

Towards Promoting Youth Leadership Development in the Digital Era

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Abstract

The paper explored youth leadership development within the context of the rapidly evolving digital technologies and its attendant unprecedented impact on individuals, organizations and economies. Conceived as the “digital natives”, young people connect and access digital platforms to socialize, obtain information and seek entertainment regularly. The central theme of this paper is that integration of emerging and frontier technologies in youth development programmes creates opportunities to disseminate and scale up technological solutions that produce healthy youth with potential to contribute towards community betterment. Young people are reflections of the future of every society. Relying on descriptive method, it is established that the paradoxical nature of the cyber space provides prospects for social development but exposes youth to risks. Regardless of young people becoming digital being, hardly can they engage in independent thinking as they suffer deficit of rationality and responsibility on account of their addiction to internet. Based on this, it is suggested that policy makers sponsor digital literacy programmes, empower youth voice, promote adult-youth collaborative networks, support youth-led initiatives, incorporate young people in decision-making process that affect them, encourage critical thinking to develop digital solutions to real-life problems, design proactive, innovative and inclusive programmes for youth in the society such that surfing the internet would not make the youth to compromise their privacy, safety and integrity; and strengthen the roles of prime enablers of youth with a view to producing functional and responsible generation that contribute to strategic planning and governance process.

Keywords: Youth, Leadership, Digital Technology, Cyberspace, Mobile Devices

Introduction

The social viability of the emerging youth is vital in activities that put the nation on the path of efficient development. The forces of globalization and technological innovation have influenced the thoughts, behaviours and aspirations of teenagers in many countries such that popularization of smartphones and electronic devices facilitate worldwide connectivity among individuals and organisations. It was in this connection that Gorodova et al. (2023)

stress the importance of digital competence in youth political engagement and leadership development activities. The fast-changing development has transformed people's daily lives and businesses on account of increased connectivity and information sharing among individuals. Expectedly, social media platforms have increased youth engagement in Malaysian politics owing global interconnectedness and seamless interactivity (Abdullahi et al., 2021a). A study by Abdullah et al. (2021b) revealed positive relationship between YouTube usage and youth netizens' behaviour in Malaysian context. Besides, a study conducted by Yugay (2023) on digital culture indicated that development of digital literacy among young people enhances youth's successful adaptation to virtual realities and prompt resolution of seemingly challenging leadership tasks. In recognition of the relevance of digital literacy in the contemporary era, Reddy et al. (2023) stress the extent at which organizations make concerted efforts to instill digital skills into the future workforce. Succinctly, digital technology has improved "operational efficiency" of organizations in an irreversible way (Cortellazzo et al., 2019; 1).

Regardless of geographical locations, Lin & Zizek (2020) asserts that digital media have infinitely permeated the life of adolescents in industrialized and less developed societies. Youth demonstrated a dramatic change in their lifestyles owing to exposure and access to internet. With the rapid development of the internet, youth are conscious of the potential of digital transformation to support them in learning and gaining new skills. To Petrosyan (2023), the worldwide access to the internet is about 64.4 per cent with the Northern Europe having the highest number of internet users totaling 97 per cent. With regard to demographic analysis of internet use, the population of young people has the highest internet penetration rate with over 75 per cent across the globe. As Nuryadi and Widiatmaka (2023; p. 215) rightly argue, youth are "digital natives" who cannot be separated from digital technology.

With the velocity of change, exposure to digital networks could generate unique and opposite responses among various individuals. Increasingly recognized as new development, digital transformations have potential benefits and harms on youth wellbeing and juvenile delinquency respectively. Excessive use of digital technologies distract youth from engaging in useful and rewarding activities that could make them discover their hidden talents. Currently, youth feel more comfortable and confident to engage in greater use of online media to access pornographic information. Scholars have illustrated potential harms of overindulgence in digital technologies to include anxiety, depression, social comparison, harassment, obesity, pain, insomnia as well as negative impacts on psychological wellbeing of adolescents (Cullen et al., 2024; Weigle & Shafi, 2024). As Davis & Goldfield (2024) remind us, distressed youth may be vulnerable to poor mental health owing to excessive digital technological use. The lukewarm attitude of political leadership coupled with inadequate investment in digital skills and literacy increases vulnerability of youth to online risks and mismanagement of their data (Wong et al., 2021; p. 18).

