

# **Mapping the Digital Neighbourhood of South African Youth**

**Andrew Vaughan**

**April 2014**

## ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the question of how a youth worker might best navigate a screen-saturated world while seeking to engage in the digitally permeated experience of young people without losing something of the transformative power of embodied communities.

Results from an exploratory survey into the places to which young people in Southern Africa turn in their quest to find meaningful connections with friends, input for spiritual growth and help for personal problems show that there is a significant preference for face-to-face connections. At the same time, those connections mediated by digital technology play a complex role, both facilitating and extending relationships but also posing a threat to these through habitual use.

The study also explores ways in which short, biblical messages delivered to the cell phones of teenagers in Southern Africa are being used to promote a convergence between the online and embodied realms.

## INTRODUCTION

A film titled *Noah*<sup>1</sup> recently won the Best Canadian Short Film Award at the 2013 Toronto International Film Festival. The seventeen-minute film follows the life of Noah as he breaks up with his girlfriend, spends time with his other friends and meets and hangs out with a wide variety of people who are strangers to him. The power of this unsettling film lies in where these relationships play out – entirely on Noah's computer screen. Caitlin McConkey-Pirie, who plays Noah's girlfriend Amy, comments:

'Everyone in this generation knows what it's like to have three tabs open on Google Chrome and to be texting, and watching a video at the same time ... We all feel like it's normal, but also that something is missing in the communication.'<sup>2</sup>

The revolution in digital communication and with it the integration of digital technology into society has been regarded by some as a threat to the flourishing of human relationships and the health of embodied communities. At the same time, others have embraced the potential of technology to bring new dimensions to relationships within community.<sup>3</sup>

Meadows, for example contrasts the capacity for technology to 'enhance and extend our embodied relationships in many ways' but also to 'conceal significant losses behind convincing 'simulations', tempting us to settle for less than fully human relationships.'<sup>4</sup>

This tension will likely be felt among youth workers who seek to follow the example of Jesus by 'taking on flesh and moving into the neighbourhood'<sup>5</sup> so as to live incarnationally with young people in the alleys, basements and Local Area Networks of their world.

How can a youth worker best navigate that screen-saturated world, engaging in the digitally permeated experience of young people without losing something of the transformative power of embodied communities? Where are young people looking to find the embodied

---

<sup>1</sup> Walter Woodman and Patrick Cederberg, "Noah" accessed at <http://www.fastcocreate.com/3017108/you-need-to-see-this-17-minute-film-set-entirely-on-a-teens-computer-screen>

<sup>2</sup> Michael Bolen, "'Noah' Short Film Breaks Your Heart With Nothing But Computer Screens" The Huffington Post, [http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2013/09/11/noah-short-film-tiff-video\\_n\\_3908782.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2013/09/11/noah-short-film-tiff-video_n_3908782.html) (February 23, 2013)

<sup>3</sup> Philip R. Meadows, "Mission and Discipleship in a Digital Culture", *Mission Studies* 29 (2012) 168.

<sup>4</sup> Meadows, 170.

<sup>5</sup> paraphrasing Eugene Petersen's translation of John 1:14 in *The Message*

connections that satisfy their desire for meaningful human connection, and to what extent have they been distracted from that pursuit by the presence of digital technology?

This exploratory study aims to address these questions for a Southern African context by investigating and marking out some of the contour lines that can help to locate the place and importance of both face-to-face and online connections in the lives of young people. Three aspects are considered: friendships; spiritual growth, and the places teenagers turn to for help with personal problems. Finally, this study also considers briefly how the online and embodied realms can be brought together in a convergence that maximises the benefit of both for youth ministry.

The primary context for this study is an online 'community' of young people who subscribe to a digital Bible-messaging platform called The WordSpace.<sup>6</sup> This platform sends short biblical messages each day to the cell phones of about 5000 teenagers through various social media platforms.

### MAPPING THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

It is difficult to read the literature on the social world of adolescents without coming across a discussion of Bourdieu's development of the concept of habitus – a 'structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices'.<sup>7</sup> This idea is based on the theory, articulated here by Benson, that an 'individuals' predispositions, assumptions, judgments, and behaviours are the result of a long-term process of socialization, most importantly in the family, and secondarily, via primary, secondary, and professional education'.<sup>8</sup>

As a concept, habitus is helpful in framing an understanding of why young people behave in the way they do and how various societal factors and relationships have formed and influenced that behaviour. This understanding will help to address the tensions and opportunities that emerge when youth workers seek to develop formative connections with young people who may be living out of a quite different, more digitally-shaped, habitus. As Reay notes:

'When habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a 'fish in water'<sup>9</sup>: it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted. However, when habitus encounters a field with which it is not familiar, the resulting disjunctures can generate change and transformation.'<sup>10</sup>

### DIGITAL HABITUS

Drescher works with the idea that the rise of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) has shaped a new digital habitus – a process that can be traced back to the beginning of computing in the 1960's and rapidly progressing to the 'interactive, mobile digital media that is underwriting changes throughout late modern culture, not least with regard to religious practices.'<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> See <http://thewordspace.mobi>

<sup>7</sup> Rodney Benson, Introduction in Rodney Benson, Erik Neveu, ed., *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Benson, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Bourdieu and Wacquant as quoted in Diane Reay, "It's All Becoming a Habitus: Beyond the Habitual Use of Habitus in Educational Research," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 25 (September 2004): 127

<sup>10</sup> Reay, 127.

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Drescher, *Tweet If You [Heart] Jesus: Practicing Church in the Digital Reformation* Kindle Edition, (Church Publishing Inc., 2011), Kindle Location 898.

