

Imago Dei Distortion as An Analytical Framework for Adolescent Identity Crisis in The Digital Age

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Abstract:

The development of social media has transformed the way adolescents construct and understand their self-identity. Previous studies have predominantly examined adolescent digital identity from psychological and sociological perspectives, particularly in relation to social validation, anxiety, and mental well-being, but have not yet been able to explain adolescent digital identity crises as an anthropological-theological issue related to the *Imago Dei*. This study aims to analyze the dynamics of adolescent digital identity from the perspective of the theology of *the Imago Dei*, identify the forms of identity distortion that emerge, and formulate their implications for Christian Religious Education. This research employs a qualitative library research approach using critical thematic analysis and conceptual analysis within an interdisciplinary framework integrating theology, developmental psychology, and digital media studies. The findings reveal that adolescent digital identity is shaped by algorithmic logic, a culture of visibility, and mechanisms of social validation that encourage the formation of performative and fragmented identities. From the perspective of *the Imago Dei*, these conditions reflect identity distortion characterized by ontological reduction, identity dislocation, and a shift in relationality from intrinsic to instrumental. These findings indicate that the identity crisis experienced by adolescents in the digital era is not merely psychosocial but also theological in nature. This study proposes the concept of “*Distortion of Imago Dei*” as a new interdisciplinary-theological framework for understanding adolescent identity crises in the digital era, while also serving as a foundation for reconstructing contextual Christian Religious Education.

Keywords:

digital identity, Imago Dei, adolescent identity crisis, Christian Religious Education, social media

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INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology over the past few decades has fundamentally transformed the way humans construct, understand, and present their identities. This change is most evident among adolescents, the digital natives who live in a world of intense interaction with social media. Various reports indicate that more than 90% of adolescents are active social media users with high daily usage rates; consequently, digital media no longer functions merely as a means of communication but also as the primary space for the formation of self-identity (Blegur, 2025). In this context, adolescents' identities are shaped through practices of self-presentation, self-image curation, and mechanisms of social recognition based on digital responses such as likes, comments, and the number of followers. Consequently, identity in the digital age is no longer rooted entirely in internal reflection but is increasingly determined by external validation that is both public and temporary.

This phenomenon marks a fundamental shift in the construction of adolescent identity. Identities that were previously relatively stable and relational are now evolving into fluid, performative forms that are constantly negotiated in the digital space. (Mokos, 2025) asserts that social media allows individuals to present various fragmented versions of themselves, while (Haq & Tega 1 2026) point to the younger generation's increasing reliance on social validation as the basis for self-esteem. Other findings also indicate that the intensity of digital interactions correlates with increased tendencies toward social comparison, identity anxiety, and self-dissatisfaction among adolescents (Regita et al., 2024). Thus, digital identity no longer functions as an authentic reflection of the self but rather as the result of a negotiation between personal expression, social pressure, and the logic of technology that shapes how individuals understand themselves.

More profoundly, this transformation indicates an ontological shift from identity as "being" toward identity as "appearing." Self-worth is no longer understood based on a person's very existence but rather on the representations displayed and recognized in the digital space. Consequently, identity becomes something that must be continuously produced, maintained, and validated externally. In this context, human relationships are also shifting from being intrinsically grounded to becoming increasingly instrumental and performative. Therefore, the identity crisis among adolescents in the digital age cannot be understood merely as a matter of technological adaptation or psychological distress alone; rather, it touches upon a more fundamental issue concerning the very nature of humanity itself.

From a Christian theological perspective, this shift becomes problematic when viewed through the lens of the concept of *Imago Dei*, which affirms that human beings possess intrinsic value as the image of God and are called to live in a holistic relationship with God and their fellow human beings (Paembonan & Ronda, 2024). Human identity within the framework of *Imago Dei* is ontological and relational, not performative or instrumental. Therefore, the dominance of digital logic in the formation of adolescent identity has the potential to result in identity dislocation that is, a disconnect between human identity as the image of God and the identity constructed through digital mechanisms. In this context, the *Imago Dei* is understood not only as a normative theological doctrine but also as a critical anthropological framework for interpreting the dynamics of human identity in the digital age.

