

Digital Natives and Religion

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ABSTRACT

The invisibility of digital technology has produced a distinctively new generation defined by digital media: the digital natives. Digital natives are those who were born into the digital age. The digital world is inevitable to the church. It has been noticed that it is difficult for the church to catch up with the pervasiveness of technology. Pastors will find themselves having little or no impact on the lives of digital natives if they continue to avoid social networking sites, where digital natives spend most of their time. If pastors want to have more influence and impact digital natives, they must embrace the social networking world of the digital natives. This paper examines the attitude of digital natives toward religion and how the church can reach out for them.

KEYWORDS: *digital natives, digital immigrants, characteristics, religion, church*

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of digital technologies transcends all cultural, racial, religious, and age boundaries. We live in an always-connected, digital age. Digitalization has accelerated exponentially, and church's survival will depend on their ability to reshape their future. Digital technologies are at the root of a massive disruption between how previous generations relate, work, think, and worship. The ubiquity of digital technologies is one of the most significant realities the church must face. The church needs careful creativity to seek the best means of using digital technologies to communicate intelligibly and persuasively to its audience in the twenty-first century. It seems that the church is not ready to face this challenge.

The digital technology fosters a chronological snobbery that the church must overcome if it is to speak meaningfully to digital natives. It has been claimed that the church have been unable to communicate effectively with the next generation due to digital revolution. If the church fails to communicate the gospel effectively to digital natives

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raised in the church because it does not understand them, then it faces a greater task and a disconnected future [1]. The church is often regarded as simply one of the many possible responses to existential problems. Wonders, miracles, healing, and material prosperity become proofs of the existence of God. Technology is also considered by some as having the ultimate power since it has brought significant solutions and benefits to mankind. Technology is the vast and mighty deity that is rapidly reshaping society.

A religion is an institutionalized body of believers who accept a common set of beliefs, practices, and rituals. It is based on dogma and what you have to believe. It incorporates spiritual consciousness into a system of belief, worship, morality, and social responsibility. Religion has been defined as beliefs or practices that express spirituality, while spirituality is the intrapersonal experience of the divine. Religious life may consist in church, synagogue or mosque attendance and observance of rituals such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals [2].

There is a noticeable fading of the impact of Christian culture. The church and the gospel are having less and less impact on daily life with regard to their message. The church is called to be salt, light, and leaven to the world (Matthew 5:13-16). The Kingdom movement is at the service of society at large. Even Jesus' mission was not a self-proclamation his own interests but that of God's interest and God's Kingdom. The church is the sacrament of intimate union with God and the unity of all humankind.

Realizing that "all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made" (John 1:3), mission today has to be open to all religious traditions and cultures.

Jesus came to the world to share in the life of ordinary people, to experience their daily struggle for survival. By immersing themselves in digital world, church leaders share the gospel with digital natives, just as Jesus had done in his earthly life. Current pastors or church leaders who are mostly digital immigrants must endeavor to catch up with the digital natives. The church must discover new tools to reach and meet the needs of youths who are raised in the present generation that is predominately marked by the evasive digital culture. To relate with the youths and get along with mutual understanding, church leaders must enter their world, learn their language, cope with their fast changing vocabulary, and engage them in meaningful and respectful dialog. To work effectively with digital natives, they will find social networking an invaluable outreach tool [3].

In the digital age, youths seem to be constantly connected to the Internet via social media and mobile devices. Technology has been integrated into their life since childhood, providing them with the skills to naturally adapt in the digital world. It is no surprise that they increasingly turn to digital media to seek answer to their spiritual questions.

WHO ARE DIGITAL NATIVES AND DIGITAL IMMIGRANTS?

There are several labels to describe the youths. They include the digital natives, the net generation, the Google generation, Generation Y or the millennials. All of these terms are being used to emphasize the importance of new technologies in the lives of youths, who live differently from their predecessors. The use of the term "digital native" has become popular in recent years. The term was coined and popularized by education consultant Marc Prensky in his 2001 [4]. Many educators and sociologists use the term to explain the online behavior of youths.

