 Reading time: 7 min.

*Communication involves several components that we need to seriously consider: first of all, the **sender** who encodes the **message** by choosing the **medium** through which the message is relayed from the sender to the receiver. The **receiver**, in turn, analyses the message in his context and interprets it in ways both intended and unintended by the sender. Finally, the **feedback** indicates how well the message was received. Any attempt to communicate Christ today starts from understanding the mindset of today's generation of young people. This short essay will focus on this.*

A generation is a group that could be identified by their year of birth and significant events that shape their personality, values, expectations, behavioural qualities, and motivational skills. Sociologists call **theBaby Boomer** generation those born between 1943 and 1960. **The Generation X** are those born between 1961 and 1979. **Millennials** (also called **Generation Y**) are those born between 1980 and 2000. The **Generation Z** are those born after 2000.

The **senders** are the Salesian pastor-educators and youth ministers. The **receivers** are the youth and young adults today who are mainly millennials and Generation Z. Hence, this presentation will focus on understanding their mindset in order to discover ways of communicating to them our **message**, Jesus Christ. We cannot close our eyes to the reality of the 'digital divide', which reflects the huge and growing social inequality between those who have easy access to the Internet and those who do not, especially many young people. Thus, an important response to this essay is to compare what is presented here with the reader's own context.

THE MILLENNIALS

Today millennials are about 41-20 years old. They learnt using technology and became dependent on it at an earlier age than other previous generations. Younger millennials could not even imagine life without smartphones and internet. They belong to a generation that is so connected through social media. They live in an age when one post could reach countless peoples across linguistic, cultural and geographic barriers. This has created in them the desire to have all the information they want that will provide instant answers and instant feedback.

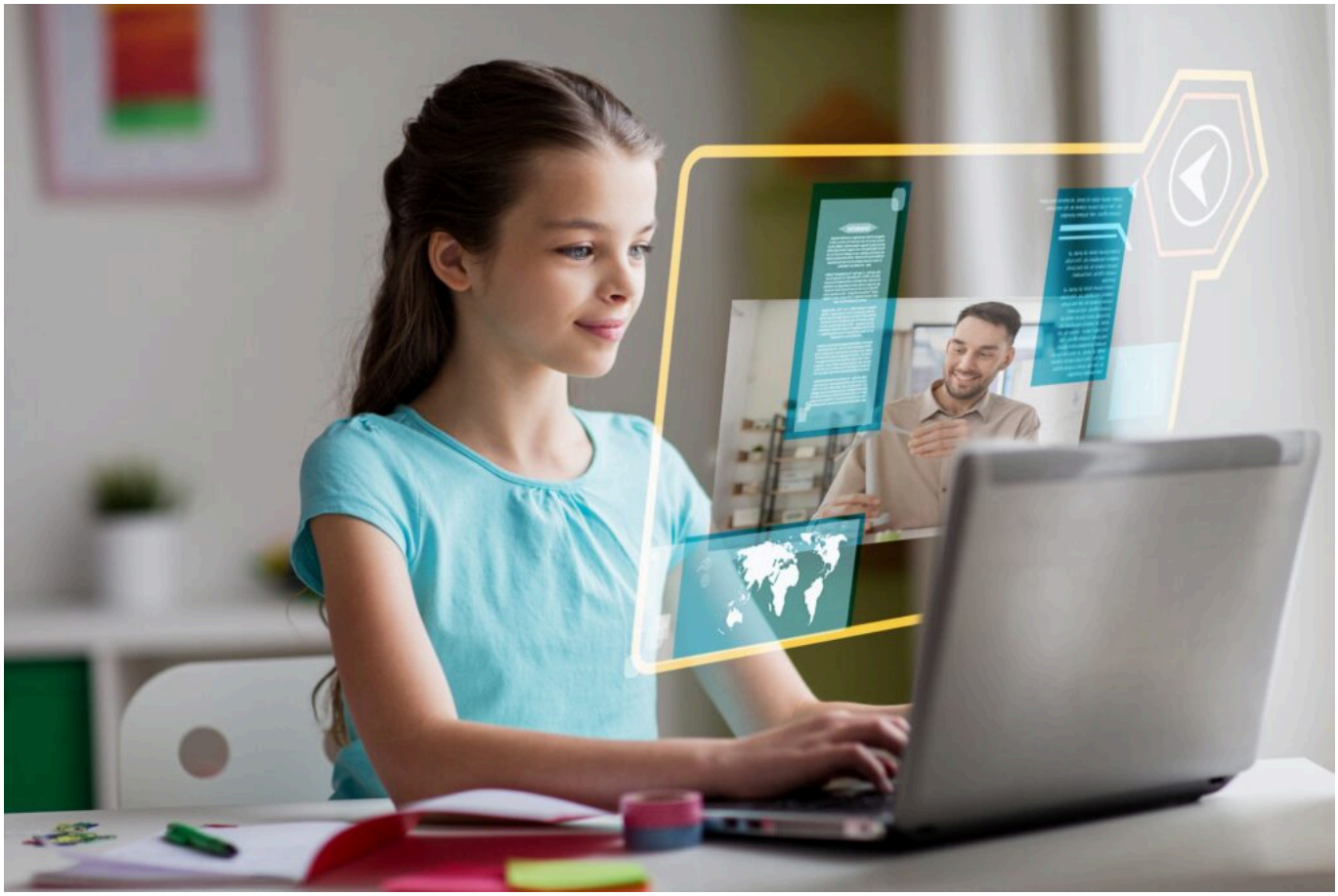
Millennials want to be involved by being given the opportunity to share their