Various previous studies have shown that social media has a significant influence on adolescent identity development. Pérez-Torres(2024) through their study “Social Media: A Digital Social Mirror for Identity Development during Adolescence,” found that social media functions as a “digital mirror” that shapes adolescents’ self-concept through intense social interactions. The study on “The Influence of Social Media on Self-Perception and Identity Formation Among Adolescents in Indonesia” indicates that high exposure to social media can trigger identity confusion due to social pressure and self-comparison. Meanwhile, the study by Zahraa et al. (2025) on “Identity Crisis Among the Younger Generation Due to the Impact of Globalization and Social Media” explains that adolescents’ identities are increasingly influenced by external factors such as technology, global culture, and digital media. Seo & Lao (2025) in their study on “The Influence of Social Media on Early Adolescent Identity Formation” also found that adolescents tend to imitate the lifestyles, values, and behavioral patterns displayed by public figures on social media. This indicates that adolescent identity is heavily influenced by external factors that are visual and popular in nature.

Although these studies have successfully explained the influence of social media on adolescents’ behavior, social relationships, and mental health, most of them still frame the digital identity crisis primarily within psychological and sociological frameworks. As a result, identity is largely understood as a social construct or a psychological response to the digital environment, while the ontological dimension of the human being as an individual has not received adequate attention. This approach ultimately tends to explain the symptoms of an identity crisis without addressing the more fundamental anthropological root namely, changes in the way humans understand themselves. Thus, previous studies still leave a conceptual gap in explaining adolescents’ digital identity crisis from ontological and theological perspectives, particularly regarding how digital culture reshapes humans’ understanding of themselves as *Imago Dei*. This study is not merely a conventional theological inquiry but an effort to construct a new paradigm for interpreting adolescents’ digital identity. Therefore, an analytical framework is needed that can integrally bridge the psychosocial and anthropological-theological dimensions.

Addressing this gap, this study develops the concept of “Distortion of the *Imago Dei*” as an interdisciplinary analytical framework for interpreting the identity crisis among adolescents in the digital age. Through this concept, the study seeks to establish a new analytical paradigm for understanding the digital identity crisis by positioning identity distortion not merely as a psychosocial issue, but as an anthropological-theological distortion of humanity as the *Imago Dei*. This concept is used to explain how algorithmic logic, the culture of visibility, and mechanisms of social validation produce ontological reduction, identity dislocation, and a shift in human relationality from the intrinsic to the instrumental. Thus, this study not only offers a theological reflection on digital culture but also constructs a new conceptual paradigm by developing the concept of “distortion of the *Imago Dei*” as an interdisciplinary analytical category that bridges theology, developmental psychology, and digital media studies. Furthermore, this study formulates conceptual implications for the reconstruction of a more contextual Christian Religious Education in response to the challenges of identity in the digital age.

METHODS

This study is a qualitative research project employing a library research approach aimed at critically analyzing adolescents' digital identities from the perspective of Imago Dei theology (Paembonan & Ronda, 2024). This approach was chosen because the research is not oriented toward statistical measurement but rather toward the development of conceptual constructs and theoretical interpretations regarding the relationship between digital identity, theological anthropology, and digital media culture. This study employs an interdisciplinary approach by integrating systematic theology, developmental psychology, and digital media studies to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of adolescent identity in the digital space.

Furthermore, this study employs conceptual-interdisciplinary construction research as its primary strategy to develop the concept of "Distortion of the Imago Dei" as a new analytical category for interpreting the identity crisis among adolescents in the digital age. This approach is used to identify, compare, and synthesize various concepts regarding human identity, digital identity, social media performativity, and the Imago Dei, thereby producing an integrative conceptual framework capable of explaining the digital identity crisis not only as a psychosocial issue but also as an anthropological-theological one. Thus, the methods employed serve not only to describe the phenomenon but also to establish the academic legitimacy of the research's novelty.

