

ENHANCING THE ROLE OF YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS IN THE DIGITAL ERA AMID THE GROWING INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND INFORMAL COMMUNITIES

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Abstract: This article examines the impact of social media and informal communities on the role of youth organizations in the context of digital transformation. Drawing on a review of domestic and international studies, it argues that the rapid expansion of digital platforms has fundamentally reshaped the ways young people connect, participate in society, and construct their identities, thereby creating a form of *soft competition* between traditional youth organizations and online communities. While these developments have expanded opportunities for youth engagement, they have also generated significant challenges, including the erosion of social capital, declining effectiveness of political and civic education, the proliferation of short-term forms of participation, and the fragmentation of shared values. In response, the article proposes several strategic directions to strengthen the adaptive capacity of youth organizations, including the development of hybrid digital–physical ecosystems, the renewal of communication strategies and organizational practices, the promotion of digital citizenship education, the expansion of collaboration with diverse social actors, and the improvement of governance through flexible, youth-centered approaches. These measures are expected to reinforce the role of youth organizations in the evolving digital society.

Keywords: youth organizations; social media; informal communities; digital transformation; Generation Z; digital citizenship.

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the rapid development of the Internet, social media, artificial intelligence, and digital platforms has fundamentally transformed the ways young people communicate, learn, work, and participate in social life worldwide. Digital space is no longer merely a channel for information exchange; it has become a new social infrastructure where young people establish relationships, construct personal

identities, share values, and engage in diverse community activities. In particular, the emergence of online communities organized around shared interests, professions, or common concerns has significantly expanded opportunities for social connection and participation while simultaneously reshaping the role of traditional social institutions (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Cortés-Ramos et al., 2021).

In Vietnam, the national digital transformation agenda, together with the widespread adoption of the Internet and smartphones, has enabled social media to become one of the primary spaces for youth interaction. Recent reports indicate that Vietnam ranks among the countries with the highest rates of Internet and social media usage in the region, with individuals aged 16–24 representing the most active user group (We Are Social & DataReportal, 2025). For Generation Z, online environments are not only spaces for entertainment but also platforms for learning, job seeking, building social networks, and participating in community activities (Hội Sinh viên Việt Nam, 2023; Lê Đình Hải & Đỗ Thị Nụ, 2025). The rapid growth of informal communities on Facebook, TikTok, Discord, LinkedIn, and other digital platforms has fostered new forms of social engagement characterized by flexibility, decentralization, and voluntary participation (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Barati, 2023).

Against this backdrop, traditional youth organizations—particularly the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union and the Vietnam Youth Federation—are facing increasing demands for institutional innovation. While these organizations have historically played central roles in political education, youth mobilization, and community engagement, they now compete with a wide range of digitally mediated communities for the attention, participation, and commitment of young people. This competition is not one of direct confrontation but rather of attracting sustained engagement and responding effectively to the increasingly diverse needs and expectations of youth (Mạnh Cường, 2025; Anh Thơ, 2023). Consequently, there is a pressing need to reassess the roles, organizational models, and adaptive capacities of youth organizations in the digital era.

Recent scholarship has extensively examined the influence of social media on youth behavior, political participation, civic engagement, media literacy, and the emergence of online communities (Barati, 2023; Hassoun et al., 2023; Saxena, 2023; Ushanova et al., 2021). Other studies have explored the transformation of youth work in the context of digitalization (Alruthaya et al., 2021). Nevertheless, existing research has largely addressed these issues separately, with limited attention given to the interrelationship between the rise of social media, the expansion of informal communities, and the changing role of youth organizations from the perspectives of institutional adaptation and social capital. In the Vietnamese context, systematic analyses of the shift from traditional youth organizations toward digital communities, as well as its implications for youth work and mass organizations, remain relatively scarce.

