

This essay will investigate how Facebook has given Christian Young Adults aged between 18-26 years old, a space to express and re-define their identity as well as how it has been evolving across the social media platform to embrace the idea of a “third place” for these youth. This is shown by looking into how the young adults find their identity and why do they need to have an online identity. This is done by delving into the self-presentation and self-management theories. It also delves into why they have joined groups such as these to have a third place on social media. There have been reasons such as COVID – 19 that have allowed them to belong to a third place where they are free to talk about their beliefs with like-minded people.

Facebook as an online platform has helped give Christian young adults a place to identify with their self and their belief. The advent of the internet has rapidly changed the way religion is practiced and shared, and with the active voices of millions of online users, the information received by the user is new and varied. This has created a new stage for Christians and followers of other religions to practice, discuss, and promote their religious beliefs. Loss of identity amongst the Christian youth due to the rapidly changing socio-economic conditions have led to these youth trying to find themselves and recreate identities through social platforms - however this creates a different religious practice and mindset compared the age-old customs held by traditional worship.

Technology has changed the practice of Christianity and takes it away from its traditional roots. What was once a community activity that involved physically being present in church activities and groups is now online. Stroope’s article writes that strong social networks reinforced the practice and values of Christianity and its behavior which kept the follower’s faith and loyalty strong. (Stroope, 2011). Religious groups and communities complimented and filled the needs and wants of their own such as acceptance among the community and peers while having a strong connection to the church and its faith. With the digital revolution, online spaces were more accessible to sharing faith-based ideas and religious teachings.

There are over hundreds of different Christian young adults’ groups on Facebook and people join them for many varied reasons. In recent years since its creation Facebook has been used as a third place for people with the same ideas or beliefs to join an online group forum where they can share and post their ideas. Increased access and use of social media have allowed people to express their beliefs and opinions freely on online platforms. Religious activities for Christians include Bible Study, attending mass and sharing Faith in social outings. These activities, instead of meeting physically, have been changed to a digital platform.

Having an identity online is made of influences such as insecurity, self-promotion, and peer perception. These factors are for people who want to be able to have an online presence that others will like.

Mark Zuckerberg wanted Facebook to be an online platform where people would have an online identity that was linked with their physical identity. For him having more than one identity displayed that the person has a lack of integrity. Having multiple online identity contradicts who the users are. (Brusseau, 2019). However, the need to have online personalities and meet with standards shown by peers has led to users having two distinctive personalities - real life and online. Christian young adults may find what they were looking for online - a good religious community to part of. However, ideals and the teachings can vary to any extent, and this can influence a young adult to recreate their identity according to their beliefs. It can be a positive or negative influence is due to who the associate with.

A key factor that Facebook users follow is a self-presentation theory. This means that a person releases certain information that will help them portray themselves in a certain manner. This kind of self-motivation is fueled by other people’s presence as well as their ideas on how one

should be on Facebook. Self-presentation can also be seen as a defensive move to make sure that people view the user that particular way (Baumeister & Hutton, 1987).

There are two types of self-presentational motivation, which includes pleasing the audience and to show to others how they need to be portrayed. While both two ideas are similar, they are in fact slightly different. Pleasing the audience means that the user understands or has some knowledge of who their audience is to please them. The audience is made up of people who might be in their immediate circle of friends or a larger group of people that are not their friends. The second idea is more about the user making sure their Facebook is what the audience wants to see or read. This can be done by understanding what their audience wants to see or read and tailoring their post to fit those criteria (Baumeister & Hutton, 1987).

The negative side of having self-presentation, is that one cares too much about what others may see or believe and they lose who they really are. Insecurities about self-image and identity can create room for impulsive and irrational decisions - making such individuals vulnerable to extremist opinions or beliefs (Baumeister & Hutton, 1987).