A digital native is someone born in 1980. Those born before that year—who have migrated online—are

digital immigrants. Prensky makes a distinction between "digital immigrants" and "digital natives." Accustomed to a pre-digital world, digital immigrants find themselves adapting to new developments in digital technology. They are characterized by the dynamic participation and interactivity in blogs, wikis, and social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace. In contrast, having grown up immersed in a digital world, digital natives have a completely different mindset. While digital immigrants live in two cultures (the pre-digital and the digital), digital natives are only exposed the digital culture. Sometimes, digital natives and digital immigrants may clash. The digital technology has significantly impacted the brain structure of digital natives, their behavior, their social skills, and their spirituality. In the near future, digital natives will become the dominant demographic worldwide [5].

Eight myths we have about digital natives and social media have been identified [6,7]:

- Myth #1: The digital is separate from the "real" world.
- Myth #2: Social media makes kids deceptive.
- Myth #3: Social media is addictive.
- Myth #4: Kids don't care about privacy.
- Myth #5: The Internet is a dangerous, dangerous place.
- Myth #6: There's nothing educational about social media.
- Myth #7: Kids are digital natives.
- Myth #8: The Internet is the great equalizer.
- Myth #9: Digital natives possess inferior social skills.
- Myth #10: Digital natives are better at multitasking than digital immigrants.
- Myth #11: Digital natives have natural instincts about using or fixing computers and other digital devices.

Research studies suggest that all these assertions are false.

Digital natives have an inherent understanding of digital technologies, as they been integrated into their lives since childhood. As shown in Figure 1, digital natives have a natural affinity to tech [8]. Figure 2 shows some examples of digital natives [9].

CHARACTERISTICS OF DIGITAL NATIVES

As result of their upbringing and the familiarity with technology, digital natives have a set of tech skills that differ from earlier generations. The characteristics of digital natives include:

1. They are connected to technology everywhere, anytime.
2. They use the Internet to socialize, play, have fun, watch videos, etc.
3. They move fluidly from online to offline.
4. They prefer to bring their own ubiquitous technologies.
5. They are willing to adapt any new technology that adds value.
6. They like task switching from one activity to another.
7. They tend to multitask, which has been found to result in shallow thinking.
8. They are notorious advocates for getting others adopting new technologies.
9. They learn better from visual images.
10. They like the social interaction with their peers.
11. They have the ability to ask questions.
12. They want truth to be related to daily life
13. They want to practice what they are learning.
14. They get easily distracted and struggle with maintaining focus.
15. They are quick in their actions and decision-making and want immediate results.
16. They are less fazed than previous generations by differences in race, sexual orientation or religion.
17. They prefer for their pastor to speak conversationally and tell stories.
18. They want to be challenged to think and they want the Bible taught in its entirety.
19. They want to be able to apply the Bible to their lives.
20. They have their Bible in their mobile phone.

ATTITUDE OF DIGITAL NATIVES TOWARD RELIGION

The immersion of digital natives in digital technology has affected how they think and reason in every aspect of their lives, especially when it comes to religion. Using technology most of the time seems very natural to the digital natives. Technology is not neutral or autonomous. By assessing technologies critically, one can use them responsibly and minimize their negative effects. Digital natives, grown with digital technologies, have little appetite and patience for what they perceive to be passive, one-sided, non-interactive communication taking place in the

predominantly classroom-style approach used in most churches to teach faith.

Youths everywhere experience a feeling of uncertainty and distress in their search for meaning in the face of peer pressure, anxiety, uncertainty, broken homes, depression, and marginalization from the religious system. They become skeptical about the content of the faith that they have inherited from the parents, who are digital immigrants [10]

Digital natives often possess a short attention span and have an inability to tolerate a slow-paced environment. They often bypass the centralized ecclesial bureaucracy where everything must be approved by the pastor by going online, creating a Facebook group on their own. Some digital natives stop believing in God and stop going to church when they feel that their prayers are not heard, or they are not remembered by God. Pastors and digital natives must see themselves as both co-laborers in the gospel ministry, engaging in mutual witness, partnership, and collaboration. Christianity is always in the spirit of partnership.

