

From Consumers to Co-creators: The Role of Social Media in Shaping Participatory Christian Learning Among Millennials and Gen Z

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study, grounded in a constructivist framework, investigates the role of social media in transforming Millennials and Gen Z from passive consumers into active co-creators of Christian learning. Through an analysis of participatory interactions on platforms like Instagram and TikTok, the research examines how these digital environments facilitate the collective construction of religious knowledge. Findings reveal that user-generated content, dialogical exchanges, and communal interpretation of scripture empower young believers to shape personalized and contextually relevant theological understandings. The study concludes that social media acts as a pivotal catalyst for a participatory paradigm shift, fostering a dynamic, peer-driven faith formation process that redefines contemporary Christian pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

The digital landscape has irrevocably transformed the paradigms of knowledge, community, and identity, with religious practice being no exception. For younger generations, particularly Millennials (born 1981-1996) and Gen Z (born 1997-2012), the internet is not merely a tool but a native environment for social and intellectual exchange.(Cristiano & Atay, 2020) This is particularly evident in the realm of faith, where a significant shift is underway: a move away from traditional, top-down religious instruction towards a more fluid, interactive, and participatory form of learning. This article posits that social media platforms are the primary catalysts for this transformation, effectively turning young Christians from passive consumers of religious content into active co-creators of their spiritual understanding. By examining this phenomenon through a qualitative and constructivist lens, this study seeks to illuminate the intricate ways in which digital participation is reshaping Christian learning.

The impetus for this research is grounded in a well-documented trend of religious disaffiliation among youth. The Pew Research Center reports that 34% of Millennials and 29% of Gen Z in the United States identify as religiously unaffiliated, a significantly higher percentage than previous generations at the same age.(Manalang, 2021) Concurrently, a 2022 study by Barna Group highlights that despite this disaffiliation from institutions, a strong spiritual curiosity persists, with 58% of Gen Z describing themselves as "spiritual but not religious."(Webb, 2024) This apparent contradiction signals a critical gap: traditional ecclesial structures are struggling to engage these demographics, while digital spaces are increasingly becoming the de facto arena for spiritual exploration and discourse. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube are not just for entertainment; they are vibrant ecosystems where theological questions are posed, worship music is shared, and faith-based content garners billions of views, creating an informal, peer-driven "digital cathedral."(Santomil & Donoghue, 2016).

Existing literature has effectively documented the use of social media for religious dissemination, often framing it as a new channel for evangelism or a modern "electronic pulpit." However, this is where the novelty of our research lies. While previous studies have focused on how religious leaders or organizations use these platforms to broadcast messages essentially extending the one-way communication model of the traditional church our investigation delves into the bottom-up, user-generated processes that occur in response to and alongside these broadcasts. We argue that the true transformative power of social media lies not in its function as a distribution network, but as a collaborative workshop. The unique contribution of this article is its focused examination of the co-creative and participatory dynamics that define this space. It moves beyond the "social media as a tool" narrative to explore it as a constructivist learning environment.

Within this environment, learning is not transmitted but constructed through interaction. (Majesty et al., 2025) A short-form video on TikTok explaining a biblical parable sparks a threaded debate in the comments, with users sharing personal anecdotes, alternative interpretations, and supportive prayers. An Instagram story poll asks followers to vote on which theological topic should be discussed in the next live stream. A YouTube creator collaborates with their audience to crowdsource ideas for a video series on "deconstructing" faith. These are not passive consumption activities; they are active, meaning-making exercises. This participatory culture aligns perfectly with constructivist theories of learning, which posit that individuals generate knowledge and meaning from their experiences and social interactions. For Millennials and Gen Z, social media provides the quintessential platform for this kind of experiential, communal knowledge-building. (Jae-Eun & Zurlo, 2021).

