

Go where the kids are at online... but beware of risks!

In the generation wars, I'm neither a Gen-X nor a Millennial. I'm a Xennial: the micro-generation born between *Star Wars: A New Hope* in 1977 and *Return of the Jedi* in 1983.

What marks Xennials like me as different from Millennials is that, like Gen -X, I had an analogue childhood. I remember getting my first cassettes from the local HMV store (for the record, they were Michael Jackson's *Dangerous* and the *Jesus Christ Superstar* Soundtrack – starring Johnny Farnham as Jesus!).

I also remember watching free-to-air TV and having to record my favourite TV show (*The X Files*) on a VHS because it aired on Wednesday nights when I was at Youth Group and there was no other way to watch it later.

But, like Millennials, I'm comfortable in online spaces. This is because when I was a teenager, everything changed. My family got their first internet-enabled PC in 1996 when I was in year 8. I remember signing up to ICQ and MSN Messenger – the first of what we now would call social media platforms. And when I was in year 12, I got my first mobile-phone, a Nokia 5110 with a green and black screen, built in snake game and the ability to send 160-character text messages to my friends.

Having said that, the explosion of online platforms is overwhelming at times, with new ones going in and out of fashion all the time. I'll never forget the first time I dropped a Facebook reference in my High School SRE class, only to be met with a resounding "Only old people use that, Miss!".

In ministry to Youth, it's always wise to be where the youth are at, but with such a rapidly changing online world, it's always hard to know the full details of the benefits and risks of each of the platforms as you use them in your ministries and encourage wisdom in how your youth interact on them.

The following pages provide a brief snapshot of different online platforms and some reflections on using them in ministry. For more details about any of these apps, visit [the e-safety guide](#).

- SnapChat
- WhatsApp
- TikTok
- Discord
- Facebook
- Instagram
- Twitch
- Tumblr
- YouTube

Snapchat

Snapchat is a messaging app where people share images (called snaps) which are supposed to evaporate not long after being sent. Like most online platforms, users are expected to be over 13 years of age before using.

Why youth use it: The appeal of snapchat is two-fold: messages that self-delete not long after opening allows content to be shared that otherwise wouldn't if the user thought it would be kept forever. The other feature is "snap-streaks" which count how many consecutive days that two users have messaged each-other.

What the risks are: Users might think they are free to post whatever they like due to the app's built-in self-deletion feature. However, although the app does inform users if their image has been screen-capped, it only takes a quick search on google to find multiple ways to get around this.

Because of the nature of this app, users feel safe to post more obscene and graphic content. In fact, the one time I was shown an inappropriate image in a classroom was when students were watching snap-chat stories (images that last 24 hours) rather than doing their work.

There are also [stories](#) of how young people have been groomed on the app. Additionally, many young girls report being [pressured to send suggestive images](#) on the [app](#) with the solicitors coercing the girls with the promises that the images won't go further because the app will delete them – when there are numerous ways to circumvent it.

Some advice you might give: Warn the youth in your groups that nothing online is ever truly erased, and even if an app promises to delete your image, there is no guarantee it won't fall into the hands of others.

A verse that might help: When on snapchat and someone asks for questionable content (or shares such content), remind youth that **"The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light."** **Matt 6:22.**

For more information from the office of e-safely, click [here](#).

WhatsApp (or WeChat)

WhatsApp (and similar Chinese-based platform WeChat), are messaging platforms. They rose to prominence as an alternative to iMessage which only allows group chats if all the users are on iPhones. The benefits of apps like this is that they use the phone's data requirements to send messages rather than be charged by your provider for every SMS. WhatsApp messages are end-to-end encrypted, so only the user and the receiver can see the content.

Why youth use it: The appeal of WhatsApp is that you can create group messages no matter what phone brand they use (Apple is notorious for blocking non-iPhone users from its group-chat facility) is also easy to send multimedia – with a built in gif-search feature that this writer is guilty of taking advantage of regularly in her work group-chat.

What the risks are: Users regularly receive unsolicited messages from strangers, so young people need to be aware before they start chatting to anyone. There are also reports of people infiltrating chat groups.

Some advice you might give: One thing that might occur is when youth create groups that exclude some people. Like all platforms, the technology can and is used sometimes for cyber-bullying. Additionally, it is wise to make sure that even though you may be a trusted adult in the what's app group, the same can't be said for many other adults out there on the platform – so encourage safety and discourage chatting to strangers.

A verse that might help:

Encourage youth to use the platform in an edifying way: "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing." 1 Thessalonians 5:11

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TikTok

TikTok started its life as a completely different app called music.ly where people filmed themselves lip-synching to popular songs. It has since morphed to a platform with thousands of mini-videos. Unlike YouTube, where users have a large amount of control through the search function, TikTok videos play instantly, one after another, based on a powerful algorithm.

Why youth use it: Some users have reported that the TikTok algorithm is so powerful that it is like it can read their brain. In a recent episode of the podcast *Reply All*, producer Anna Foley shared some strangely specific content from her TikTok feed. Among the millions of videos on the app, the algorithm not only sent her one filmed at her old high school, but it also sent her one about a peculiar health issue her sister suffers from (the inability to burp!).