Addressing this research gap, the present study analyzes changes in youth social participation under the influence of social media and informal communities, evaluates the challenges confronting traditional youth organizations, and proposes strategic directions to enhance their adaptive capacity and social role in the digital era. Drawing on the theoretical perspectives of social capital, connective action, and institutional adaptation, the article contributes to the literature on the transformation of youth organizations in digital societies while offering policy implications for the renewal of youth work in contemporary Vietnam.

2. Social Media, Informal Communities, and the Transformation of Youth Participation in the Digital Era

2.1. Changing Patterns of Youth Participation in the Digital Era

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed the social behavior of young people worldwide. Unlike previous generations, Generation Z has grown up with the Internet, smartphones, and social media, and is therefore widely regarded as a generation of "digital natives." For this generation, digital space is no longer merely a communication tool but an integral part of everyday social life, where learning, work, entertainment, identity formation, and community engagement occur simultaneously (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Alruthaya et al., 2021). Consequently, the

ways in which young people establish social relationships and participate in collective activities have undergone profound changes.

International studies indicate that young people increasingly prefer flexible forms of participation that emphasize autonomy and self-determination rather than hierarchical organizational structures. Anderson and Jiang (2018) found that the vast majority of American teenagers use social media as their primary communication environment, with nearly half reporting that they are "online almost constantly." As Internet access has become ubiquitous, digital platforms have evolved into the primary spaces through which young people access information, maintain social relationships, and express personal opinions. This trend has been consistently confirmed by more recent studies, which demonstrate that digital platforms now play a central role in shaping the identities, values, and social behaviors of younger generations (Hassoun et al., 2023; Deloitte, 2025).

A defining characteristic of Generation Z is the increasing personalization of social participation. Rather than maintaining long-term commitment to a single organization, young people tend to engage selectively in activities that align with their personal interests, competencies, and immediate needs. Alruthaya, Nguyen, and Lokuge (2021) argue that digital environments facilitate more flexible models of learning, communication, and collaboration, allowing young people to independently determine the content, timing, and forms of their participation. This reflects a broader transition from obligation-based participation toward participation motivated by personal interests and individual values (Deloitte, 2025).

These developments have also reshaped young people's understanding of community. Whereas social belonging was traditionally established through formal institutions such as schools, youth organizations, and civic associations, social ties are increasingly formed around shared interests, professional aspirations, or common goals within digital environments. Young people can simultaneously participate in multiple online communities with varying degrees of commitment, free from the structural constraints of traditional organizations. The ability to establish connections rapidly,

expand social networks, and adjust participation flexibly has become a major source of attraction for digital communities (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Barati, 2023).

In Vietnam, these trends have accelerated alongside the country's national digital transformation. According to the Digital 2025: Vietnam report published by We Are Social and DataReportal, more than three-quarters of the Vietnamese population use the Internet and social media, with individuals aged 16–24 representing the most active user group. Digital platforms have become essential spaces where young people seek information, pursue education, build professional networks, develop personal brands, and engage in various forms of civic participation (We Are Social & DataReportal, 2025). Surveys conducted by the Vietnam Students' Association similarly indicate that social media has become an indispensable medium for learning, communication, and student activities (Hội Sinh viên Việt Nam, 2023).

These developments suggest that changing patterns of youth participation are not merely technological consequences but reflect a broader restructuring of social relationships in the digital era. Young people increasingly favor open, flexible, and voluntary forms of participation, while their attachment to traditional institutions has gradually weakened. This transformation has created favorable conditions for the emergence of new forms of digital communities and simultaneously poses significant challenges for youth organizations seeking to maintain their capacity to mobilize, guide, and empower younger generations (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Trần Quang Thái, 2023).

2.2. Social Media and the Emergence of Informal Communities

The widespread adoption of social media has accelerated the rapid emergence of informal communities within digital environments. Unlike traditional social organizations, which are established through formal structures, institutional regulations, and clearly defined membership, online communities are primarily formed through voluntary connections among individuals who share common interests, professions, values, or concerns. Characterized by openness, flexibility, and low participation costs,

these communities have become increasingly attractive forms of social organization for young people (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Barati, 2023).