One key aspect of this digital habitus is that technology itself is becoming harder to differentiate from 'real life'. Mitchell, drawing on Stivers' observation of a tendency by people to regard technology as something like magic<sup>12</sup>, writes that technology is 'something not fully understood by the masses but nevertheless trusted and relied upon for its service'<sup>13</sup> For young people, technology is a bit like a car – 'something that is 'just there.'<sup>14</sup> Mitchell continues:

In this regard, young people do not 'use' technology; it is an increasingly invisible aspect of their communication habits. Imagine asking most teenagers, "Do you use a mobile phone?"<sup>15</sup>

## DIGITAL HABITUS AND FRIENDSHIP

Such levels of integration of digital technology into the lives of young people will concern those who see this as having a primarily disembodied effect and thus posing a threat to the flourishing of real life relationships.

Counter to this, Harper et al. suggest that online connections can have a beneficial effect on relationships. They draw on data obtained from agent-based modelling to suggest that while 'the internet is unlikely to increase the number of core friends ... it may make these relationships more stable.'<sup>16</sup> The kinds of connection mediated by the internet are not necessarily weaker than those made in face-to-face situations as has often been assumed. Rather, they find that these relational links are 'as vital as any other, but that they may be of another kind.'<sup>17</sup>

'The modelling suggests that the number of friends that people might call close, or intimate, will likely remain fairly similar with the internet. This may seem surprising, given the hyperbole that often goes with discussion of the internet suggestive that social ties are weakening, that historical stability is being replaced by social fluidity. What the internet appears to do is slow the pace of change, so friendships last longer.'<sup>18</sup>

Mitchell describes various characteristics of digital technology that can have a significant influence on relationships in a digital age. Four of these are particularly relevant to this discussion:

- a heightened sense of intimacy that results from the 'privacy and easy access' that is a feature of instant messaging. This can lead to conversations that are deeply intimate despite (or perhaps because of) the lack of physical presence. For young people this sense of intimacy can lead to a blurring of 'the distinction between the real and virtual.'<sup>19</sup>
- a greater level of spontaneity in communication that is a result of the portability of cell phones and always-on network connections. This can result in 'more frequent, impulsive and sometimes compulsive use.'<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Richard Stivers, *Technology as Magic*, 2001 cited in Craig Mitchell, "Young People, Technoculture and Embodied Spirituality," in Stephen Garner, ed., *Theology and the Body*, (ATF: Hindmarsh, 2011) 94. New York: Continuum

<sup>13</sup> Mitchell, 94.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Harper, Lynne Hamill, and Nigel Gilbert, "Modelling Digital Habitus: The relationship between the internet and the density and duration of friendship ties." (Microsoft Research: MSR-TR-2013-67, 2013) 24

<sup>17</sup> Harper, Hamill, and Gilbert, 25.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Harper, Hamill, and Gilbert, 29.

<sup>20</sup> Mitchell, 89.

- a sense of the indispensability of digital devices. Mitchell observes a progression in which 'affordability with availability leads to indispensability.' This process is driven forward as the 'habitual nature of humans leads from 'can' to 'will' to 'must''<sup>21</sup>
- a sense of transcendence in which people feel transported beyond 'immediate, imagined and sensory limits.' This brings a 'deeper sense of connection to real or imagined worlds.'<sup>22</sup>

The sense that emerges from this is that the impact of digital technology on relationships is too complex to simply regard as categorically beneficial or not. In this vein Harper *et al.* suggest that a shift is required from thinking in categories of 'virtual' and 'real' to those that 'foster human connection, whether it is mediated or not.'<sup>23</sup>

## SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Part of mapping the digital neighbourhood for youth workers will require understanding the impact of a digital habitus on the spiritual growth of young people.

The Barna Millennials group have published a report based on a survey of North American adults 18 or older that indicates digital technology can nurture spiritual growth through facilitating the reading of Scripture by making it more accessible by means of online Bibles.<sup>24</sup> David Kinnaman notes that instead of being passive recipients of spiritual input, Millennials prefer to engage in 'relevant, two-way conversations on a wide-range of topics' and there is evidence that shows this is taking place online.<sup>25</sup>

This reflects Drescher's observation that a key characteristic of the 'digital reformation' is to promote 'distributed participation over mass consumption.'<sup>26</sup> The extent to which online technology can promote spiritual growth will depend in part on the extent to which this two-way participation, through online conversations with pastors for example, is encouraged.

Mitchell argues that the ability of digitally mediated connections to foster a sense of intimacy and self-transcendence plays a key role in the spiritual development of young people. The multi-layered sense of connectedness that young people experience is necessary at this stage of their lives for a healthy spirituality 'both in terms of a sense of the transcendent or divine and of interdependence with other people.'<sup>27</sup>

Thus, the ways in which digital connections can nurture spiritual growth for teenagers may be more subtle and multi-layered than youth workers expect. What is important, Drescher notes, is that effective use of technology for spiritual growth is not about using the right technology but in using technology in the right way.<sup>28</sup> Mitchell concludes that more research is required to explore the ways in which digitally mediated social connections can also benefit their spiritual growth.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Mitchell, 89.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Harper, Hamill, and Gilbert, 25.

<sup>24</sup> Barna: Millennials, "How Technology is Changing Millennial Faith". <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/millennials/640-how-technology-is-changing-millennial-faith#.UqI-qrQXW2c2014> (January 12, 2014)

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Drescher, 1817.

<sup>27</sup> Mitchell, 78.

<sup>28</sup> Drescher, 1329.

<sup>29</sup> Mitchell, 95.

## CONVERGENCE

The discussion so far suggests there is at least some scope to bring together the characteristics of the digital habitus in a way that promotes the flourishing of both relationships and discipleship in embodied communities.