With the opportunities provided by access to global evolving digital behaviours, youth can unleash their potential for development initiatives, create desirable change and become partners in nation building. Conscious of this reality, a number of countries designed and developed youth-driven programmes aimed at providing the young generations with adequate knowledge, necessary skills and capacity to become productive citizens and contribute effectively to the society. Some of these youth leadership programmes are

structured to prepare youth for future challenges, and transit to adulthood with integrity and maturity.

Of what relevance is digital technology to youth leadership development? Are youth-adult collaborative efforts necessary in the contemporary digitally connected world? How does community support strengthen youth leadership development in digital globalisation? In the digital era, young people can utilize cyberspace to encourage participation in community services and cultural activities without any expectation of rewards, and caring for the welfare of less privileged expecting nothing in return for services rendered. From the prism of social responsibilities, young people leverage information technology to seek knowledge, generate ideas, learn new skills, create values, and take on new challenge with a view to making positive impact in the society. The exponential advance and corresponding increase in youth activities ranging from creating awareness, advocacy to active engagement in decision-making process is an indication that the world is undergoing radical transformation.

Theoretical Framework

Adolescent development is a maturation period characterized by exposure of young people to prosocial behaviours, societal influences, risky adventures, and technological advancement. Digital era offers opportunities for creative and innovative youth to become the best in their circle of influence. Hence, this paper adopts Radical Change theory which explains the noticeable transformation and attendant development in human behaviour as a direct result of connectivity, interactivity and access to digital technology (Dresang, 1999; 2005; Koh, 2015). Developed in the 1990s by Eliza Dresang, the perspective analyses youth growth and development especially on matters relating to connecting and gaining superior information about different spheres of life namely education, science, politics, culture, technology and philosophy. The technological innovation improves youth competence and avail them the opportunity to make informed decision on groundbreaking innovation and creativity.

Previous study on youth development in digital era utilized Cyber-developmental framework which views individual behaviour as perpetually changing across a spectrum of adaptive outcomes and maladaptive patterns (Stavropoulos et al., 2021). Personal motives of accessing the cyber space determines whether the outcome is beneficial or otherwise to every internet user. The adaptive digital media usage promotes individual achievement of developmental tasks such as digital literacy, digital acculturation and digital resilience. This particular mode strengthens greater flexibility and improves confidence in their social responsibilities and leadership activities. In contrast, maladaptive consequence of surfing internet has potential to provide at-risk youth with the opportunity to indulge in such morally defective habits as spreading fake news, online gambling and immoral sexual behaviours. Young individuals in this category are fond of exhibiting illicit acts towards other members of the society.

Given the insatiable desires by young people to learn, update knowledge, gain experience, create new ideas and socialize with peers across the globe, the suitability of this theory is underscored by the fact that digital environment nurtures youth capabilities to widen their knowledge horizon, expand social networks and proffer appropriate solutions to identifiable problems in the society. In any area of human endeavour, competence entails a combination of knowledge, skills and an appropriate mentality peculiar to certain procedures and activities in a specialized field (Mihai & Cretu, 2019; p. 68).

Radical Change theory applies digital age principles to explain both information resources and information behaviours (Dresang, 2005; p. 180). Interestingly, the world has become more interactive and gradually connected through digital networks. In the growing digital world, the theory discusses the changes in the behaviour of adolescents as they connect with different categories of people, institutions and private sectors to improve their comprehension of digital globalisation. The applicability of the theory is such that community support provides safe environment and conducive platform for youth participation in leadership development.