This specificity is the reasons so many teens are addicted to the app. Imagine opening an app that knows you so well that it can feed to you videos about interests that you've never told anyone about (like the strange enjoyment I get in watching others play the Sonic the Hedgehog games from the 1990s).

What the risks are: This powerful algorithm comes with risks, too. Chiefly, it is powerfully addictive. One reason for this is that the short, sharp videos come one after another without the user needing to do anything to bring on the next hit of dopamine.

But, as [one report noted](#), the algorithm can take vulnerable users down dark paths. One user started on TikTok by following a fitness "influencer", this led to her feed being more and more populated by videos about health, wellbeing – all good things to begin with – until the videos started talking about calorie tracking which triggered an eating disorder in the user. There are other "rabbit-hole" topics that the TikTok algorithm can cause users to be drawn into like QAnon, Anti-Covid theories, or, more chillingly, one researcher found that it takes only four to six hours for the algorithm to inundate a user's feed with racist or sexist content.

Additionally, [there are reports](#) that in search of TikTok stardom, some users as young as 6 years old are objectifying themselves and sexualising themselves in order to gain attention and followers.

Some advice you might give:

Youth may think that TikTok is harmless fun – and it can be – but they also need caution. Youth might also see the fame of the rising number of TikTok celebrities and think that they too can become rich using the app. Yet, more and more there are stories of the dark side of such celebrity with some famous users committing suicide from the pressures of such fame. Even during the 2021 Tokyo Olympics, there are [stories of](#) people bullying Olympic Athletes in the comments of their posts.

Moderation is key with this app, which is hard, because it had been designed, arguably more than any other app, to addict its users. Try encouraging your youth to take breaks, even to have a "sabbath rest" from the app.

A verse that can help:

"Everything is permissible for me"--but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible for me"--but I will not be mastered by anything." 1 Corinthians 6: 12

Challenge your youth to see if they are being mastered by the app and its addictive algorithm.

For more information from the office of e-safely, click [here](#).

Discord

Discord rose to popularity within the computer gaming community. It allows people to set up invite-only servers where groups can gather united by a shared hobby or interest. Because of this, some Youth Groups have started setting up their own servers for their youth.

Why youth use it: We are made by God to be in community, and Discord allows users to find communities of people from across the world with the same interests as them. As you can imagine, in seasons of COVID Lockdown, these groups would be appealing to teens who feel isolated at home.

What the risks are: Despite the ability to make such servers invite-only, users regularly find their private groups [infiltrated by online trolls](#). Additionally, as servers can be set up on any topic, there are thousands of NSFW (Not Safe for Work) servers with extreme sexual and violent content.

Even in regular Discord servers, there is content which is unhelpful - [hate speech, vulgar language, bullying, spreading malware](#), and even [predators](#) or [human traffickers](#). In fact in 2021, the American Centre for Missing and Exploited Children listed Discord as [a major contributor to child exploitation](#).

Some Advice you Might give: The danger of inviting teens to a Youth Group Discord channel is that you are encouraging them to use an app that has content which is completely unmoderated. It would be helpful to have a conversation with your youth about the other servers they are subscribed to and if the content is edifying or not. Additionally, as [many predators lurk on servers](#), it is helpful for young people to be aware of unsolicited invitations from strangers.

A Verse that can help:

If inviting youth to a church-based discord, make it clear that the purpose isn't to endorse the app, but to be set-apart on the app, a community with a different purpose:

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” Romans 12:1-2

For more information from the office of e-safely, click [here](#).

Facebook

Why youth use it: They don't! Quite a few may have an account but it's not their go-to social media app (unlike their parents or some of their older youth leaders).

What the risks are: For youth leaders, the risks come when they seek to use the platform to message youth. (This can also occur in private message features on Instagram, too). In all circumstances, it's wise to keep communication between youth leaders and youth in a public platform where there is no hint at impropriety - this may mean a group chat with the youth and their parent.

Another risk is that on the rare occasion that Youth access Facebook they may see a post or a comment that shines poorly on the leader and ultimately on God. A comment out of context or an in-joke that may seem harmless might end up leading the weaker brother or sister (in this case, a youth in youth group) astray.

Some advice you might give:

[Make sure all youth leaders are following safe ministry practices for communicating with youth at all times.](#)

A Verse that can help:

“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” Acts 20:28

For more information from the office of e-safely, click [here](#).

Instagram

Instagram is one of the mainstays of social media apps for youth since its launch in 2010. The focus on the app is on beautiful images (albeit filtered and manipulated ones) and creative captions. Although the comment function is a feature, the number of “likes” often equates to value in the eyes of the young person posting.

Why youth use it: Youth are drawn to the aesthetic of the app which is simple to use and allows images to look pristine and perfect. However, this striving for perfection is part of the app’s dangers.

What the risks are: The mental health risks of Instagram are one of the highest for social media platforms, particularly for teenage girls. A [study in the UK found](#) that increased anxiety, loneliness, depression and body image issues are all linked to high levels of Instagram usage. In fact, that study found that 9 out of 10 teenage girls said they were unhappy with their body image.