Research on digital communication suggests that social media functions not merely as a channel for information exchange but also as a new social infrastructure through which individuals establish networks, share knowledge, collaborate, and mobilize community resources (Cortés-Ramos et al., 2021; Barati, 2023). Through platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, Discord, LinkedIn, and Reddit, young people can easily participate in study groups, professional communities, content creation networks, volunteer initiatives, and entrepreneurial ecosystems without being constrained by geographical boundaries, fixed schedules, or rigid organizational structures. Consequently, digital communities have substantially expanded opportunities for youth participation beyond those offered by conventional organizations (Deloitte, 2025; Ushanova et al., 2021).

One defining feature of informal communities is their decentralized governance. Rather than operating through hierarchical administrative structures, most online communities rely on horizontal interactions among members. Leadership typically emerges through expertise, credibility, and active contribution rather than through formally appointed positions. Such decentralized structures foster open communication, encourage creativity, and promote greater individual initiative among participants (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

Many scholars argue that the proliferation of online communities has fundamentally transformed patterns of youth civic engagement. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) introduced the concept of connective action to explain digitally networked forms of collective action, in which individual participation depends less on intermediary organizations and more on direct connections facilitated by digital platforms. Under this model, individuals are able to determine their own level of involvement, disseminate information, or initiate collective activities without relying on centralized organizational coordination. This perspective helps explain why numerous social campaigns, volunteer initiatives, and environmental movements have spread rapidly through online networks

without being organized by traditional institutions (Barati, 2023; Cortés-Ramos et al., 2021).

Despite their significant contribution to expanding opportunities for civic engagement, informal communities also present substantial challenges to conventional social institutions. The growing influence of digital networks has dispersed the mobilizing capacity of many youth organizations by providing young people with numerous alternative avenues for social interaction and personal development. Moreover, algorithm-driven content recommendations, information bubbles, and the rapid dissemination of unverified information may contribute to value fragmentation and reduce meaningful dialogue among different social groups (Hassoun et al., 2023; Lê Đình Hải & Đỗ Thị Nụ, 2025).

In Vietnam, online communities have expanded rapidly across various domains, including education, professional development, technology, entrepreneurship, content creation, volunteerism, and social activism. These communities have created new opportunities for learning, collaboration, and skills development while enabling young people to broaden their social networks and contribute to addressing societal challenges (Hội Sinh viên Việt Nam, 2023; We Are Social & DataReportal, 2025). At the same time, however, their growth has fundamentally altered the competitive environment among social institutions seeking to attract and sustain youth participation. Under these conditions, youth organizations are no longer the sole institutions responsible for community building but must instead adapt to an increasingly polycentric social ecosystem in which social media platforms and informal communities have become influential actors shaping youth behavior and civic participation (Mạnh Cường, 2025; Trần Quang Thái, 2023).

2.3. Fragmentation of Youth Identity, Values, and the Capacity for Youth Guidance in the Digital Space

Another important consequence of the growing influence of social media and informal communities is the fragmentation of youth identity formation and value systems. In the past, youth organizations played a central role in transmitting shared

values, fostering civic ideals, and cultivating a sense of collective responsibility. Today, however, young people's socialization increasingly occurs through digital platforms, where algorithms, media trends, and diverse online communities exert significant influence. While this transformation broadens young people's exposure to multiple value systems, it also weakens the coherence of their beliefs, identities, and developmental orientations (Hassoun et al., 2023; Lê Đình Hải & Đỗ Thị Nụ, 2025).

A defining characteristic of the digital environment is the emergence of echo chambers and filter bubbles, in which users are predominantly exposed to content that reinforces their existing interests and viewpoints. When information consumption is confined to like-minded communities, young people are more likely to develop selective perspectives, become less willing to engage with opposing viewpoints, and experience difficulties in cultivating critical thinking. Consequently, information fragmentation affects not only individual cognition but also undermines the development of shared values and collective responsibility within society (Hassoun et al., 2023).