Yeoh (2023) considers youth as being passionate and curious to get involved in politics and decision-making process. Imbued with wealth of experience, supportive adults are naturally expected to develop youth information-seeking behaviour in a digital environment to eschew prevalence of questionable attitudes capable of leading them on the road to ruins. Only when youth-oriented programmes are designed to enable young members build self-confidence; unleash their endowed potential; and properly guided to appreciate the necessity of transformation can radical change become actualized in any society.

Youth Literacy in the Digitalized World

Relevance of knowledge in the digital age cannot be overemphasized given the development of individual and social progress in a contemporary world of global interconnectedness. Digital revolution and progressive use of internet have significantly influenced young people's learning patterns, lifestyles, identities, and public engagement. As a channel for socialization, information and entertainment, youth are often engaged in digital media for several hours to satisfy their individual cravings or group interests. According to Hale et al. (2016), Information and Communication Technology (ICT) usage is pervasive among contemporary youth, with about 95% of youth ages 12-17 years reporting use of the internet. Frequent access to digital technologies and social media by young people exacerbates feelings of anxiety, restlessness and cyber bullying (OECD, 2018). Unfortunately, adolescents who use social media to overcome deficits in social competence may benefit less from its use (Romer, 2016).

Young people are called "digital natives" because of their early acquaintance and continuous connectivity to internet. Stavropoulos et al. (2021) describe digital natives as those who have early experience with technology, and distinguish them from "digital immigrants" (Prensky, 2009) who were exposed to technological gadgets in adulthood. On regular basis, youth access internet with the aid of computers and mobile devices to obtain sensitive information and strategic skills requiring competencies that are largely still not being taught in schools (Martinovic et al., 2018). Due to the widespread use of digital media among the youth, it is important to understand its impact on their daily social practices and patterns of interactions with acquaintances. As of April 2023, a GWI survey outlines reasons behind youth frequent access to internet.

Table 1

S/N	16-24 Years	25-34 Years
1	Finding information	Finding information
2	Contact friends and family	Contact friends and family
3	Watch videos and shows	Watch videos and shows
4	Listen to music	Follow news and events
5	Education and study	Learn how to do things
6	Find new ideas	Find new ideas
7	Learn how to do things	Listen to music
8	Follow news and events	Research Brands
9	Fill spare time and browsing	Fill spare time and browsing
10	Gambling	Education and study

Source: waresocial.com

As the table above indicates, young people stay in cyberspace to accord priority to what they considered most important to them. It is common to find young people being unduly influenced by their varying preferences, priorities and orientations. Deep appreciation of myriads of challenges confronting the society determines whether youth will demonstrate commitment towards societal transformation.

Rather than waste precious time on digital platforms to seek information on obscenities and frivolities, youth need to be guided to explore useful information that can add value to their lives and improve the wellbeing of their fellow humans in the community. Importantly, digital literacy enhances critical thinking of young people regarding active participation in electoral process and promoting responsible leadership (Handoko et al., 2023). Marin & Castaneda (2023) lend credence to this when they argue that digital literacy is a crucial competence for empowering citizenship in a digital world. A study by Setiadi et al. (2023) revealed a strong relationship between youth digital literacy and community empowerment. The society however needs to ensure that digital ethics and security are upheld so that youth can remain safe from cybercrime. Hence, integration of digital literacy among youth facilitates cultivation of innovative strategies aimed at promoting effective leadership in the society (Groenewald, 2024). At this point, caring adults are required to understand emotions of youth, and the reasons behind their involvement in a particular exercise. Policy makers and other stakeholders are obliged to collect data on youth-related behaviours to facilitate government intervention on identified social problems. Data is vital to trace the genesis, development and implications of irresistible urge of youth addiction to digital platforms.

Healthy Youth and Leadership Development

Social system comprises interconnected parts that ensure the survival, stability and maintenance of the entire whole. From childhood to adulthood, every individual is influenced by norms, values, attitudes and beliefs within the society. Remarkably, the predictors of youth, according to Nabavi et al. (2014; p. 32) include historical lineage, locality, demography, educational institutions and peers. Youth development perspective lays emphasis on structures, opportunities, and processes that positively impact adolescent development. The approach calls for providing young people with developmental experiences shown to promote leadership (Suandi, 2009; p. 11).