The research data sources consist of primary and secondary literature relevant to the research focus. Theological literature includes studies on the Imago Dei, human identity, and Christian anthropology, while literature in psychology and digital media studies covers discussions on adolescent identity, social media, digital culture, social validation, and identity performativity. The literature was obtained through searches of various academic databases such as Google Scholar and indexed scientific journals. The inclusion criteria for selecting the literature include: (1) articles and books that discuss adolescent digital identity, the Imago Dei, developmental psychology, or digital media culture; (2) scholarly publications released between 2015 and 2026 to ensure recency, contextual relevance, and alignment with current developments regarding adolescents' digital identity and social media culture; (3) academic sources that have undergone a peer-review process; and (4) full-text articles directly related to the study's conceptual focus. Meanwhile, the exclusion criteria include: (1) popular articles that have not undergone a peer-review process; (2) sources that are not relevant to digital identity or theological anthropology; and (3) publications that lack clarity regarding their sources and academic validity (Rizki Afri Mulia, 2022).

Data collection was conducted through a systematic search of relevant books, journal articles, and other scholarly works using keywords such as digital identity, social media, adolescent identity, Imago Dei, digital culture, and Christian anthropology. The literature obtained was then read, classified, and analyzed thematically and critically to identify conceptual patterns related to the formation of adolescents' digital identities.

Data analysis was conducted in several stages. First, the identification of key concepts in the literature related to digital identity, social validation, performativity of identity, and Imago Dei. Second, the categorization of major themes illustrating the interconnection between digital culture and shifts in human identity orientation. Third, a critical interpretation of the limitations

of psychological and sociological approaches in explaining the digital identity crisis among adolescents. Fourth, an interdisciplinary conceptual synthesis is conducted between Imago Dei theology, developmental psychology, and digital media studies through a process of abstraction, conceptual relationalization, and theoretical integration to construct the concept of “Distortion of the Imago Dei” as a new analytical category for interpreting the digital identity crisis among adolescents. Through these stages, the research aims to produce a conceptual framework that not only explains the symptoms of the digital identity crisis but also its underlying anthropological-theological roots. In this synthesis, Imago Dei theology is used to understand the ontological and relational dimensions of humanity; developmental psychology is used to analyze the dynamics of adolescent identity formation; and digital media studies are used to examine the influence of algorithmic logic, the culture of visibility, and social validation on the construction of digital identity. This study establishes the academic legitimacy of the concept of “Distortion of the Imago Dei” as a new analytical category for understanding the dynamics of adolescent identity in the digital age.

To ensure the academic validity of the research, the researcher employs theoretical triangulation by critically comparing various interdisciplinary perspectives. This interdisciplinary strategy is used to generate a more comprehensive understanding of the adolescent identity crisis in the digital age. Additionally, the study’s validity is maintained through transparency in source selection, consistency in analysis, and the researcher’s reflexivity in the literature interpretation process, ensuring that the resulting conceptual framework possesses strong argumentative coherence and academic relevance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Nature of the Imago Dei as the Foundation of Human Identity

In Christian theological research, the concept of Imago Dei serves as the primary foundation for understanding the nature and identity of humanity. Etymologically, the term Imago Dei originates from Latin, meaning “image of God,” while in the biblical context, Imago Dei refers to the belief that humans were created in the image and likeness of God, as stated in Genesis 1:26–27: This concept affirms that human identity does not stem from social constructs, personal achievements, or external recognition, but is ontologically rooted in humanity’s relationship with God as Creator. Thus, human beings are understood as persons possessing intrinsic value, dignity, and a purpose in life that are inherent in their existence as the image of God.

From a systematic theological perspective, Imago Dei is not merely understood as specific attributes possessed by humans, but as the entirety of human existence that reflects God (Bambang, 2025). In other words, human beings as individuals possess value, dignity, and a purpose in life that originate from God; thus, human identity is not merely neutral or shaped solely by the social environment, but has a fixed ontological foundation inherent within them as God’s creation. Furthermore, the concept of Imago Dei contains an intrinsic dimension that affirms that every human being possesses a value that cannot be reduced or measured by worldly standards. Human value is not determined by achievements, social status, or recognition from others, but by the fact that a person is a precious creation of God (Paembonan

& Ronda, 2024). From this perspective, identity is not built through self-isolation or individual construction alone, but through engagement in meaningful relationships.

Another dimension of the Imago Dei is the moral and spiritual aspect, in which humans are called to reflect God's character in their lives. This encompasses values such as love, justice, and truth (Ndruru et al., 2025). Thus, human identity is not only about who one is, but also how one lives one's life in accordance with God's will. In this context, identity is not fluid or situational but rather has a fixed and coherent theological foundation.