Moreover, the rapid expansion of informal online communities has made youth identity formation increasingly individualized. Young people often participate simultaneously in multiple communities based on shared interests, professions, lifestyles, or social values without maintaining long-term commitment to any single organization. Although this model provides greater flexibility and broader opportunities for personal development, it also produces more fragmented and fluid social identities, making sustained attachment to collective values increasingly difficult. For many young people, identification with an online community has become more salient than affiliation with traditional social organizations (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Deloitte, 2025).

Against this backdrop, the capacity of youth organizations to provide value-based guidance faces unprecedented challenges. As social media has become the dominant source of information and digital influencers, content creators, and online communities increasingly shape youth behavior, youth organizations no longer possess an exclusive

role in guiding younger generations. Without substantial innovation in organizational practices, communication strategies, and interaction mechanisms, these organizations will face increasing difficulties in maintaining their position as institutions responsible for value formation and youth mobilization (Trần Quang Thái, 2023; Anh Thơ, 2023; Mạnh Cường, 2025). This shift has implications not only for the effectiveness of youth work but also for the accumulation of social capital and the development of social cohesion necessary for national development (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

Nevertheless, such fragmentation should not be viewed solely as a risk to be mitigated. Rather, it reflects an inherent characteristic of digital societies, where young people seek to express individual identities while participating in multiple overlapping communities (Barati, 2023; Deloitte, 2025). Consequently, the primary challenge is not to replace or compete with informal communities but to reposition youth organizations as network hubs within the broader digital social ecosystem. In this capacity, youth organizations should facilitate dialogue among diverse communities, promote shared civic values, and support young people's development as responsible digital citizens (Hassoun et al., 2023; Trần Quang Thái, 2023). By fulfilling these functions, youth organizations can move beyond their traditional educational and mobilizing roles to become key actors in strengthening social cohesion within an increasingly digitalized society (Mạnh Cường, 2025).

3. Strategies for Strengthening the Role of Youth Organizations in the Digital Era

3.1. Transforming Organizational Models toward a Youth-Centered Digital Ecosystem

The preceding analysis suggests that the principal challenge confronting youth organizations does not arise from the emergence of social media or informal communities themselves, but rather from the inability of conventional organizational models to keep pace with changing patterns of youth participation and engagement (Mạnh Cường, 2025; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Accordingly, strengthening the role of youth organizations requires more than simply incorporating digital technologies into

existing activities; it demands a comprehensive transformation toward a youth-centered digital ecosystem (Anh Thơ, 2023; Alruthaya et al., 2021).

Within this framework, digital space should be regarded as an integral component of organizational operations rather than merely a communication channel. Digital platforms should not only facilitate membership management but also provide environments where young people can learn, exchange knowledge, build networks around shared interests, develop professional competencies, and implement social initiatives (Alruthaya et al., 2021; Deloitte, 2025). Furthermore, online activities should be systematically integrated with face-to-face engagement through hybrid organizational models, ensuring continuous interaction between digital environments and real-world community life (Cortés-Ramos et al., 2021).

At the same time, youth organizations need to shift from standardized, program-based approaches toward more personalized forms of engagement. Developing specialized clubs, interest-based communities, entrepreneurship networks, research groups, digital innovation initiatives, and volunteer programs tailored to diverse needs would enable young people to participate according to their individual interests, competencies, and developmental aspirations (Deloitte, 2025; Alruthaya et al., 2021). Under such a model, youth organizations would no longer function merely as coordinators of collective campaigns but would become comprehensive platforms that support the holistic development of each individual (Mạnh Cường, 2025; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

3.2. Innovating Educational Approaches, Communication Strategies, and the Development of Digital Citizenship

Within the contemporary digital media environment, the capacity of youth organizations to guide younger generations depends not only on the content of their educational messages but also on their communication approaches and the quality of interaction they establish with young people (Trần Quang Thái, 2023; Anh Thơ, 2023). Accordingly, youth education and communication should evolve from a one-way transmission model toward a more participatory approach characterized by dialogue,

interaction, and the co-creation of content with young people themselves (Cortés-Ramos et al., 2021).