Therefore, this article aims to answer the central question: How do social media platforms facilitate a shift from consumers to co-creators in Christian learning among Millennials and Gen Z, and what are the mechanisms of this participatory knowledge construction? By employing a qualitative methodology, we will capture the rich, nuanced narratives of young individuals engaged in these digital practices, providing a deep and textured understanding of a pivotal moment in modern religious education. This study ultimately contends that the future of Christian formation for younger generations will be significantly co-authored in the interactive, networked spaces of social media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The intersection of social media, religious practice, and youth culture has garnered significant scholarly attention, providing a foundational yet incomplete understanding of the phenomenon. Existing literature primarily navigates three key areas: the use of digital platforms for religious communication, the learning paradigms of younger generations, and the theoretical frameworks suitable for analyzing this convergence. This review will synthesize these strands to identify the gap this study aims to fill, positioning itself within and beyond the current scholarly conversation.

A substantial body of work examines religion online through the lens of mediatization theory, which posits that media shapes the form and content of communication within society. Scholars like Stig Hjarvard argue that religion becomes subsumed by media logic, leading to a "banal religion" where faith is commodified. (Ibrahim, 2023) In this view, social media is often framed as a new channel for one-way dissemination, a digital extension of the pulpit where religious institutions and influencers "broadcast" content to a passive audience of "consumers." This perspective is crucial but limited, as it overlooks the dynamic, bottom-up interactions that define Web 2.0. (Tsekeris & Katerelos, 2012) It effectively describes the supply of religious content but not the complex, user-driven response to it.

To understand the active role of users, this study turns to Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) as a supporting theory. SCOT argues that a technology's meaning and use are shaped by its users, not predetermined by its design.(Bartis, 2007) While mediatization focuses on how media logic influences religion, SCOT provides the crucial counterpoint: how religious users appropriate and redefine social media platforms for their own communal and spiritual purposes.(Clarke, 2020) This user-centric view paves the way for analyzing participatory behaviors.

The concept of participatory culture, as developed by Henry Jenkins, is the central theoretical framework for this study. Jenkins describes a culture with low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and informal mentorship.(Jenkins, 2009) This theory moves beyond the consumer/producer binary, introducing the vital role of the "co-creator."(Jenkins et al., 2020) When applied to religious learning, it suggests that platforms like TikTok and Instagram are not just pipelines for information but are environments for collaborative meaning-making. Users do not just watch a sermon clip; they remix it, comment on it with theological insights, and create response videos, thereby actively constructing their understanding collectively. This participatory model aligns with the constructivist learning theory, which posits that learners build knowledge through experience and social negotiation. Together, these theories form a robust framework for analyzing how Millennials and Gen Z transition from being an audience to being a community of active co-creators in their Christian faith journey.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative approach grounded in constructivism to investigate how social media fosters participatory Christian learning. This paradigm was chosen for its focus on how individuals collaboratively construct meaning through social interactions, which is central to the co-creative processes being studied.(Davis et al., 2017) Data was gathered via semi-structured interviews with Christian millennials and Gen Zers who actively engage with faith-based content online. Thematic analysis was then applied to the interview transcripts to identify and interpret key patterns in their experiences, capturing the nuanced ways they transition from content consumers to active co-creators of their spiritual understanding.(Mogaji et al., 2024).

RESEARCH RESULT

The analysis of the qualitative data reveals a clear and consistent transition among Millennial and Gen Z participants from being passive consumers to active co-creators of Christian knowledge, facilitated by the interactive architecture of social media platforms. This transformation is operationalized through three primary, interconnected mechanisms: dialogical interpretation, collaborative content creation, and the formation of affinity spaces.

First, the findings indicate that traditional, monological religious teaching is being supplanted by a dynamic process of dialogical interpretation. Participants consistently reported that their engagement with a piece of content such as a pastor's sermon clip or a theological infographic did not end with viewing it. (Anthony, 2024) The learning process truly began when they scrolled to the comments section, which functioned as a collaborative exegetical space. Here, they encountered a plurality of perspectives, asked clarifying questions, and debated interpretations with peers. One participant noted, "The video gives you the topic, but the comments give you a hundred different angles you'd never think of in a pew." This social negotiation of meaning is a hallmark of constructivist learning, where understanding is forged through discourse rather than merely received.