thoughts because they like to share ideas and choose the best one. They want to be part of the conversation by listening and speaking. When their opinions are listened to, they feel valued and will be ready commit themselves to something they feel part of. Millennials want their faith to be holistically integrated into their life, including technology.

Millennials are the app generation. Apps have become a means for them to communicate, process information, purchase goods or even read Scriptures and pray. They are tech savvy who use apps up to two hours a day. They want to be discovered. They are optimistic and desire to share, with preference to communicate with texts. They are focused on the ‘now’ but tend to be idealistic.

THE GENERATION Z

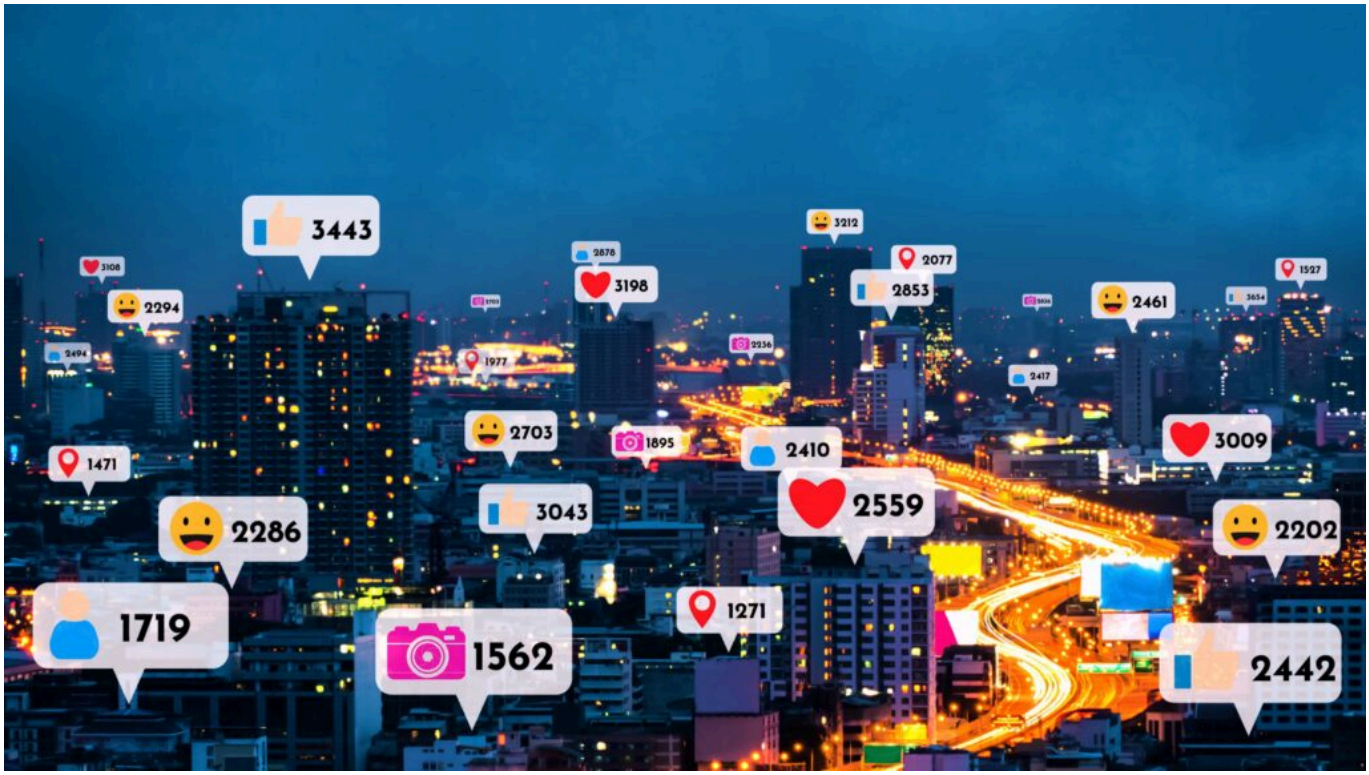
Today those of the Generation Z are those who are 21 years old and younger. They are the first who have the internet readily available to them. They are digital natives because they have been exposed to the internet, social networks and mobile systems from earliest age. They use social sites to socialize without distinguishing friends they meet on-line and friends in the physical world. For them, the virtual world is as real as the physical world. They are always connected; for them there is no offline anymore. They are vigorous contributors and high consumers of on-line content. They prefer on-line social sites to communicate and interact with people especially using images.



They prefer to participate and remain connected via technology at their fingertips. They are creative, realistic and focused on the future. The have a broad awareness about important issues and events and have a great desire to search for the truth. But they want to choose and discover the truth for themselves. In fact, the search for truth is at the centre of their characteristic behaviour and consumption patterns.

Those of the Generation Z use the social media networks like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, Tiktok, Tumblr to obtain information about the social concerns, health and nutrition, spirituality, etc. But they are also heavy users of anonymous social media platforms like Snapchat, Secret, Whisper, where any incriminating images disappear almost instantly. With vast amount of information at their disposal, they are more pragmatic and less idealistic than the millennials. Their high on-line reliance could risk to too much sharing of personal information in the virtual world and to internet addiction. Their character is moulded by what they post about themselves on-line and what others post and assess about them. A great majority of them in all continents declare themselves to be religious but not necessarily

identifying themselves to a religion: they believe without belonging, others belong without believing. Those who claim not to belong to any specific religion normally come from families with no religious faith or who are lukewarm Christians. They are much less religious than the millennials.



THE SOCIAL MEDIA

It is true that the social media could in some way hinder authentic interpersonal relationships. These could also be used as a platform to distribution and access to materials that could cause moral, social and spiritual harm. The truth of the matter is that any medium has the potential to be used for evil. It is true that the social media has been used, for example, to globalise populism and to help spark revolutions like the Arab Spring and the yellow vest protests in France.