[Another study](#) showed that when girls were shown an Instagram post with a high level of likes, their brains interpreted it as “good” or “better”, regardless of the content of the photo. The likes drive the response, rather than the content. Much like TikTok, girls are also in danger of following influencers whose content promotes dangerous weight loss methods and can trigger eating disorders. Another risk is access to the account. It is essential that youth using Instagram set their account to “private” - which will give access only to approved friends rather than allowing anyone on the internet to access their stream of images.

Some advice you might give:

[Study after study has](#) shown the direct correlation between lengthy social media use and mental health issues. These studies also show that girls are disproportionately impacted more than boys. Encourage moderation and affirm value of your youth in God’s eyes, not in Instagram likes.

A Verse that can help:

The character of God is a comfort here. Where Instagram is all about the external perfection, God sees what’s important. **“Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” 1 Samuel 16:7**

For more information from the office of e-safely, click [here](#).

Twitch

Twitch was created for computer gamers to live-stream themselves to their followers and fans. It has now diversified to be used for music streaming and other “real-life” (ie, not computer-game) fanbases.

Why youth use it: Twitch creates community. Not only is the streamer demonstrating content, they actively engage with comments that come through and due to the live nature of their stream, they can react in real time to their communities.

What the risks are: Twitch is moderated, but with a wealth of live content, the moderators can only do so much. As with any online platform with comments, there are often trolls and bullies. Twitch streamers try to make their money on the platform, so viewers will regularly be encouraged to pay to unlock certain extra levels of access to their favourite streamers.

Additionally, the content streamed may be computer games with mature themes and violent and suggestive content. Most troubling is that there have been cases of suicides live-streamed on the platform.

Some advice you might give:

The greatest draw to Twitch is the community it offers more than the computer game streams it provides. You might want to talk to your youth who are using Twitch about what they are getting from that online community, and if there are aspects that they aren’t receiving in Christian community, there may be the chance to address it.

A Verse that can help:

“Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things; and give me live in your ways” Psalm 119:37

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Tumblr

Tumblr is a micro-blogging platform with a large focus on gifs and images. It's much like Instagram, but with more space to annotate images with text.

Why youth use it: Where teenage boys are more likely to use Twitch, Teenage girls are the most likely to use Tumblr. One of the appeals is how easy it is to post using the mobile app. Tumblr uses tags to sort its vast content. This allows users to follow their interests and find a group of like-minded people.

What the risks are: Tumblr blogs are hard to maintain privacy with. The settings are such that the platform is public by default. Users should be aware that any posts can be viewed by anyone and not to use identifying content. More concerning is the large amount of pornographic images that are accessible though the site. Even if users aren't seeking such content out, they may stumble across it: if someone they "follow" posts it, it will automatically pop up in the user's feed. One study showed that a third of Tumblr images were objectifying. - Wick M, Harriger J. *A content analysis of thinspiration images and text posts on Tumblr. Body Image. 2018;24:13-16. doi:10.1016/j.bodyim.2017.11.005*

Like Tik Tok and Instagram, there has been research to show that body image issues are exacerbated by "thinspiration" Tumblr [blogs](#).

Some advice you might give:

Similar to Twitch's appeal to teenage boys, Tumblr provides users an online community of like-minded people. But, like Twitch, this community comes with a dark underbelly. Ask your youth how their needs for community can be better met by your church.

A Verse that can help:

Knowing the dangers and lure of pornography, it would be wise to avoid a platform which makes it easy to access. Similarly, if thinspiration content is impacting body image issues, then it is better to avoid the platform altogether.

And if your **eye causes you to sin**, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be thrown into the fire of hell. Matthew 18:19

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YouTube

Why youth use it:

The same reason that adults use it: YouTube offers trillions of hours of free entertainment on any topic imaginable. 500 hours of content is being uploaded every [minute](#).

What the risks are: Like any unregulated platform, the content varies widely in quality and in appropriateness. YouTube does its best from discouraging content that isn't "family friendly" by "demonetising" or cutting off ads and ad-revenue from any channel or video which its algorithm deems inappropriate. The only problem is – the censorship is only as powerful as the algorithm can be. There just aren't enough people on staff at YouTube to possibly watch every video.

This leads to all sorts of content, but particularly concerning for young teens and children is the content which pretends to be for children – and might even at first glance look like a kids' cartoon featuring Peppa Pig or Thomas the Tank Engine – but actually is a smokescreen for content of a disturbing or even sexual nature. YouTube Kids was supposed to mitigate this somewhat, but there are still reports of content falling through the cracks.

Some advice you might give: For very young children, it's best that parents are watching alongside their children to make sure the content is appropriate.

Additionally, turning off the "autoplay" feature protects users from going down the "YouTube Rabbit Hole" and accessing information they weren't expecting.

For youth, the question to ask might be how many hours have they been spending on YouTube and has it been beneficial for their relationships and their spiritual walk?

A Verse that can help:

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Philippians 4:8

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