For Meadows, this convergence between embodied and digital realms in ministry is about living the whole of life 'as a missional presence in the midst of our digital culture'. Convergent expressions of Christian life together are the product of an ongoing trilectic between three approaches to digital technology:

The approach of 'digital aliens' resists the 'disembodying ... and compartmentalising power of digital culture'<sup>30</sup> by calling people to invest in real-life embodied friendships. At the same time 'digital pioneers' focus on building these friendships through online means such as 'private web communities and open social networks.'<sup>31</sup> 'Digital natives' will leverage the capability of always-on digital connections to build friendships both online and face-to-face.<sup>32</sup>

The result of such a conversation between these three approaches, Meadows envisions, will be a situation in which 'embodied ministries in face-to-face relationships can be enhanced and followed up through the use of digital media' while ministry mediated through digital technology will find its 'natural fulfilment in embodied encounters, and the irreducible value of fully human embrace.'<sup>33</sup>

Drescher has also proposed ways in which the features of the 'digital reformation' can be integrated into and promote the flourishing of Christian community. For Drescher, digital technology, in whatever form it is present, is a social medium that enables new forms of ancient ministry practices that are about 'tilling the soil, feeding the roots, maybe weeding a bit and playing music to encourage growth.'<sup>34</sup> Convergent ministry requires 'such ministries of presence, encouragement, and, above all, abundant attentiveness to others.'<sup>35</sup>

Drescher suggests a number of ways in which technology can be used to foster convergent ministry. These include: facilitating, creating or otherwise promoting fertile conditions for spiritual growth within small communities; facilitating connections within and between small communities; and encouraging or enabling 'distributed participation rather than passive consumption.'<sup>36</sup>

Against this background, the aim of this paper is to present the results of an exploratory investigation into some of the features of the digital neighbourhood in which Southern African teenagers and youth workers live.

The study has two parts. The first is an investigation into the roles of online and face-to-face interactions among young people in three areas: friendship, spiritual growth, and seeking help with personal issues; the second is an investigation into how a digital Bible-messaging platform called the WordSpace has facilitated a convergence between digital technology and face-to-face interaction in Christian communities.

---

<sup>30</sup> Meadows, 178.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Drescher, 1346.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Drescher, 1817.

## METHOD:

The research focused primarily on an online community of around 5000 young people in Southern Africa who subscribe to a daily Bible-based messaging platform called the WordSpace. In this project, 100-word posts written by local youth leaders are sent out daily on eight social media platforms to subscribers' cell phones.

This research was conducted in three parts. In the first part a survey was conducted online using the Survey Monkey platform. In this survey respondents were asked to answer questions that focused on the importance of face-to-face and digital connections in their social relationships and spiritual growth and also how the WordSpace posts had played a role in their various face-to-face connections.

In the second part a series of three 'snap-surveys', each consisting of a single question relating to the use of cell phones to connect with friends was broadcast via instant message to subscribers.

The third part of the research consisted of a short interview with people who had previously contacted us for help with various personal issues. This was also done via instant message.

In order to compare the responses from the WordSpace sample with young people who did not necessarily share the same faith commitment, students from three local high-schools were asked to respond to the questions in the primary survey that related to social relationships.

Informed consent was obtained from participants on the basis that their participation was voluntary, would result in no material benefit for themselves, and that data was confidential and anonymous.

Table 1 below lists the relevant demographic data for the two groups of participants.

|                                      | WordSpace participants | School participants |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|
| % (unless otherwise stated)          |                        |                     |
| Average age (years)                  | 15.7                   | 15.3                |
| Male                                 | 40                     | 60                  |
| Female                               | 60                     | 39                  |
| Parents that have university degree: |                        |                     |
| One or both                          | 79                     | 75                  |
| None                                 | 20                     | 22                  |
| Type of phone owned                  |                        |                     |
| Smartphone                           | 90                     | 82                  |
| Feature phone                        | 8                      | 8                   |
| Basic phone                          | 1                      | 5                   |
| Attend a church or youth group:      |                        |                     |
| Yes                                  | 92                     | N/A                 |
| No                                   | 6                      |                     |
| Read the WordSpace messages:         |                        |                     |
| 5 or more times a week               | 66                     | N/A                 |
| 2-4 times a week                     | 25                     |                     |
| Sample size                          | 149                    | 385                 |
| Sample error                         | +8                     | +5                  |

Table 1 Participant data

## RESULTS

### SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

The data presented in Table 2 show that, when asked in general terms where their most significant connections with friends occur, both the WordSpace and school sample populations prefer face-to-face over online connections. Almost half (40%) say they are comfortable in both realms – the same percentage that say they prefer mostly face-to-face connections. Those who say they prefer mostly online connections represent a much smaller group.

The data shown in Figure 1 show that the preferred means of connecting shifts further towards face-to-face interactions when specific kinds of settings are given as response options. When the responses were grouped together to indicate an overall preference, 75% of the respondents from both the WordSpace and school samples chose some form of face-to-face contact.

| Where do significant connections occur | Mostly Face-to-face | Mostly Online | About half and half | <i>n</i> | <i>E</i> |
|--|---------------------|---------------|---------------------|----------|----------|
| WordSpace                              | 44.5                | 15.2          | 39.6                | 149      | +8       |
| Schools                                | 41.0                | 17.6          | 40.3                | 385      | +5       |

Table 2 Preferences for social connections (%)