Social media platforms should be utilized as open educational spaces through which positive values are communicated in ways that resonate with the digital culture of younger generations. The use of short-form videos, podcasts, infographics, livestreams, and other interactive media formats can significantly enhance accessibility while fostering stronger emotional engagement among young audiences (Trần Quang Thái, 2023; Deloitte, 2025). At the same time, the participation of scholars, professionals, entrepreneurs, positive digital influencers, and young people themselves can enrich educational content, strengthen its credibility, and broaden the social reach of youth initiatives (Barati, 2023; Cortés-Ramos et al., 2021).

More importantly, youth education in the digital era should prioritize the development of digital citizenship competencies. Alongside political awareness and social responsibility, young people should be equipped with the ability to evaluate information critically, exercise analytical thinking, communicate effectively in digital environments, protect personal data, and behave responsibly online (Hassoun et al., 2023). These competencies constitute the essential foundations that enable young people not only to adapt successfully to digital society but also to contribute proactively to the creation of a safe, inclusive, and ethically responsible digital environment (Alruthaya et al., 2021; Hassoun et al., 2023).

3.3. Building Open Collaborative Networks to Expand the Social Influence of Youth Organizations

In an increasingly networked digital society, youth organizations cannot effectively fulfill their missions if they remain confined within traditional institutional boundaries. Consequently, organizational strategies should shift from a management-oriented mindset toward a network-oriented approach that promotes open collaboration among youth organizations, businesses, educational institutions, civil society organizations, professional communities, and diverse online communities (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Barati, 2023).

Such collaborative networks can diversify the financial, technological, intellectual, and human resources available for youth development activities. Furthermore, engagement with informal communities should not be regarded as a form of institutional competition but rather as an opportunity to broaden outreach, harness grassroots social innovation, and encourage wider youth participation in community initiatives (Cortés-Ramos et al., 2021; Mạnh Cường, 2025).

From a long-term perspective, youth organizations should gradually transform from organizers of collective campaigns into architects of comprehensive youth development ecosystems. Under this model, they would continue to provide value-based guidance while simultaneously connecting social resources to support young people's education, entrepreneurship, innovation, and participation in addressing community challenges (Anh Thơ, 2023; Mạnh Cường, 2025). This transformation is consistent with contemporary governance approaches, in which organizational effectiveness is measured not only by membership size but also by the ability to cultivate collaborative networks and generate positive social impact (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

Conclusion

The rapid expansion of social media and informal communities has fundamentally reshaped the socialization processes, patterns of civic participation, and value systems of young people. While these developments provide unprecedented opportunities for young people to expand social networks, access knowledge, and pursue personal development, they also present significant challenges for the traditional roles of youth organizations. Declining social capital, increasing difficulties in value-based guidance, and the growing prevalence of fragmented and short-term forms of civic engagement indicate that conventional organizational models must adapt to the realities of an increasingly digital society.

Drawing upon an analysis of the transformation of youth participation in digital environments and its implications for youth work, this study argues that strengthening the role of youth organizations should not be understood as competing with social

media or informal communities. Instead, youth organizations should seek to position themselves as coordinating and guiding institutions within the broader digital social ecosystem. Achieving this objective requires comprehensive transformation in organizational models, educational and communication strategies, and collaborative mechanisms with diverse social actors in order to respond more effectively to the evolving needs of younger generations.

In the long run, the effectiveness of youth organizations should be evaluated not merely by the number of members they recruit or the scale of the campaigns they organize, but by their capacity to create environments that enable young people to learn, innovate, contribute, and develop throughout their lives. By serving as hubs that connect social resources, support the holistic development of young people, and promote positive values across digital spaces, youth organizations can continue to play a pivotal role in developing future generations, strengthening social capital, and contributing to Vietnam's sustainable development in the digital era.

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