In adolescent development, an understanding of the Imago Dei becomes crucial as the foundation for forming a stable identity in the digital age. Adolescents are individuals in a transitional phase from childhood to adulthood, marked by biological, cognitive, social, and spiritual changes, as well as an intense process of self-identity exploration (Ginting & Hsb, 2025). In today's digital age, adolescents not only undergo internal development but also actively interact with digital media, which shapes how they understand themselves, their values, and their social relationships. This situation makes adolescents vulnerable to identity crises, especially when their self-construction is influenced more by social standards in digital media than by essential values, including theological values regarding humanity as the image and likeness of God (Imago Dei). Adolescents who are aware of their inherent worth in God's eyes tend to be more resilient to social pressures and are less easily influenced by external standards when determining their self-worth. However, in the digital age, this understanding is beginning to shift. Adolescent identity is increasingly influenced by social media and digital culture, which emphasize appearance, popularity, and external validation. This situation reveals a tension between a fixed theological identity and a fluid digital identity (Regita et al., 2024).

In this context, the Imago Dei is relevant not only as a normative theological doctrine but also as an anthropological-theological framework for analyzing shifts in human identity orientation in the digital age. The integration of the concept of the Imago Dei, digital identity theory, and the dynamics of adolescent development reveals that the digital identity crisis is not merely a psychosocial issue but also reflects a distortion of the understanding of humanity as the image of God. Through this interdisciplinary synthesis, this study posits "Distortion of the Imago Dei" as a new analytical category to examine how algorithmic culture, digital performativity, and mechanisms of social validation shape adolescent identity ontologically, relationally, and spiritually.

Distortion of the Imago Dei in the Construction of Digital Identity

Based on the results of an interdisciplinary analysis, this study found that adolescents' digital identity crisis is not only related to psychosocial issues but also indicates a distortion in the understanding of humanity as the Imago Dei. In this study, the distortion of the Imago Dei is understood as a process of shifting human identity from an ontological-theological foundation toward an identity construction shaped by the logic of digital culture, social validation, and mechanisms of virtual representation. This concept is developed through a synthesis of Imago Dei theology, digital identity theory, adolescent developmental psychology, and digital media studies to explain how digital technology not only influences human behavior but also reshapes the way humans understand themselves.

In the context of digital culture, human identity is increasingly constructed through the performative mechanisms of social media. Individuals are no longer primarily understood in terms of their existence as persons, but rather in terms of their ability to construct a self-representation that is publicly accepted and recognized. Social media creates a culture of visibility that positions attention, popularity, and digital responses as the primary indicators of self. Consequently, human identity shifts from an intrinsic nature to one dependent on external recognition. From the *Imago Dei* perspective, this condition reflects a shift in identity orientation from a relationship with God toward a relationship with a digital social system that is temporary and performative.

One of the primary forms of this distortion is ontological reduction—the narrowing of human meaning to mere visual imagery and popularity. In a visibility-oriented digital culture, an individual's value is often measured by the extent to which they can attract public attention. Identity is reduced to an outward appearance that can be curated, edited, and published (Regita et al., 2024). As a result, the deepest dimensions of human existence—such as spirituality, morality, and the relationship with God are neglected. From the *Imago Dei* perspective, this condition reflects a shift from understanding humanity as a reflection of God toward a visual object evaluated based on aesthetic standards and popularity.

The second form is identity dislocation, namely the mismatch between one's authentic self and the self presented in digital spaces (presented self) (Salsabila & Nur, 2025). Social media allows individuals to construct a self-image that does not always reflect the reality of their lives. Adolescents, in particular, tend to present an idealized version of themselves to meet social expectations and gain recognition (Salsabila & Nur, 2025). This leads to a disconnect between the real self and the constructed self, resulting in an inauthentic identity. Within a theological framework, this dislocation reflects a loss of awareness of the adolescent's identity as the image of God, which should be whole and integrated.

The third distortion manifests as a shift in relationality—that is, a change in the meaning of interpersonal relationships from being intrinsic to becoming instrumental. In digital culture, relationships are often built not on the basis of love or authenticity, but on the basis of social benefits, such as increased popularity or influence. Interactions become a means to achieve specific goals, rather than an expression of authentic relationships (Salsabila & Nur, 2025). This condition contradicts the concept of *Imago Dei*, which places relationships at the core of human existence. When relationships are reduced to tools, the value of humans as individuals created to relate to one another becomes distorted.