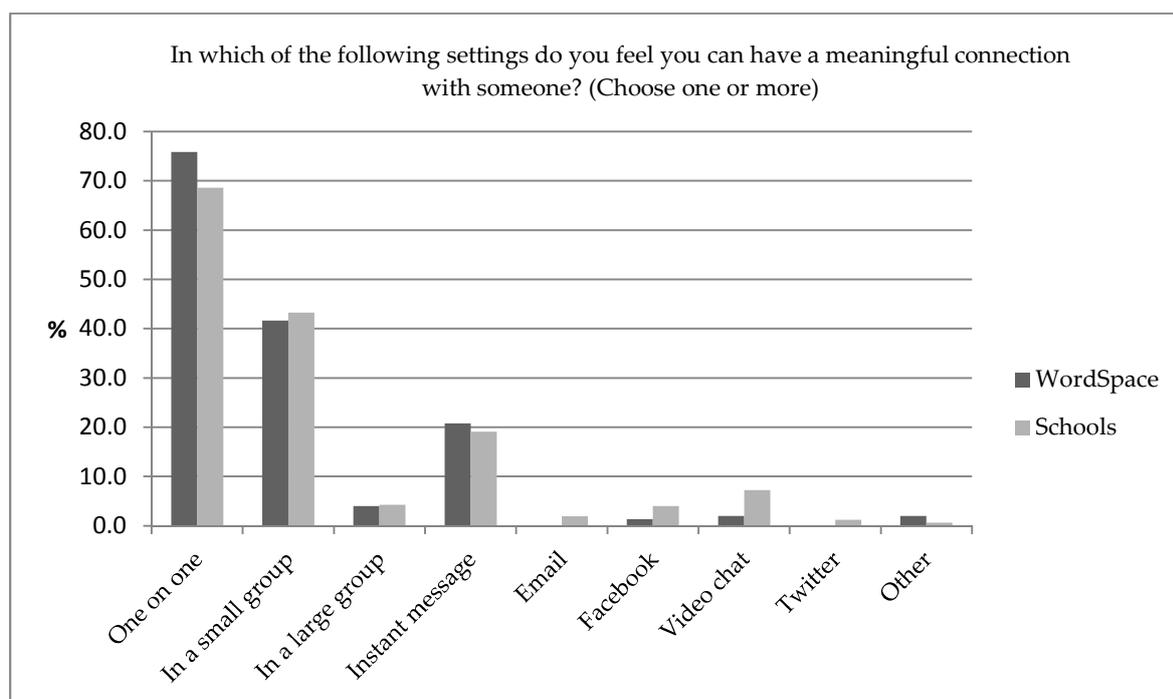


Figure 1 Preferences for social connections in specific settings

In Table 3 it can be seen that cell phones are generally considered important in helping people to stay connected with their friends in real life. 54% said their cell phones are important while just 5% said they were not important. However, they are significantly less important as tools for expressing and sharing the particular details of daily life (26% said their phones were important for this aspect while 41% said they were not important). This holds for both the WordSpace and School samples.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> z-values at 95% confidence were 5.2 and 7.5 and -7.8 and -7.6 in the 'Important' and 'Not important' categories respectively.

How important is your cell phone in...

|  | Important  |         | Slightly important |         | Not important |         |
|--|------------|---------|--------------------|---------|---------------|---------|
|  | Word Space | Schools | Word Space         | Schools | Word Space    | Schools |
| helping you feel connected to people in real life? | 54         | 51      | 41                 | 39      | 5             | 9       |
| expressing what's going on in your real life?      | 26         | 24      | 34                 | 40      | 41            | 35      |

Table 3 Importance of cell phones in staying connected and expressing aspects of life (%), WordSpace  $n = 149$   $E = +8$ , Schools  $n = 375$   $E = +4$ )

Data from the three snap surveys, presented in Table 4 paint a more complex picture of the importance and role of cell phones and online connections in the lives of these teenagers.

|  |                                  |                  |                       |     |     |
|--|----------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|-----|-----|
| 1. Would you rather give up...                         | phone for a week                 |                  | friends for a weekend | $n$ | $E$ |
|  | 79                               |                  | 21                    | 335 | +4  |
| 2. Do you engage in online chats...                    | A lot of the time / All the time | Some of the time | None of the time      | $n$ | $E$ |
|  | 44                               | 51               | 5                     | 406 | +5  |
| 3. Does use of phones while together make the time ... | More meaningful                  | Less meaningful  | No different          | $n$ | $E$ |
|  | 9                                | 67               | 24                    | 177 | +7  |

Table 4 Results of three separate 'snap surveys' of the WordSpace population (%)

In the first survey, there was a strong (if hypothetical) preference for face-to-face connection with nearly 80% saying they would rather go without their phones and instant messaging for a week than go without seeing their friends on the weekend. Those who said they would choose to give up their phones considered face-to-face time more significant and meaningful than online chats.

'I'd jump at a chance to hang with my friends. I'd rather be with them and chat there than not be there and chat over the phone'

'because my friends and family are more important than a phone and I (like) face to face chat time not over a phone it's so impersonal'

'although losing the phone's internet would leave me without contact to many more friends, there's something that can't be replaced over the phone about spending time with people you enjoy being around'

Those who said they would retain their phones during the week rather than meet their friends said they preferred being in contact with more people over instant messaging as well as being able to overcome the constraints of busy schedules and geographical distance that hinder face-to-face contact.

'we hardly have time to meet on the weekends anyway and we could still stay in contact via the internet'

‘well my friends are important yes, but my fone helps me communicate with so many other apart from them so I would give that up for a weekend n have my fone cos either way I can still chat to them’

‘I don’t really see my friends on weekends because I see them all the time at school but I chat to them a lot on my phone so I actually get more interaction with them normally on my phone than on weekends’

The results of the second snap survey indicate that a high percentage engage in online chats during free time with 91% saying they engaged in online chats at least some of the time.

In the third survey 67% said that the presence and use of cell phones for activities such as instant messaging while people are gathered in face-to-face situations makes the time less meaningful. Just 9% said it makes the time more meaningful. One in four respondents said it made no difference.

When asked to explain why phones were frequently used for online activity while people were gathered together, responses fell into three general categories:

- 1) the benefit of features that enhance the time together
  - ‘to take pictures and save memories’
  - ‘we like to listen to music or if they need to call someone in an emergency’
- 2) social factors that ease awkwardness or promote image:
  - ‘to distract you when you have awkward situations, seems like the norm’
  - ‘there’s an urge to make friends not there jealous by saying what a great time we’re having’
  - ‘we do it for image, it looks like we have more friends and that we are ‘cool’ ‘
- 3) the addictive nature of social networking on cell phones
  - ‘basically it’s a way of life or an addiction in a way. We constantly have to check our phones for updates and messages’
  - ‘people these days can’t live without their phones and they always have to be glued to their sides’

## SPIRITUAL GROWTH

The data in Figure 2 indicates that the preference for face-to-face connection in the realm of friendships is also true for spiritual growth. When combined, 77% of respondents said meeting with other believers in some way was beneficial for their spiritual growth compared to 18% who said engaging with something spiritual online was helpful. Table 5 presents the various frequencies with which respondents engaged in spiritually beneficial activities. Almost all (90%) said they participated in one or more of the activities shown in Figure 2 either daily or weekly.

