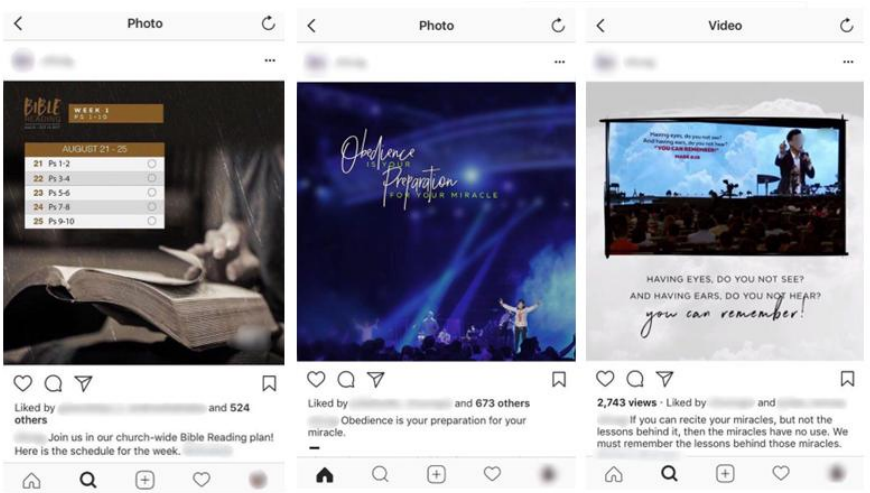
Drawing on Appadurai's (1996) concept of "mediascapes," which underscores the empowering role of media in facilitating self-imagination across geographic boundaries, it becomes clear that digital platforms allow the youth to engage in self-reflection and identity work. For example, Wei Qian, an 18-year-old junior college student, explained:

> *I listen to preaching on podcasts and YouTube as a way of "feeding" myself spiritually because I think that more than just being exposed to preaching on the weekend, I could gain more by renewing my mind from a steady, healthy flow of input through the week… Regarding my identity as a Christian, I think that at the very basic level, being intentional about downloading and listening to other preachers and sermons – on top of your own church's weekend sermons – shapes and affects the way we identify ourselves as mature believers that take ownership of our own spiritual growth; to feed myself rather than always wait to be fed…*

Wei Qian's reflections demonstrate how consuming digital sermons extends beyond the immediate church environment, fostering a more personalized, autonomous approach to spiritual development. In a similar vein, social media platforms like Instagram play an important role in reinforcing and reminding young people of key Christian teachings. As Agnus, a 16-year-old secondary school student, shared:

> *[Social media] posts from the church also help me keep updated of the season we as a community are going through and align myself with it…sometimes we forget sermons we've heard and their [SG Church's] posts provide a good and short reminder.*

Below are three examples of how SG Church uses Instagram posts: the leftmost post reinforces the importance of Bible reading and the church's reading plan; the middle post highlights a key point from a previous week's sermon; and the rightmost post features a video snippet from a past sermon. These posts shape and align the thoughts and beliefs of the audience, as Agnus described earlier.



Through these channels, church messages reach the youth at any time, reinforcing their beliefs and aligning them with the larger community. However, the influence is reciprocal, as many young people also create and share content, thereby shaping their beliefs and the beliefs of others (Zelizer 2002). Thomas, a 19-year-old polytechnic student, noted:

> *I use it [Instagram] to share my revelations and thoughts…times when I come across an inspiring faith-building Instagram post I will share it…or repost it… I would also post my own devotions to share and encourage anyone…*

The following are examples of posts from two respondents:

Despite the profound impact of digital media on belief formation, the youth exhibit a degree of agency and discernment in navigating these platforms. Agnus and Krystal (16) acknowledged that digital media can shape beliefs but also emphasized the importance of critical engagement:

Agnus (secondary school student, 16) stated:

I'm sure that using all these [social media] platforms for religious purposes will shape our beliefs to a certain extent or even subconsciously because we use it so much... But I also feel that beliefs are deeply rooted foundations and difficult to change or impact immediately.

Krystal (secondary school student, 16) said:

...there are certain beliefs that may differ from the different churches…not everything on Instagram may be true and we must be wise to listen to the right stuff…

Both respondents indicate the strength of agency that young people do exercise in the face of an increasingly digitalized formation and expression of Christian beliefs.

5.2. Digitalized Practices

The integration of digital tools has also redefined common Christian practices like evangelism and prayer among SG Church youth. Evangelism in the digital age can take many forms, from overt to subtle expressions of faith. Thomas (polytechnic student, 19) explained:

By sharing posts on Instagram my own [Christian] beliefs get expressed to my followers and the community at large whether or not they are Christians... Another way to evangelize is by posting [outreach/evangelistic] events and use that as a platform to invite people to church.

Many young people believe that posting/sharing their beliefs on social media can evangelize and influence others. However, not all youth engage in overt evangelism. Some, like Tong En (18), adopt a more cautious approach, stating:

I wouldn't express my religious beliefs excessively through my smartphone, as it may appear insensitive to non-believers and ineffective to reaching out [evangelism].