The Bible is an ancient book initially addressed to an ancient people. It is associated with a low-tech lifestyle, perceived to be incompatible with the present technology-driven culture. Its standards and values are seem to be irrelevant. Mission is a life-centered ministry in our changing cultural context, teeming with the human rights as defined by the United Nations. The significance of mission to civil society can be understood only when we realize that the purpose of mission is the transformation of the world and not necessarily the growth of the church. The church is basically the gift of God to the world for its transformation towards the Kingdom of God.

If Christians really encounter Christ, they will assume the freedom of the children of God. Jesus is not a set of truths or a new religion, but the practice of radical love towards others [10].

These attitudes pose significant barriers to the task of teaching digital natives “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3).

HOW TO REACH DIGITAL NATIVES

Since digital natives are not all the same, they can be reached using diverse means discussed here.

- 1. Biblical Communication:** Biblical communication can be made a focal practice that shapes its participants. It helps to address the adverse effects of the use of digital technology. The biblical communicator enhances his/her credibility and respect by humbly entering into transparent relationships with the digital natives.

His daunting task is to challenge the idols of this particular digital culture. This is essentially the same challenge the Old Testament prophets faced in confronting Israel of its unfaithfulness to God (Ezekiel 44:10, NLT). The biblical communicators must be empowered by the Holy Spirit to understand God's Word and minister the message of the gospel to others. They must know the Bible and their audience very well. They must determine the best practices for reaching digital natives. It is the Holy Spirit who ultimately makes biblical communication effective [11].

2. Personal Witnessing: The primacy of witness is picked up in Acts 1:8. The kingdom of God is proclaimed through the witness of the Spirit-empowered disciples. The goal of personal witnessing is invoking a faith that involves self-surrender and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. It also involves a call to repentance since humanity is in rebellion against God. Church leaders must be willing to go where digital natives are, the digital world, just as Jesus hung out with tax collectors and prostitutes to be able to reach them. They should understand that their ministry to digital natives is essentially bringing the gospel to an environment where God is absent. There is an urgent need for church ministers to immerse themselves in the contemporary world of digital natives.

3. Adapting Your Church to Technology: A pastor or church leader may consider adapting their church to digital natives. Although the gospel message is timeless, the methods by which we communicate the message change over time. Here are some ways digital natives can be engaged in a church [12]:

- A. Do not discourage technology use in worship. church leaders should be courteous to those who read their bibles, take notes, or otherwise use their phones wisely during the worship service.
- B. Get your church on social media. More will be said about this later.
- C. Start a church blog. A blog can be set up as an extension of the ministry to my church and the community.
- D. The church blog can be used to post updates about the ministry of their church and some of pastor's messages.
- E. Encourage using technology to grow spiritually. There are many apps out there that can help one grow spiritually, especially when it comes to spiritual disciplines like daily Bible reading and

verse memorization. Believers should be encouraged to use these apps.

- F. Teach your church how to use technology wisely. Technology can be a huge benefit to the kingdom of God. You are doing your church a disservice if you are not teaching them how to think theologically about technology.

The church should have an effective bring-your-own-device (BYOD) policy. To protect the church, have the policy in writing, and be vigilant about maintaining it [13].

4. Pursing Spiritual Intelligence: Digital natives should be encouraged to pursue spiritual intelligence. World religions (such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism) agree that humans consist of body, mind, soul, and spirit. A growing body of knowledge shows that spirituality can be "good medicine" for the body and mind. Therefore, spirituality and spiritual intelligence must be recognized as an integral and important part of the human condition. Spirituality begins with deep connection with God and refers to an aspect of reality that is more than physical, emotional or intellectual. It is often viewed as the innate human need to connect with something larger than ourselves. Spiritual intelligence implies awareness of our relationship to the divine. It is a unique ability to feel, understand, and act beyond selfish motives. It expands our capacity to understand fellow human beings at the deepest level. Attributes of spiritual intelligence include faith, humility, gratitude, self-control, modesty, morality, forgiveness, wisdom, integrity, honesty, compassion, and love. Spiritual intelligence enables us to see things as they are. It helps us to make wise choices and learn from our mistakes. Spiritual intelligence is concerned with integrating the inner life of mind and spirit with the outer life of work in the world. It is the ability to behave with compassion and wisdom while maintaining peace regardless of the circumstances. It is about how we behave, act, and make decisions on daily basis as we interact with difficult people and situations. It is essential for both personal and professional development. Every person has their innate spiritual capacities that give meaning and purpose to life. We pay a heavy price in education when we fail to develop the spiritual intelligence of children [14]. Figure 3 shows various components of spiritual intelligence.