The percentage who said they used online resources ‘in the last week’ (55%) was about the same as those who said they engaged face-to-face (46%). Even though online resources are generally considered less beneficial than meeting people face-to-face they are used at least as often, if not more.

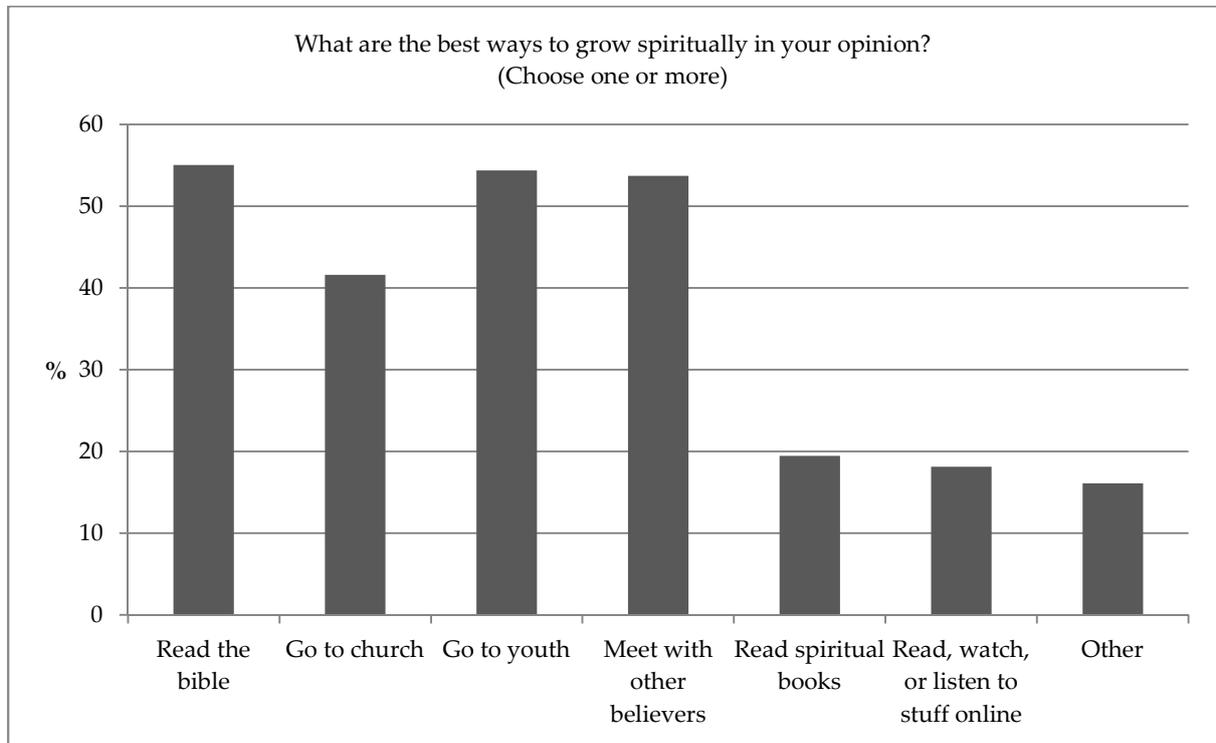


Figure 2 Sources of help for spiritual growth

|   |              |                  |                   |                  |       |
|---|--------------|------------------|-------------------|------------------|-------|
| How often do you do something to help you spiritually?  | Daily        | Weekly           | Monthly           | Yearly           | Never |
|   | 43           | 47               | 9                 | 1                | 0     |
| When was the last time you engaged with something online or someone in real life that helped you spiritually? |              | In the last week | In the last month | In the last year | Never |
|   | Online       | 55               | 22                | 12               | 7     |
|   | In real life | 46               | 26                | 22               | 3     |

Table 5 Frequencies with which respondents engage in spiritually beneficial activities (% , n=164, E=+7.6)

The results shown in Figure 3 indicate that the main perceived benefit from reading WordSpace posts online is a strengthening of faith and a sense of connection to God. Reading the Bible, having questions answered, and learning more about Christianity in general also feature relatively highly. About one in five respondents also said that it helped them feel more connected to other Christians.