Youth tend to develop values of commitment, involvement, attachment and self-beliefs (Muhammed et al., 2014) in any community that guarantees appropriate support. Conscious

of the fact that youth-oriented groups are vehicle for change, the prime enablers of youth including youth worker, youth organization and youth researcher (2009) fine-tune new ways of working with adolescents in the modern era of globalization and rapid technological advancement.

The ubiquitous social networking sites equip young people with skills they need to step into a new digital reality (UNICEF, 2020). Conceived as a new paradigm for thriving society, the digital process enhances social media, affords youth the opportunities to advance their vision and accomplish their mission in future. They can facilitate positive changes in the existing programmes being executed in the community, and devise innovative ideas to improve living conditions of all and sundry.

As early adopters and active users of digital tools (ITU, 2021; Romer, 2016), the rate at which youth navigate the terrain of digital technology surpasses the capacity of adults in every society. To thrive in the digital era, youth completely use digital tools in order to define, access, understand, evaluate, create and communicate digital information (Martinovic et al., 2018; p. 2314) capable of promoting community progress. Young people however, are often underrepresented and underutilized in a number of programmes and other initiatives within the social environment (Suandi, 2009; p. 3). This is a consequence of societal prejudice which considers adolescents as problematic group that threaten relative peace and stability.

When adults demonstrate passion to nurture young people, the latter tend to perform better, encourage their colleagues to become agents of progress and make the society an arena of meaningful development. This is the outcome of an organized society that prioritizes youth affairs and pays special attention to youth-oriented policies. Complacency on the part of adults will produce a pack of adolescents trying to experiment, and assuming adult-like responsibility for socially undesirable behaviours and morally repugnant decisions. Despite being regarded as “digital natives” by virtue of their familiarity with internet, 9 out of 10 youth who lack access live in Africa or in Asia and the Pacific (ITU, 2020).

Digital divide arose from geographical variations culminating in two categories of advantaged youth pampered by technology, and disadvantaged youth living with no access to internet connection. Digitally-disadvantaged youth lack consistent and dependable access to the digital technology (UNICEF, 2020). This particular group lacks digital literacy, digital skills and broad understanding of internet connectivity owing to ecological settings, public policies, poor facilities and socio-economic conditions (Chetty et al., 2018; Gupta & Verma, 2024; Matraccia et al., 2023). The desire to get updates on social media might not appeal to adolescents in resource-deprived societies because internet accessibility is not accorded priority. The citizens rely solely on policymakers to provide essential services, protect lives and property and take care of their welfare.

Conscious of the disparities between individuals and geographical areas in their access to digital connectivity, scholars highlight strategies adopted at various times to address digital divide especially in regions with limited access so as to ensure that individuals have equal opportunities to benefit from internet facilities. These include, but not limited to, digital infrastructure development, digital training programmes, increased connectivity, digital content localization, promoting human wellbeing, corporate social responsibility, affordability, and community empowerment (Bon et al., 2024; Chetty et al., 2018; Gupta & Verma, 2024; Matraccia et al., 2023)

Absolute dependence of adolescents on “digital neighbourhoods” is related to getting appropriate and accessible content of relevant information at a point in time. Hence, precious time is spent on intensive use of information technology to learn desirable behaviour and

morally reprehensible habits. At the click of button, youth become exposed to all manners of obscenity and online marketing of unregulated products such as cigarette smoking and alcoholism as well as display of pornographic materials.