In addition to these three forms, distortions of the *Imago Dei* can also be observed in the dominance of algorithmic systems that mediate digital experiences. Social media algorithms actively shape users' preferences, interaction patterns, and even self-perceptions by displaying content aligned with their previous behavioral patterns (Regita et al., 2024). Under these conditions, human identity is no longer constructed primarily through deep self-reflection, but through interaction with technological systems that direct users' attention, emotions, and social orientation. This indicates that algorithmic culture not only influences digital behavior but also shapes the ontological and relational construction of human identity.

Thus, this study demonstrates that the distortion of the *Imago Dei* is an interdisciplinary analytical category that explains the interconnection between digital culture and the theological

crisis of human identity. This concept reveals that algorithmic logic, the culture of visibility, and mechanisms of social validation systematically shape performative, fragmented identities that depend on external recognition. In this context, the identity crisis among adolescents in the digital age cannot be understood solely as a psychological or social issue, but also as an anthropological-theological crisis that touches upon humanity's understanding of itself as the *Imago Dei*.

The Impact of the Distortion of the *Imago Dei* on the Adolescent Identity Crisis

The distortion of the *Imago Dei* in the construction of digital identity has complex implications for adolescent identity development, particularly in psychological, social, and spiritual aspects. Based on a synthesis of developmental psychology, digital media studies, and theological anthropology, this study finds that digital culture not only influences adolescents' interaction patterns but also shapes their existential orientation in understanding self-worth and social relationships. In this context, adolescent identity crises can no longer be understood solely as a matter of psychological development but rather as a consequence of a distorted understanding of humanity as the *Imago Dei*.

Psychologically, intensive social media use encourages adolescents to construct an ideal self-image in line with evolving digital standards. Adolescents not only express themselves but also strive to conform to social expectations formed in virtual spaces. This often creates internal pressure, as the identity they present does not always align with their actual selves (Regita et al., 2024). When the process of identity formation is largely driven by performative digital standards, adolescents tend to experience anxiety, stress, and dissatisfaction with themselves.

This phenomenon is closely linked to the practice of social comparison, in which adolescents compare themselves to others who appear more ideal on social media. In this context, identity becomes fragile because it depends on external judgments. Research shows that exposure to unrealistic digital content can lower self-confidence and increase the risk of mental health disorders among adolescents (Suwardi & Winayanti, 2025). In this context, identity is no longer built through deep self-reflection but through a process of adapting to digital social expectations that are temporary and fluctuating. Consequently, there is a tendency to construct a performative identity that emphasizes appearance over personal authenticity.

Furthermore, identity distortion also contributes to the emergence of identity confusion. Adolescents struggle to understand their true selves due to the discrepancy between their real identity and their constructed digital identity. Social media allows individuals to present various versions of themselves, leading to an inconsistent and fragmented identity (Sari et al., 2025). Adolescents then experience a disconnect between their real identity and the virtual identity they construct in the digital space. From a developmental psychology perspective, this condition indicates weak identity integration, whereas from the *Imago Dei* theological perspective, this fragmentation reflects humanity's disconnection from its ontological identity as a whole and relational image of God. Thus, the distortion of digital identity not only results in psychological instability but also shifts humanity's theological understanding of its own existence.

From a social perspective, the distortion of the Imago Dei leads to changes in the patterns of adolescents' interpersonal relationships. Social interactions in digital culture tend to be built on the basis of visibility, image-building, and the importance of self-representation. Relationships are no longer primarily based on authenticity and depth, but on the need to gain attention and social recognition. As a result, interactions become more superficial, while feelings of loneliness and social alienation actually increase amid the high intensity of digital connectivity (Sasfira & Salas, 2025). In this context, human relationships undergo a shift from being intrinsic to instrumental, where others are viewed as means for validating one's own identity.

Furthermore, this study found that the most fundamental impact of the distortion of the Imago Dei lies in spiritual and anthropological aspects. When human identity is constructed based on the logic of digital culture, adolescents' life orientation shifts from being theocentric to anthropocentric and performative. Self-worth is no longer understood as a gift from God that is intrinsically inherent, but as the result of social recognition that must be continuously maintained through digital performance. Within the framework of Imago Dei theology, this condition indicates a rupture in the human relationship with God as the source of true identity. The identity crisis among adolescents is ultimately not merely a matter of mental health or social change but also reflects an anthropological-theological crisis that affects how humans understand the meaning of their existence.