In a Facebook group for Christians, pleasing the audience is something that needs to happen because belonging to the group means you need to understand and see from their standpoint. An example of a popular post in a Christian group is about living together without being married yet. While in any other conversations with other people this is something that one decides by themselves but in groups like this it is a trend that one must accept the group's ideas that such things can be viewed as negative things. The other members of the group will also voice their own opinions but in reality, they will all roughly be saying the same answer. The reason that they conform to this idea is that they could be wrong in what they already know but because they belong to a group, they will understand it from the group's point of view. They also must be able to reject any ideas that are not based on their religious beliefs such as not following the Bible.

A key factor is the impression management theory, where one can change how others view themselves to other people's views. Facebook in a way uses this theory since a lot of people's posts are about the first impression. This means that the viewers may unknowingly ask the users to change the posts depending on how many 'Likes' they receive (Dorethy et al., 2014).

The third place is a place that exists outside of work and home. It is a place that provides the people with a sense of belonging and a place to socialize with one another. (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982). With this, Facebook is where like-minded people come together to express themselves and connect to other individuals whilst ensuring they belong to the same belief. Facebook groups can function as third place for people such as Christians Young Adults. The groups can provide them with a sense of belonging, a place to relax and connect with people. The reasons why these Facebook groups function as a third place is different for everyone. As an example, they might want to explore their connection to God, and they want to belong to religious communities that are not governed by traditional rules. By acting as third place these Facebook groups allow Christian Young Adults a place for them to share down their thoughts, share personal struggles and help others to find them closer to faith. It is through interactions with one another that people feel like they are part of a group that is for everyone who has that same belief.

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared that COVID -19 was a global threat. During this pandemic, many emergency protocols were established such as lockdowns. This meant that people could not go on with their everyday lives such as attending church in person. The increase in social media use paved the way for an increase in Christian groups on the internet.

People could attend services, have discussions, and share their ideas with similar minded people without risking the pandemic's onslaught. Not having to physically be in their communities has changed the way religion is practiced and used. Young adults also found that these groups allowed them to be informed about the pandemic, however the reliability of this information has been questionable (Cinelli et al., 2020).

With the increase of the online groups for the Christian groups, many young adults have taken the chance to join other groups that are not the one that they belong to. This has happened quite a lot for Catholic young adults as many of the churches that they belong to do not have a Facebook or an online presence. Instead, these young adults have to find other churches that are on Facebook that will give them that spiritual teaching they require. Joining another church not their own can be daunting as they are not sure if they will receive what they are looking for. There is also the issue that there will be misinformation about the teachings. Joining another church means that you will be with strangers who they might not know but they have one common goal which is their belief and their ideas.

Not being able to be a part of these events in person can create insecurities among the people who follow the traditional customs. Traditional people are the patrons of the church where their teachings and service are done in a certain way. These insecurities can lead to them feeling lost in what they believe in as well as their own identity. For young adults who are religious and may have lost their social connection to their faith due to reasons such as moving location, Facebook groups have been a place that can provide that sense of security and belonging. This type of feeling has been present in their traditional community-based Christian lives. The lack of discipline is a result of less and less social embeddedness which can cause young adults to go astray when trying to figure out their identities.

The negative effect of this is that Christian young adults are more likely to believe in online groups that are closely resembles to what is familiar (Pauwels & Hardyns, 2018), and thus identify themselves with something else. The rise of American nationalism is intricately linked to Christian nationalism as the nationalistic ideals draw upon sayings in the Old Testament - ideas of denouncement of other faiths and idols. For a young adult from conservative background, the loss of identity due to community dispersion can re-emerge when joining a nationalist movement which emanates similar religious ideologies (Whitehead et al., 2018).

In conclusion, Facebook groups allow religious young adults a third place to be able to interact with another and a safe place to discuss their beliefs. This interaction is more based upon having an online identity that is made upon the factors of self-presentation and impression management. Both these theories are used on how users portray themselves on Facebook. The way that they portray themselves can lead up to how other members of the group see them.

Religious services often follow strict traditions and the divergence from traditional religious practices has changed the way young adults view themselves through the lenses of Christianity. The implications for this have both positive and negative effects and while for some social media has enhanced their outlook on religion and the world, for others it has been a place to find a sense of belonging.

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