Yet, the social media has also allowed people to stay connected globally, empower each of us to update each other what is happening in our lives, share powerful ideas, and invite people to know Jesus Christ. The social media have become our virtual courtyard. Therefore, it is important that we move from demonising the medium, to educating young people to its proper use and to developing its

potentials to evangelise.

COMMUNICATING CHRIST

Credible witness is an important condition for communicating Christ. In the virtual world, witness implies **visibility** (we visibly manifest our Catholic identity), **truth** (we ensure that we are bearers of the truth and not of fake news) and **credibility** (the images we present reinforce the message we want to communicate). Faith needs to be presented to millennials and to the Generation Z in new and engaging ways. This, in turn, will open possibilities for them to share their faith with their peers. We should resist the temptation to bombard the social media with religious messages and images. This will actually drive away a big number of young people.

Initial proclamation is not about Christian doctrines to be taught. The adjective 'initial' is not to be understood in a strictly linear or chronological sense as being the first moment of proclamation because it actually impoverishes its richness. Rather, it is 'initial' in the sense that the term *arché* was understood by ancient Greek philosophers as the principle or the fundamental element from which everything has its origin, or that from which all things are formed. It is the foundation for a new evangelisation and of the whole process of evangelisation.

Initial proclamation is about fostering an overwhelming and exhilarating experience which is capable of stirring up the desire to search the truth and an interest in the person of Jesus. This, ultimately, leads to an initial adhesion to Him, or the revitalisation of faith in Him. Initial proclamation is that spark that leads to conversion. This choice for Christ is the **feedback** to the **message**. It is then followed by the process of evangelisation through catechumenate and systematic catechesis. Without initial proclamation that brings about a personal option for Christ, any effort to evangelise will be sterile. Thus, the challenge for every Salesian pastor-educator, for every youth minister, of every missionary disciple is not making content for the social media. This is a temptation that has to be resisted strongly. The challenge is to train and accompany millennials and Generation Z themselves so that they can create faith-based content for themselves and their peers on the social media that can stir interest in knowing the person of Jesus Christ. Indeed, today the social media is a privileged forum to communicate Christ to young people. It is up to each of us to use it with missionary creativity!

TODAY'S YOUTH VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

New insights from a missionary perspective

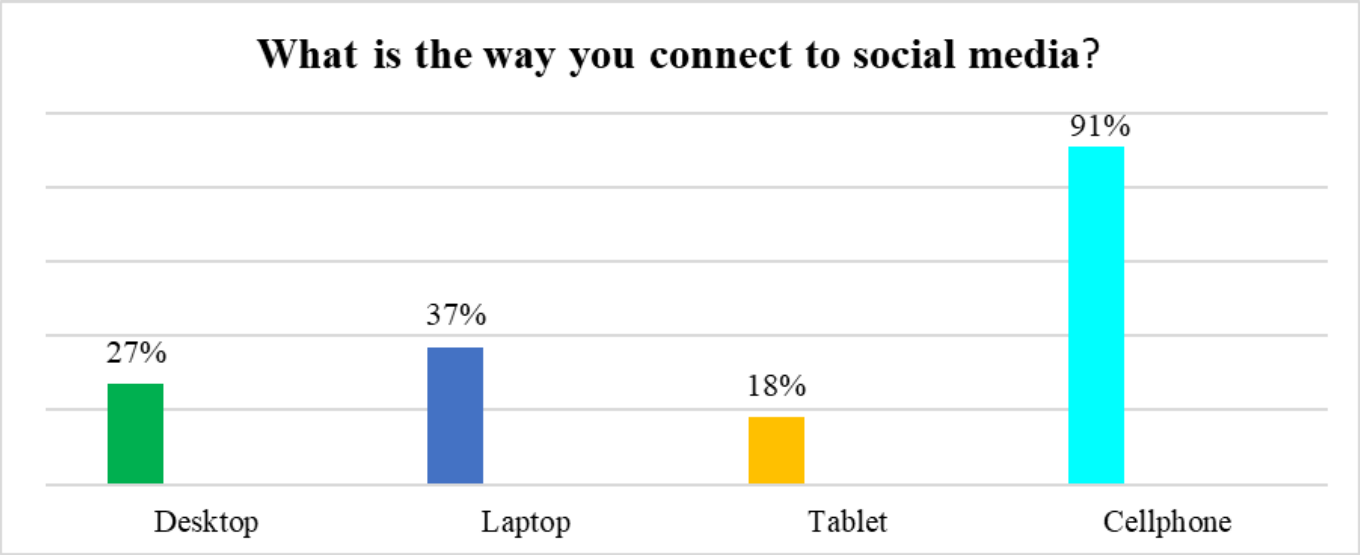
Survey conducted by Juan Carlos Montenegro and Fr Alejandro Rodriguez sdb, San Francisco Province (SUO), USA.