5. Social Networking: Social networking must be a vital component of pastoral ministry. Pastors are called to engage today's technology and foster

mutuality, empathy, and collaboration with digital natives. Digital natives use cellphones, e-mail, messaging, texting, as well as social networking tools like MySpace, Flickr, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter as natural means of communicating and relating with each other. Digital natives are usually more comfortable relating online as a neutral environment, sharing deeply on social networking sites about their difficult issues such as alcoholism, family problems, cohabitation, and depression, social justice, poverty, and racism. The impersonal and egalitarian nature of online interactions enables digital natives to share their deepest secrets and struggles without the anxiety, shame, or embarrassment of face-to-face contact. Although face-to-face sessions are important, they constitute only a small fraction of the digital natives. Most digital natives do not come to church and would not return our phone calls or e-mails [3]

CONCLUSION

Technology is a key part of the personal and social lives of digital natives. Using technology most of the time seems very natural to them. Although one cannot avoid using technology since technology is a fact of life in this digital world, technology has the potential to become an idol. The use of technology can shape a person's thinking and behavior negatively. The power of this technology can work for us or against us.

Pastors should not be afraid to take advantage of new technologies as weapons to reach the lost. They have the responsibility to reach to digital natives within their world and minister to their unique needs. They should make use of today's digital technologies such as Internet, mobile devices, and social networking tools. More information about digital natives can be found in the books in [15-18].

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Figure 1 Digital natives have a natural affinity to tech [8].



Figure 2 Examples of digital natives [9].

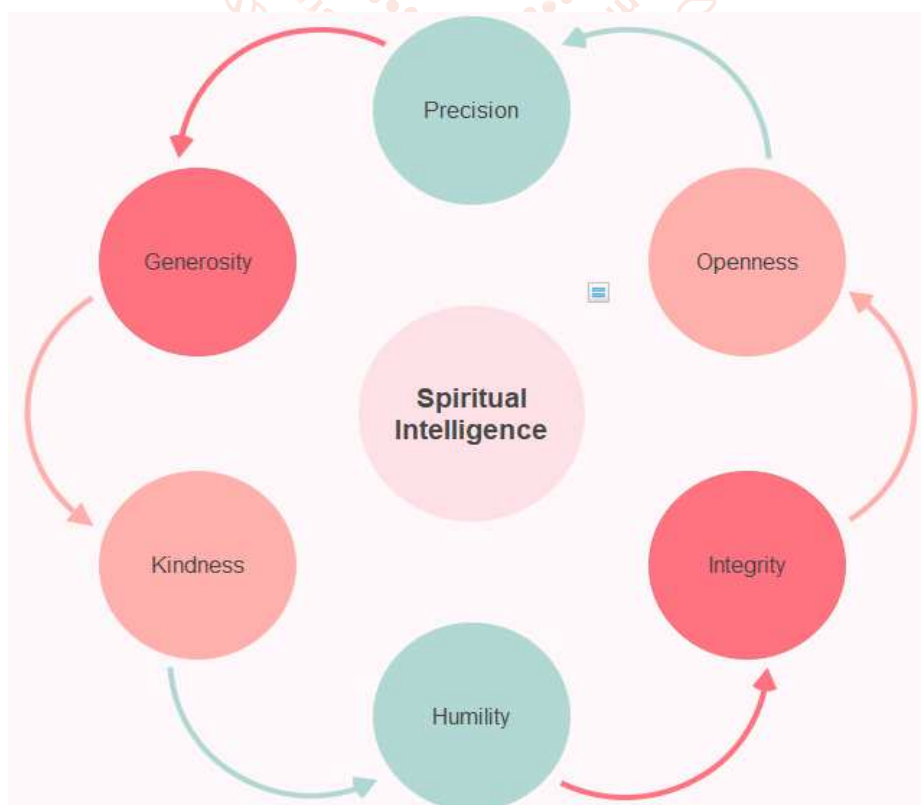


Figure 3 Components of spiritual intelligence