Thus, this study demonstrates that the impact of the distortion of the Imago Dei on adolescents is multidimensional and interconnected. Algorithmic logic, the culture of visibility, and mechanisms of social validation shape a performative identity that results in ontological reduction, identity fragmentation, and a shift in human relationality. Through this interdisciplinary synthesis, this study affirms that the crisis of adolescents' digital identity cannot be adequately explained solely through psychological or sociological approaches but requires an anthropological-theological framework capable of interpreting changes in human identity orientation at a more fundamental level.

The “Distortion of the Imago Dei” Analytical Framework in Adolescent Digital Identity

This study develops the concept of Distortion of the Imago Dei as an interdisciplinary analytical framework for interpreting the identity crisis among adolescents in the digital age. This concept is not understood merely as a normative theological term, but rather as a new analytical category constructed through a synthesis of Imago Dei theology, adolescent developmental psychology, digital identity theory, and digital media studies. Through this approach, the digital identity crisis is understood not only as a psychosocial issue related to anxiety, social pressure, or identity confusion, but as an anthropological-theological distortion of humanity as the image of God (Blegur, 2025). Thus, the concept of Imago Dei Distortion serves as a new conceptual paradigm for explaining shifts in human identity orientation within contemporary digital culture.

Within this framework, human identity is understood to undergo a shift when the digital space no longer functions as a medium for self-expression but rather as a cultural system that

shapes how humans understand their existence. The interdisciplinary synthesis developed in this study demonstrates that social media operates through algorithmic logic, a culture of visibility, and mechanisms of social validation that simultaneously shape the construction of adolescent identity (Mokos, 2025). These three aspects subsequently give rise to forms of theological distortion of the *Imago Dei*, namely ontological reduction, identity dislocation, and a shift in relationality. Therefore, this study posits that adolescents' digital identities cannot be understood merely as a product of psychological development, but rather as the result of complex interactions between technological systems, digital culture, and shifts in human anthropological orientation.

First, the algorithmic logic in digital media drives the formation of performative identities oriented toward public attention and digital engagement. Social media algorithms work by selecting, recommending, and prioritizing content based on popularity, interaction, and user responses. This situation indirectly shapes adolescents' behavior to continuously produce visually appealing identities to gain digital recognition (Regita et al., 2024). Consequently, identity is no longer understood as an intrinsic existence but rather as a performance that must be continuously displayed and maintained in the digital public sphere. From the perspective of *Imago Dei* theology, this condition indicates an ontological reduction—that is, a narrowing of the meaning of humanity from a person of intrinsic value as the image of God to an object of visual representation valued based on popularity and social response (Pintakhari & Bunga, 2025). Thus, algorithmic logic not only influences adolescents' digital behavior but also alters humanity's ontological orientation toward itself.

Second, the culture of visibility on social media fosters an existential dependence on public recognition. In digital culture, a person's existence is increasingly defined by the extent to which they are seen, responded to, and recognized by others. Adolescents are thus driven to construct an ideal self-image that aligns with digital social standards to gain social validation (Regita et al., 2024). This process leads to a discrepancy between the authentic self and the presented self (Salsabila & Nur, 2025). Identity ultimately becomes a situational construction of self-image that depends on social expectations. Within the *Imago Dei* framework, this condition indicates a dislocation of identity—a disconnect between human identity as the image of God and the digital identity constructed through the culture of visibility. Human identity is no longer rooted in a relationship with God as the source of existence, but rather in temporary and ever-changing external validation (Waruwu et al., 2026).

Third, the mechanisms of social validation in digital media produce identities that are fluid, fragmented, and instrumental. Systems of "likes," comments, follower counts, and various other forms of digital feedback make social acceptance the primary measure of self-worth. Under these conditions, adolescents tend to adjust their identities to the expectations of their digital audience in order to maintain social acceptance (Banik et al., 2026). As a result, interpersonal relationships shift from intrinsic to instrumental relationships. Social interactions are no longer built on authenticity, love, and openness, but rather on social benefits and the need to maintain a digital presence (Yusriman, 2025). From the *Imago Dei* perspective, this condition indicates a shift in relationality—that is, a change like human relationships from personal and theological ones toward performative and utilitarian ones. Yet, in the *Imago Dei* concept,

relationships are the core of human existence as beings created to live in communion with God and one another (Patibang & Midian, 2025).