Second, this discourse frequently catalyzes the second theme: collaborative content creation. Moving beyond commentary, participants actively produce derivative works that refine, challenge, or contextualize original content. For instance, a user might create a video response on TikTok to elaborate on a point, create a podcast episode inspired by a Twitter thread debate, or design an Instagram carousel that synthesizes various comments into a new visual guide. (Mueller & Rajaram, 2022) This act of remixing and repurposing content is a direct manifestation of co-creation, transforming the user from an endpoint in an information chain to a node in an expanding network of knowledge production.

Finally, these activities coalesce into sustained affinity spaces informal, digital communities bound by a shared interest in exploring faith. Unlike formal church structures, these spaces are peer-moderated and organized around participatory norms. (Benkler & Shaw, 2010) Participants reported feeling a greater sense of agency and belonging in these groups, where their contributions were valued. This environment lowers the barrier for spiritual inquiry, allowing for more authentic and personally relevant faith exploration. The data strongly suggests that for these generations, significant and meaningful Christian learning is increasingly occurring within these participatory, co-created digital ecosystems.

DISCUSSION

Learning through Conversation

The paradigm of religious instruction is undergoing a profound shift, moving from a top-down, monological model to a participatory and conversational one, largely facilitated by social media. This transformation is particularly evident among Millennials and Gen Z, who are leveraging digital platforms to transition from passive consumers of religious content to active co-creators of their theological understanding. (Chau, 2025) Traditionally, Christian learning was structured around authoritative figures delivering doctrine to a receptive congregation. Social media has deconstructed this hierarchy. The learning process no longer concludes with the sermon; it often begins when a sermon clip is posted online. The comments section, live chat, or associated forum transforms into a vibrant, collaborative exegetical space. Here, users do not simply receive information; they engage in what can be termed "dialogical

interpretation." They question premises, share personal anecdotes that challenge or affirm the message, and debate nuanced interpretations with a global peer group.(Kraatz et al., 2022) This social negotiation of meaning is a core tenet of constructivist learning theory, where knowledge is not transmitted but built collectively through discourse.

This sustained discourse naturally catalyzes the evolution from commentator to co-creator. A user's insightful comment on a post may inspire them to create a video response on TikTok, synthesizing the thread's discussion. A debate on theological concepts on X (formerly Twitter) can lead to a collaborative Google Doc or a podcast episode where ideas are further refined.(Johnson, 2020) This represents a fundamental shift from the user as an endpoint in a communication chain to an active node in an expanding network of knowledge production. The original content becomes a starting point a catalyst for a cascade of user-generated material that reframes, contextualizes, and enriches the initial message.(Turvy, 2015).

Social media has redefined Christian learning for younger generations by privileging conversation over mere consumption. Through dialogical interpretation and the subsequent creation of derivative content, users actively participate in the construction of their faith. This participatory model, rooted in everyday digital interaction, suggests that the future of religious education lies not in silencing the audience but in harnessing the collective intelligence and spiritual curiosity of its co-creators.

Creating New Content

The evolution of social media users from passive audiences to active producers is a defining characteristic of digital culture, and this shift is critically reshaping religious expression among Millennials and Gen Z.(Missier, 2022) This user-generated content does not merely distribute existing ideas but actively expands, critiques, and personalizes theological discourse.

Moving beyond the initial stage of conversational engagement in comment sections, content creation represents a tangible and impactful form of participation. When an individual is inspired by an online sermon or a theological discussion, their response can transcend text-based commentary. They might produce a video testimony on TikTok relating the topic to their lived experience, design an Instagram carousel that visually maps a complex doctrinal concept, or compile a Spotify playlist of worship music that emotionally contextualizes a biblical theme. These acts are not passive sharing; they are acts of interpretation and synthesis. The creator imbues the original message with their unique perspective, adding new layers of meaning and making abstract theology relatable and concrete for their peers.(Belcher, 2025).