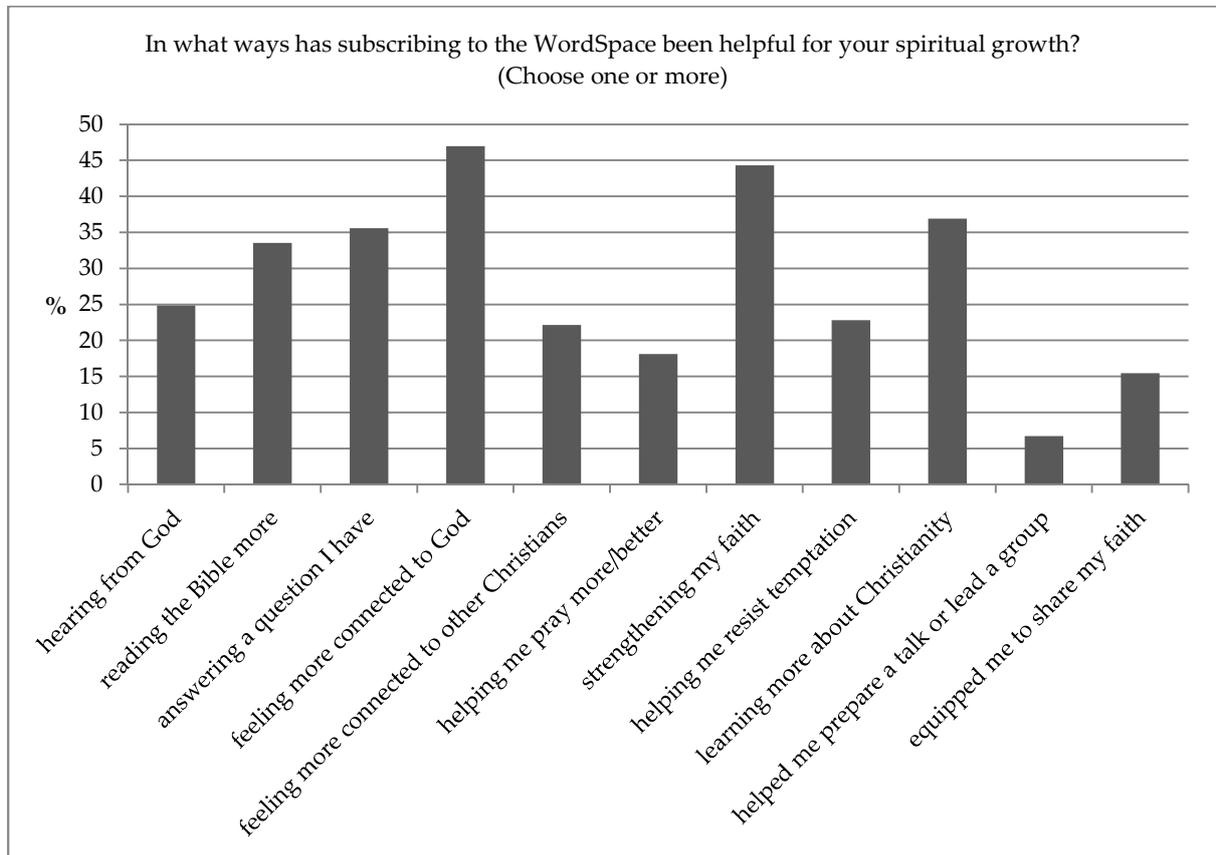


Figure 3 Impact of WordSpace for spiritual growth

#### ONLINE CHATS FOR HELP WITH PERSONAL PROBLEMS

Since the WordSpace began sending short Bible-based messages to subscribers in August 2012, a number of people have replied via instant message asking for help with a personal issue. As part of this study, follow-up interviews with three of these people were conducted to assess their opinions on the value of chatting via instant messaging and also talking face-to-face about the kind of issue they were facing.

When asked what had prompted them to initiate contact, two respondents said they did so because there was initially no-one else with whom they felt comfortable talking. The third was referred by a friend who subscribed to the WordSpace.

'I felt like there weren't really anyone else to go talk to for advice... I can't go speak to my dad himself because he's very strict and he's highly respected by his fellow family so it would be pretty awkward to go talk to him about a situation like that'

'my friend suggested I get in touch with the WordSpace. As he found out about my depression and cutting... And I did feel the need to speak to someone about it.'

When asked if they had spoken to someone else face-to-face two of the teens said they had (a girlfriend, school counsellor, a parent). In both cases these occurred after the online chat with the WordSpace.

'Yes the counsellor at our school and I talk to my mom about it :)'

'I talked to u and later my girlfriend who was understanding and loving which helped a lot'

All three said that chatting over instant message about the issue they were dealing with was easier than talking with someone face-to-face. Reasons for this included the safety of anonymity and feeling more secure in front of a screen rather than speaking to someone face-to-face.

‘being online u can stay anonymous and it is easier to express ourselves because most of us are uncomfortable about talking to someone in person’

‘I knew if I brought it up, I’d get judged. I’ve seen it all happen before. My friends (that know) guessed what was wrong. So they confronted me, but I never really spoke to anyone ... I knew you wouldn’t judge. And I don’t really enjoy talking to people face to face. So since it was over bbm, I found it easier. See I can still type even if I’m crying. But I can’t get a single syllable out of my mouth if I’m crying.’

When asked to suggest any possible disadvantages of chatting via instant message one respondent said ‘you maybe can’t always understand properly over the phone.’ No other disadvantages were suggested.

Despite the apparent benefits of communicating digitally, the two respondents that had also spoken to someone face-to-face said that talking face-to-face had significant benefits and advantages over chatting online.

‘Talking face-to-face is much better and more effective’

‘when I spoke to my girlfriend in person it felt like a mountain was lifted from my shoulders. U feel more intimate and ur relationship with that person really becomes stronger It is good to have someone in person to talk to it really lifts that burden.’

## CONVERGENCE AND THE WORDSPACE

There are aspects of potential convergence between online and face-to-face connections in the WordSpace ministry that feature in preceding results. In the survey, however, two questions focused specifically on the aspect of convergence by asking respondents if they had spoken to anyone about a post, and if a post had been used in some way at a youth gathering.

When asked if they had spoken with someone else, for example a friend, parent, teacher, or youth leader about what they had read on the WordSpace, 62% said ‘sometimes’, 8% said ‘many times’ and 32% said ‘never’. The kinds of people spoken with are shown in Table 6. When an online post is discussed face-to-face with someone, it is most frequently with a friend or parent.

| Who have you spoken with? | Friend | Youth group member | Parent | Youth leader | Sibling |
|---------------------------|--------|--------------------|--------|--------------|---------|
| %                         | 49     | 7                  | 25     | 10           | 7       |

Table 6 The kinds of people with whom face-to-face interactions have taken place as a result of a WordSpace post ( $n = 55$ ,  $E = 13$ )

38% said something from the WordSpace been used in some way at a group they attended, for example church, youth group, cell group, or school group while 59% said that had not happened.