Jesus' command to 'Go and make disciples' (Matt 28:19) continues to resound to us today. Our love for Christ challenges us to go beyond our boundaries and reach out to people particularly young people of our society today. To do this we need to see reality form their perspective, understand how they process information, and how this information influences their behaviour. Nonetheless, our primary Salesian mission as educators-evangelizers to bring them closer to Christ and Christ to them. Generational differences could be a challenge that does not help us transition from being "fully" present in this new courtyard where the young people have built their own language, they have developed their own rules, and they have created new different expressions and kind of significative relationships. This new playground is a virtual world where young people today live, interact, dream, engage, and suffer. The love and missionary seal of Don Bosco move us to embrace this new reality with hope, faith, and pastoral charity.

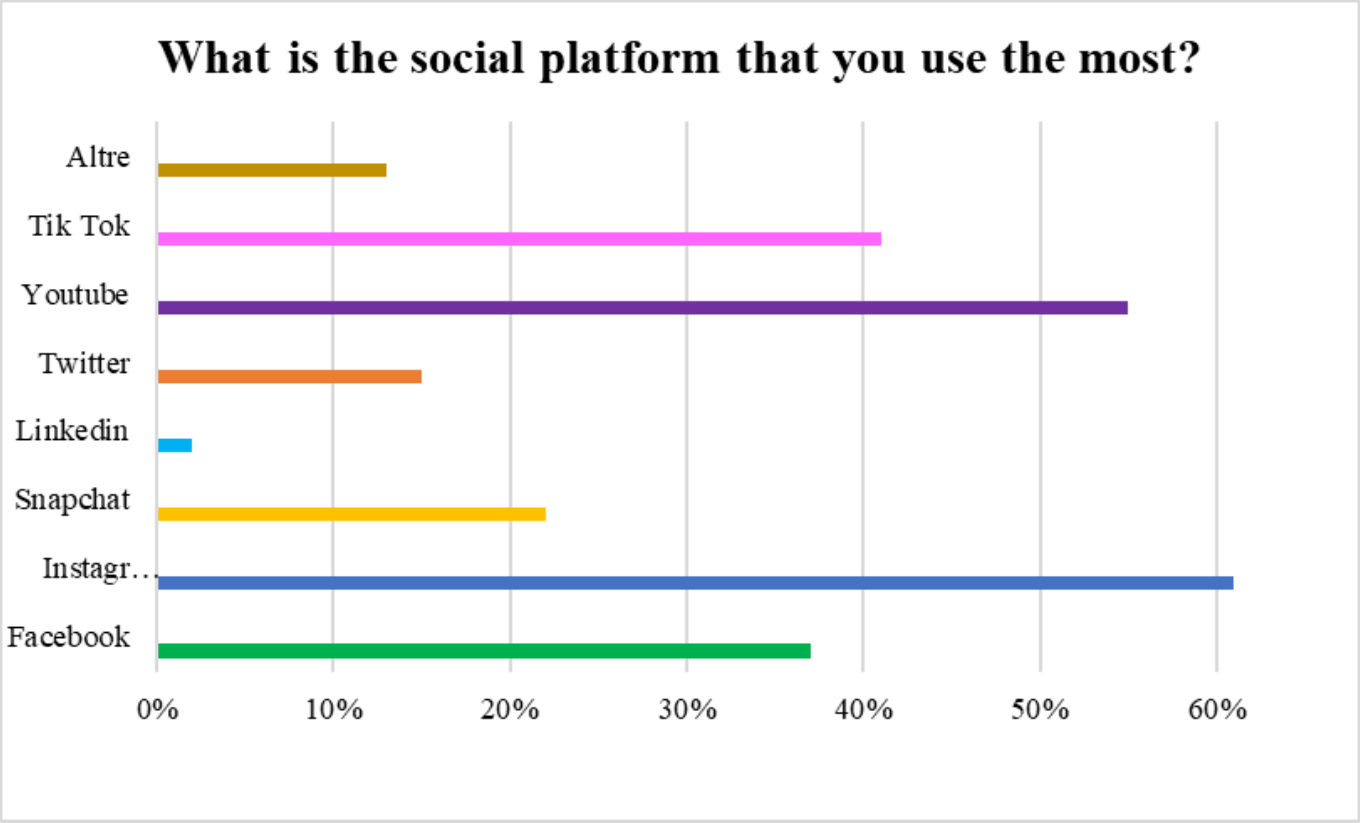
If we don't know the new reality the youth is facing in the virtual world, our proposal and accompaniment as educators-evangelizers will be insignificant and irrelevant. *The Salesian Youth Ministry Frame of Reference (2015)* calls us to be present in the "new courtyard". Now more than ever, we need to innovate and to adapt our Salesian style of being present among the young.
To understand what's happening in this new virtual courtyard, the Missions Sector conducted an online survey at the Congregational level seeking to understand our young people, what they think, what they do, what they expect regarding the contents, possibilities and the use of the social media. The online survey in 6 languages involved 1,731 young people of our Salesian educative-pastoral communities who are between 13 to 18 years old from 37 countries and 6 different continents. This is important to keep in mind because the responses from young people who are not from the Salesian environment may differ.