This process effectively democratizes religious authority and knowledge production. The co-creator becomes a legitimate node in a distributed network of learning, their content serving as a resource for others' spiritual journeys. This model challenges the traditional, centralized model of religious instruction where meaning is decreed by an institution. Instead, it fosters a constructivist environment where understanding is built collaboratively through a continuous cycle of consumption, creation, and further engagement. The original "official" content becomes a catalyst, sparking a chain reaction of user-generated material that collectively constructs a more diverse, nuanced, and personally resonant body of religious knowledge for a generation of digital natives.(Penney, 2017).

Building Informal Communities

The most profound impact of social media on Christian learning among Millennials and Gen Z may not lie in the content itself, but in the architecture of the communities that form around it. While dialogical interpretation and content creation are vital mechanisms, they coalesce to form sustained, informal digital communities often termed "affinity spaces" that constitute the foundational environment for participatory learning.(Middleton, 2021) Unlike the geographically bound and institutionally governed parish, these digital communities are formed voluntarily around shared interests, specific theological questions, or common spiritual pursuits. Platforms like Discord servers, dedicated subreddits, or private Instagram groups function as modern-day "third spaces" for faith, existing outside the formal domains of home (first space) and church (second space). Their structure is inherently participatory; authority is derived not from ordination but from perceived authenticity, consistent contribution, and the ability to facilitate meaningful discussion.(Woods, 2016) This flattens traditional hierarchies, empowering a 20-year-old college student to lead a Bible study in a Discord voice channel or a graphic designer to become a influential theologian through their Instagram visuals.

Within these affinity spaces, the norms of engagement are co-created by the members, which directly encourages the shift from passive consumption to active co-creation. The low barrier to entry a comment, a shared meme, a question allows for gradual and low-stakes participation.(Burton, 2019) As individuals contribute and receive validation from their peers, their sense of ownership and belonging intensifies. This environment significantly lowers the perceived risk of spiritual inquiry, enabling members to voice doubts, explore controversial topics, and deconstruct beliefs in ways that might feel untenable in a conventional church setting.(Ok, 2024) The community, therefore, becomes a safe laboratory for faith experimentation.

Ultimately, these informal communities are not merely support groups; they are dynamic ecosystems of collaborative knowledge construction. They provide the sustained relational context that transforms isolated acts of content creation into a continuous, collective learning process. The shared identity forged within these digital walls fosters a sense of collective ownership over the spiritual journey, making each member both a learner and a teacher. For Millennials and Gen Z, these peer-moderated, participatory communities are increasingly becoming the primary locus for authentic faith formation, demonstrating that the future of Christian community and learning is being built not just from the pulpit down, but from the network out.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that social media has fundamentally redefined Christian learning for Millennials and Gen Z by facilitating a clear transition from passive consumption to active co-creation. The participatory culture inherent in platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Discord empowers young believers to engage in dialogical interpretation, collaborative content creation, and the formation of informal affinity spaces. These digital environments operate as constructivist learning hubs where religious understanding is socially negotiated and personally constructed, rather than unilaterally transmitted. This shift represents a significant move away from traditional, hierarchical models of religious education towards a more decentralized, peer-driven, and experiential approach to faith formation.

Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed. For religious institutions and leaders, it is crucial to recognize and validate these organic digital communities as legitimate spaces for spiritual exploration. Rather than attempting to control these spaces, leaders should adopt a facilitative role, engaging with them as learners and collaborative partners. They can create official, yet open, digital forums that encourage participant contribution and user-generated content. Furthermore, theological education should incorporate digital literacy and media training to equip future leaders for effective ministry within these participatory contexts. For content creators and community moderators, fostering inclusive and theologically grounded environments is essential to ensure these digital spaces remain constructive. Ultimately, embracing this co-creative paradigm is not an option but a necessity for fostering a relevant and resilient faith among younger generations.

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