## DISCUSSION

The habitus that shapes the lives and relationships of many Southern African teenagers is infused with digital technology. Over 80% in this study own smartphones and many spend significant amounts of time chatting online and browsing the internet.

Overall, however, there is a clear preference for face-to-face time with friends in the quest for meaningful connections. This holds true for the areas of spiritual growth and also, to some extent in seeking help for personal problems. If the nature of social connections in the new digital neighbourhood is gravitating towards disembodied, shallow and fleeting interactions like those played out on the screen of Noah's computer, it will be largely against the wishes or ideals of those involved.

The significant numbers (40%) that said they were equally at home in both online and face-to-face realms supports the idea articulated by Mitchell that technology is, for many, seamlessly interwoven into their lived experience and thus hard to distinguish from 'real life.'<sup>38</sup> This may explain the increase in preference for face-to-face connections (from 45% to 75%, see Table 2 and Figure 1) when the phrasing of the questions was expressed in specific examples (one-on-one, instant messaging etc.) rather than general categories (online or face-to-face). This variability may also indicate that the categories of 'online' and 'face-to-face' are not always the most helpful in determining where meaningful connections are sought. Rather, as Harper *et al.* suggest, the categories in question might be changed to those that 'foster human connection'<sup>39</sup> and those that do not, irrespective of how they are mediated.

The data also suggests however, that as seamlessly as digital technology may appear to be integrated into the neighbourhood, seams – perhaps even tears in the fabric – tend to show up when connections mediated by digital devices compete for attention with the physical presence of friends. The high percentage of people who said cell phones degrade the quality of face time together is at odds with the frequency of their use in those same situations. The frustration expressed by many respondents bears witness to an unresolved social dynamic around the proper use of digital devices.

These results correlate with Mitchell's observation of the 'more frequent, impulsive and sometimes compulsive use'<sup>40</sup> that is a product of the indispensability of mobile devices. The habitual use of cell phones, driven by their affordability and availability and a "can' to 'will' to 'must'"<sup>41</sup> progression makes it perhaps not that surprising that teenagers find themselves frustrated.

The value of digitally mediated connection in enabling users to transcend the constraints of time and geography – the 'immediate, imagined and sensory limits' mentioned by Mitchell<sup>42</sup> - is evident in the frequent use of instant messaging and digital forms of spiritual input even though these digital forms of connection were valued less for meaningful interaction.

The relatively insignificant role that social media sites such as Facebook, Skype and Twitter play in providing meaningful connections is interesting. For these young people, instant messaging is the primary context in which meaningful connections are sought online. This possibly reflects the transience and temporiness that seems to be a result of the ever-evolving nature of digital technology. There is a steady stream of new social media

---

<sup>38</sup> Mitchell, 94.

<sup>39</sup> Harper, Hamill, and Gilbert, 25-26.

<sup>40</sup> Mitchell, 89.

<sup>41</sup> Mitchell, 89.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

platforms ready to take the place of yesterday's favourite 'app'. Further research could investigate the value of other kinds of online activities, online gaming for example, for meaningful connection in this context.

There is a relatively low level of importance attached to digitally mediated forms of spiritual input by Southern African teenagers (18% said reading spiritual content online was helpful). This seems to contrast with the stronger online engagement found in the Barna report which found that 70% of 'practicing Christian Millennials ... read Scripture on a screen' and 54% are also 'heavy users of online videos pertaining to faith'.<sup>43</sup> This study, however, was conducted among an older age group in a North American context in which a greater supply of locally produced content and faster internet connections may be a factor in the increased use.

However, the data also shows that the people in the WordSpace sample are active readers of online content. 91% said they read a WordSpace post two or more times a week and significant numbers said doing so had been beneficial for their spiritual growth (see Figure 3). This discrepancy may be a result of respondents not counting WordSpace posts as 'reading stuff online' but also, as mentioned earlier, a confusion of what is meant by 'online' and 'face-to-face'.

Overall, there appears to be a similar relationship between the significance and frequency of interaction in face-to-face and digital settings for spiritual growth as there is for social interactions. The connections that happen in face-to-face situations (youth groups, church, other gatherings) are more meaningful for spiritual growth even though they may be less frequent than digital connections. The value of digitally mediated spiritual input again lies, at least partly, in its ability to transcend the limitations of busy schedules and physical separation by delivering content instantly wherever the user happens to be.

The people who engaged the WordSpace via instant message for help with a personal issue did so because of a combination of three factors: availability ('I had no-one else to go to'); anonymity ('it's easier to talk to someone you don't know about something that would be uncomfortable face-to-face'); and trustworthiness ('I knew you wouldn't judge'.)

These findings correlate well with the characteristics of instant messaging described by Mitchel who highlights the importance of a sense of the 'empathic presence' of a trusted friend for online intimacy.<sup>44</sup> For those who contacted the WordSpace it was not a friend they were talking to but nevertheless it was someone they trusted. That trust appears to be based on the recommendation of a friend, and most likely earned through the nature of the daily post content. Another key factor articulated by Mitchell in facilitating intimate conversations is the 'privacy and easy access'<sup>45</sup> that is characteristic of instant messaging from a personal device. These qualities were also apparent in the online interactions between the WordSpace and those who turned to it for help.

It is significant that two of the three respondents did eventually speak to someone face-to-face after having chatted with the WordSpace. Both found the face-to-face more meaningful even though it was initially more risky. It is likely that their initial contact with someone through the safety of an instant message chat emboldened them to speak with someone they knew.

---

<sup>43</sup> Barna: Millennials, 28.

<sup>44</sup> Mitchell, 90.

<sup>45</sup> Mitchell, 91.

While hard to measure quantitatively, it appears that the findings of this study correlate to some degree with the characteristics of convergent digital ministry outlined by Drescher: creating fertile conditions for spiritual growth; facilitating connections within and between small communities; and encouraging or enabling distributed participation rather than passive consumption.