Youths like Tong En and Shi Ya perceive showcasing their daily lives on Instagram as a form of evangelism, aiming to "bear a good testimony" by exemplifying the values and lifestyle of a devout Christian. Shi Ya (secondary school student, 15) expressed:

> *What I post [on Instagram] is not always super "Christiany"… but they know that I am a believer and how perhaps I deal with things the way I do with God… hopefully, in these little ways I can be a testimony to them and be able to bear a good testimony…*

This notion of "bearing a good testimony" aligns with Lim and Sng's (2020) study, which found similar behaviors among Christians in the workplace in China. While subtle evangelism through social media is not new, its reach and visibility have significantly expanded, making everyday expressions of faith more accessible to a broader audience.

Prayer, a foundational practice in religion and Christian identity, has evolved through the adoption of communication and messaging apps, as studied by scholars such as Young (2004), Campbell (2013), and Dugan (2019). Among the youths in SG Church, digitalized prayer using apps like Whatsapp has revolutionized personal devotion/prayer and intercession/prayer for others. This form of prayer is perceived positively as it enables easy, frequent, and rich communication through real-time text, audio, and video, transcending geographical boundaries. Respondent interviews reveal how digitalized prayers facilitate their practice of prayer and contribute to their personal growth in prayer.

For instance, Jian Wen (secondary school student, 13) shared how a cell group chat on Whatsapp helps him pray for others, stating, *"…it helps me know what's going on in their lives better and can better pray for them."* Similarly, Sarah (university student, 21) highlighted how the group chat is a platform for sharing reflections and prayers: *"…every other day a different one will send their reflections and prayers for us to receive."*

More than being just another avenue for youths to pray, digitalized prayer is changing the practice of prayer itself. Jian Wen (secondary school student, 13) noted how the prayers of others in the chat group shape his own practice of prayer: *"…when I see how Nic and Nee respond and send their prayers in the group… it inspires me to pray myself… I learn how to pray better myself too."* Other respondents shared new and creative expressions of prayer, such as Jie Si's (secondary school student, 15) use of her iPad for drawing during prayer as a form of expression, which she then sends digitally to those she prays for.

Furthermore, digitalized prayer has transformed the way people ask for and request prayer. Agnus (secondary school student, 16) and Zach (national serviceman, 20) hold regular "prayer conferences" via video chat apps, transcending geographical boundaries. Instagram's interactive

features, such as the "Questions" sticker, allow for easy feedback and communication, creating opportunities for requesting and receiving prayer from others. Grace (university student, 20) shared how she posts "questions" on her Instastories to ask for prayer requests from her followers. This highlights how digitalized prayer enables communication, connection, and a richer knowledge of the prayer needs of others while providing novel ways of practising prayer.

This section underscores the transformative influence of digitalization on the religious beliefs and practices of SG Church's youth. Digital tools do more than serve as supplemental outlets for religious content; they actively reshape how beliefs are formed, expressed, and practiced. As Turkle (2011) aptly put it, technology doesn't just facilitate communication; it actively shapes our intimate and spiritual lives. In a similar vein, digitalization isn't merely a tool for Christian youth; it profoundly influences the very essence of their religious identities.

6. In Lieu of a Conclusion…

This article highlights the effects of digitalization on religious beliefs and practices among young individuals in a Pentecostal megachurch in Singapore. Developing and utilizing an ecosystemic approach, the study reveals the direct and indirect impacts of digitalization on religious identity formation, which includes changes in faith-based communities, religious authority, and individual engagement with social media and communication apps. Adopting an ecosystemic approach to appreciate the lived experience of digital religion (the blending of online and offline religion) provides a more holistic and compelling perspective for understanding the dynamics and lived religious experiences of young Christians and holds potential relevance for examining other religious groups and individuals.

The study underscores the significance of smartphones in facilitating community engagement, thereby reshaping perceptions and expectations of community participation. While smartphones are seen as instrumental in strengthening religious communities and providing access to religious resources beyond the local church, caution is expressed regarding the potential negative impact on face-to-face relationships. The study also examines the challenges and opportunities of digitalization for religious

authority in a nuanced manner, in contrast to existing literature that often discusses authority in overly broad terms. Specifically, the paper identifies three overlapping spheres of religious authority: systems, leadership, and theology. Furthermore, the study delves into how religious authority in the context of digitalization is subverted, innovated, tinkered with, and negotiated. The analysis of the respondent data also reveals that digital media platforms enable young people to (re)imagine their Christian identities in novel ways. This is achieved through the consumption, production, and sharing of content on social media and communication apps, resulting in salient changes to their religious beliefs and practices.

In lieu of a conclusion, the ecosystemic approach to studying digitalized religious identity formation in this paper raises important sociological questions regarding the impact of digitalization on community dynamics, religious authorities, and the dynamic relationship between digitalization and individual religious identity. This conceptual framework serves as a foundation for future research and application in diverse religious contexts and communities, with the aim of advancing our understanding of the complex effects of digitalization on religious beliefs, practices, and identities in our rapidly evolving digital world.

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