Key findings:
• It is known that the greater use of the Internet is associated with a decline in the participants' communication with members in the household, a decline in the size of their social circle, and an increase in their depression and loneliness. These are important topics to keep in mind regarding accompaniment in our pastoral planning.
• 91% of our young people use mobile phones to access to the social media. These devices are associated with behavioural problems and even possible health problems. Connectivity among the 75% of the sample is more than 6 hours per week but may be over 20 hours in some cases. The connectivity to the internet has

a lot of implications, like the shift of social skills development, relationships, knowledge, etc.



• The youth interviewed perceive online bullying, paedophilia, fake news, predators, and hackers as the biggest threat in the use of the social media. While 26.40% of our young people affirm that they have been bullied.
• Due to lack of supervision and/or formation and accompaniment young people are exposed to online adult content; the most urgent educative presence of adults starts with kids at the age of 11-13 years old because is the moment when, according to the survey, they are most vulnerable to surf on webpages with adult content.
• In regard to our presence with religious content, 72.56% of the young people who took this survey have been exposed to some type of religious content. 47.72% believe that the internet helps to develop their relationship with God.
• Our youth visit websites that are related to videos -music, games, tutorials, etc. The 88% of the sample prefer video as the type of content.
• Young people prefer WhatsApp (64 %), Instagram (61 %), Youtube (41%), Tik Tok or Facebook (37%), and Messenger (33 %). This information helps us to improve our ways of communication with young because adults may spend a lot of effort to be present in platforms where the young are not present. Maybe our channels for communication must be Facebook for parents, and Instagram for our young people.



This survey is a powerful reminder which challenges us educators and evangelizers of the young to be present among our young people in a relevant and significant way in the social media.