One aspect of this is the extent to which WordSpace content that is read individually on personal handsets is then shared and discussed among existing communities. The significant number of respondents who said they had done this with friends, parents, youth leaders etc. indicates that some level of convergence is indeed present. Additionally, one in three youth groups have used content published by the WordSpace as part of their teaching. The significant number of respondents (22%) who said they felt more connected to other Christians is also encouraging.

This data correlates well with the friendship and conversation-extending aspects of convergent ministry as articulated by Meadows.<sup>46</sup> The results in this study show that, at least to some degree, WordSpace posts are provoking and enriching faith-based conversations between friends and providing youth leaders and parents with points of engagement with the young people they know.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has presented findings from an exploratory into the role and importance of online and face-to-face connections among Southern African teenagers. While limited by the relatively small sample size and by the mostly quantitative approach, some features of the digital neighbourhood can be discerned from the data.

This data suggests that, while technology is deeply integrated into the lives of Southern African teenagers, face-to-face connections remain the context in which the most meaningful interactions in the areas of friendship, spiritual growth and discussing personal issues are sought. While digitally mediated connections are important in enabling users to enhance their relationships through transcending the constraints of time and space and can facilitate a sense of 'empathic presence'<sup>47</sup> and safety in anonymity, the habitual use of devices such as cell phones can adversely affect the quality of face to face time.

The data also suggest that future research may benefit from focussing on categories other than 'face-to-face' and 'online' in attempting to describe the factors that foster human connection as noted by Harper *et. al.*<sup>48</sup>.

This was study in which data collection was limited to an online survey and small samples of follow-up interviews. Despite these limitations a picture emerges that should relieve some of the anxiety youth workers may feel about a perceived drift by young people towards disembodied, digitally mediated social connections. At the same time there are both hazards to be negotiated and opportunities to be explored. Further research will help to fill out the map by which these can be better negotiated.

---

<sup>46</sup> Meadows, 178.

<sup>47</sup> Mitchell, 91.

<sup>48</sup> Harper, Hamill, and Gilbert, 25-26.

## REFERENCES

- Barna: Millennials, "How Technology is Changing Millennial Faith".  
<https://www.barna.org/barna-update/millennials/640-how-technology-is-changing-millennial-faith#.Uql-qrQXW2c2014> (January 12, 2014)
- Benson, R. 2005. Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field. Editors Rodney Benson, Erik Neveu. Cambridge: Polity
- Bolen, M. 2013. "'Noah' Short Film Breaks Your Heart With Nothing But Computer Screens" Accessed February 23. The Huffington Post. [http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2013/09/11/noah-short-film-tiff-video\\_n\\_3908782.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2013/09/11/noah-short-film-tiff-video_n_3908782.html)
- Bourdieu, P. 1977. Outline of a theory of practice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Bourdieu, P. 1990. The logic of practice. Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P. & Wacquant, L. 1992. An invitation to reflexive sociology. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- De Certeau M. 1984. The practice of everyday life. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Drescher, E 2011. Tweet If You [Heart] Jesus: Practicing Church in the Digital Reformation (Kindle Locations 570-2038). Church Publishing Inc.. Kindle Edition.
- Green L. 2002. Technoculture: From Alphabet to Cybersex. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Harper R, Hamill L, Gilbert N. 2013. Modelling Digital Habitus: The relationship between the internet and the density and duration of friendship ties. Microsoft Research.  
<http://research.microsoft.com/apps/pubs/default.aspx?id=196215>  
MSR-TR-2013-67
- Hasebrink, U., Livingstone, S., Haddon, L. and Ólafsson, K. 2009 Comparing children's online opportunities and risks across Europe: Cross-national comparisons for EU Kids Online. LSE, London: EU Kids Online
- Kinnaman, D. 2012. "The Rise of Digital Urban Tribes" Christianity Today, Vol 56, No. 6, 28
- Jones, C. and Czerniewicz, L. 2010, Describing or debunking? The net generation and digital natives. Journal of Computer Assisted Learning, 26: 317–320. doi: 10.1111/j.1365-2729.2010.00379.x
- Lindley, S. Meek, Sam. Sellen, A. and Harper, R. 2012. "It's Simply Integral to What I do": Enquiries into how the Web is Weaved into Everyday Life. Proceedings of the 2012 international conference on World Wide Web. International World Wide Web Conference. 1067-1076. URL <http://www2012.wwwconference.org/proceedings/proceedings/p1067.pdf>
- Meadows, P. R. 2012. Mission and Discipleship in a Digital Culture, Mission Studies 29 163-182
- Mitchell, C. Young People, Technoculture and Embodied Spirituality. Theology and the Body, edited by Stephen Garner. 2011, 77-98

Palley, W. Gen Z: Digital in Their DNA, JWT Accessed online at <http://www.jwt.com/en/work/global/genzdigitalintheirdna/>

Palley, W. The Future of Correspondence, JWT Accessed online at <http://www.jwt.com/en/work/global/thefutureofcorrespondence/>

Reay, D. 2004. It's All Becoming a Habitus': Beyond the Habitual Use of Habitus in Educational Research Author(s): Diane Source: *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol. 25, No. 4, Special Issue: Pierre Bourdieu's Sociology of Education: The Theory of Practice and the Practice of Theory (Sep.,2004), pp. 431-444

Root, A. Identity in a Digital Age, *Word & World* Volume 30, Number 3 Summer 2010

Stald, G. 2008. "Mobile Identity: Youth, Identity, and Mobile Communication Media." *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media*. Edited by David Buckingham. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 143–164. doi: 10.1162/dmal.9780262524834.143

Underwood C, Parker L and Stone L. 2013. Getting it together: relational habitus in the emergence of digital literacies, *Learning, Media and Technology*, 38:4, 478-494, DOI: 10.1080/17439884.2013.770403