Besides, dissemination of unverified information is common to internet users in the cyber era. Hateful contents can go viral easily on Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube while authentic ones are considered less exciting to share (Yeoh, 2023). Young people are supposed to be given orientation on how to examine and verify the source and content of digital information before sharing them on social media. This might be time-consuming as sufficient period is necessary to fix youth-induced problems. The supportive roles of experienced members in the social setting are crucial in youth leadership development so as to guide youth from socially deviant behaviour; intervene to avert unpalatable consequences; rehabilitate isolated minds; inspire promising youth for greater accomplishment; integrate them into the larger society and motivate them for productivity.

With proper guidance from caring adults, young people are expected to behave in a socially constructive manner which portrays them as responsible members of the society. Youth are capable of initiating and accelerating social and behavioural change. The “digital ecology” significantly influences youth such that they become inspired through mobile networks to find answers to numerous questions bordering their minds, and devise strategies to resolve seemingly ambiguous technical issues. Integration of youth into the community decision-making body enables them to come up with appropriate suggestions that could address contemporary challenges.

The technical and social processes of integrating digital technologies and data into all areas of life as well as the resulting change that they bring about constitute digital transformations (Wong et al. (2021; p. 19). Digital transformation gives youth the chance to develop global vision, recognize opportunities, create digital business model, conduct feasibility studies and engage in profitable digital entrepreneurship without becoming a threat to the community. Once the society builds strong institutions that guarantee development of technological competence among young people, there is likelihood of achieving development strides that would complement the success earlier recorded by the prevailing leadership. As Aiyede (2021: 24-25) puts it, the rapidly changing society require the skills of collective problem solving, creativity and communication...that would enable youth transform social environment in positive ways to achieve prosperity.

In a constantly changing world, upcoming leaders need to be well-equipped with both digital and emotional agility to operate in a complex environment (Mihai & Cretu (2019; 71). The moment they adapt themselves to ICT, there is likelihood of embracing new ideas, orientations and mindset shaping their worldview. Notwithstanding their ICT knowledge, young people require more from adults to ensure healthy development. Since the youth have vision but lack appropriate channel to translate it into action, incorporation of young people into voluntary services will instill in them the socially cherished values of communal responsibility, and selflessness with a view to strengthening community progress. As the reflection for the nation’s future (Abdullah et al., 2014; p. 50), these technologically-savvy and digitally enabled generation can utilize their skills to fullest potential through what Hisa & Mohiddin (2019) called “effective youth leadership programme” considered to encourage youth decision making based on a process of discussions, agreements and consensus (Para-Gonzalez, et al., 2018).

Conclusion

Creating effective youth leaders in the digital era requires providing enabling environment that nurtures, empowers and supports young people in their efforts to positively change the society. The generational effect of the digital era is the emergence of youth leaders infused with clear thinking and determination to transform their ecological settings. As they become globally minded and locally relevant, the supportive structure would afford the youth deploy their problem-solving skills to address the needs of the society. Due to higher levels of engagement with digital platforms coupled with the desire to generate new ideas, support services must be provided by adults to enable young people have mindset to behave in a mature way, and seek to move society to greater heights.

Similarly, connecting the unconnected parts of the world will improve healthy development of youth globally. Adequate knowledge of the contemporary issues will enhance youth appreciation of the enormous tasks responsible leadership should perform at a point in time. To counter youth harmful behaviour in the 21st century regarded as the “time of youth” (Mirkamali, 2005), stakeholders need to nurture youth to become informed, confident, actualizing, dutiful, responsible and reflective citizens (Lin & Zizek, 2020).

At this point, this paper proposes a series of actionable steps aimed at enhancing youth leadership development in the digital era. These encompass developing digital communication skills, strengthening youth-led digital projects, providing resources and support to youth-driven initiatives, promoting youth voice, integrating young people into decision-making process that affect them, cultivating robust collaborative networks, giving youth opportunities to spearhead community service projects, continuous digital learning and adaptation, and encouraging creative thinking to devise digital solutions for real-world challenges. If government, policy makers, youth workers and relevant stakeholders were to implement these recommendations, it could empower young people to become effective leaders in the digital era, equipped with requisite skills, confidence and resources necessary to contribute positively towards community progress and leadership development.

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