Through this analytical framework, the study demonstrates that adolescents' digital identity crisis cannot be understood solely as a psychological issue, such as anxiety, social comparison, or identity confusion. These various issues are essentially manifestations of a more fundamental anthropological-theological distortion, namely a shift in how humans understand themselves as the *Imago Dei* (Blegur, 2022). Thus, this study expands upon previous approaches that tended to frame digital identity solely within a psychosocial perspective. This study demonstrates that digital culture not only influences human behavior but also reshapes humans' ontological, relational, and spiritual orientations toward themselves.

Based on this synthesis, this study proposes "Distortion of the *Imago Dei*" as a new conceptual model for analyzing the dynamics of adolescents' digital identities. This model explains that algorithmic logic produces ontological reduction, the culture of visibility produces identity dislocation, and social validation produces a shift in relationality. These three forms of distortion are interrelated and collectively shape adolescents' digital identity crisis in a multidimensional way. Thus, this study not only explains the influence of social media on adolescent identity but also offers a new analytical framework as an interdisciplinary conceptual model for analyzing the digital identity crisis from an anthropological-theological perspective. This model demonstrates that the digital-age adolescent identity crisis is shaped by the interaction between algorithmic logic, the culture of visibility, and mechanisms of social validation, which simultaneously produce ontological reduction, identity dislocation, and a shift in human relationality as the *Imago Dei*.

Reconstructing Christian Religious Education as a Response to the Distortion of the *Imago Dei*

In the face of the distortion of the *Imago Dei* in the construction of adolescents' digital identities, Christian Religious Education (CRE) needs to be reconstructed not merely as a means of transferring theological knowledge, but as a space for identity formation that is contextual to digital culture. The digital age not only changes communication patterns and learning methods but also alters how adolescents understand their self-worth, social relationships, and the meaning of their existence. In this context, the adolescent identity crisis can no longer be understood merely as a moral or psychological issue but rather as an anthropological-theological issue related to the distortion of the understanding of humanity as the image of God (*Imago Dei*). Therefore, the reconstruction of PAK must be directed toward the development of an *Imago Dei*-based digital pedagogy model as a response to algorithmic logic, the culture of visibility, and the mechanisms of social validation that shape adolescents' digital identities.

The *Imago Dei*-based digital pedagogical model in this study was developed as a pedagogical approach that integrates spiritual formation, critical digital literacy, and theological reflection on digital culture. This model is built upon a synthesis of *Imago Dei* theology, adolescent developmental psychology, and digital media studies as an effort to restore adolescents' identities so that they are once again rooted in the intrinsic value of human beings as God's creations. Within this framework, Religious Education (PAK) serves not only to teach

doctrinal beliefs in a normative manner but also to help students understand how digital culture shapes their self-awareness, social relationships, and life orientation.

First, the reconstruction of PAK must be oriented toward the formation of a spiritual identity grounded in the *Imago Dei*. In a digital culture that emphasizes performativity and visibility, adolescents tend to understand themselves based on public recognition and digital representations. Therefore, PAK instruction must be directed toward fostering the awareness that human worth is not determined by popularity, digital image, or social validation, but rather by one's existence as the image of God, endowed with intrinsic dignity (Sanjaya & Silalahi, 2026). In a pedagogical context, this can be achieved through reflective learning that helps students critically examine the identity standards shaped by social media and reflect on their own identity in light of Christian theology.

Second, this study proposes the development of theological digital literacy as part of a concrete implementation strategy in PAK instruction. Digital literacy in this context is understood not merely as the ability to use technology, but as a critical-theological ability to interpret digital culture based on Christian values. Students need to be guided to understand how social media algorithms, the culture of visibility, and digital validation systems influence the way people view themselves and others (Regita et al., 2024). Thus, students become not only active users of technology but also reflective subjects capable of evaluating digital reality from ethical and theological perspectives

Third, the pedagogical approach in PAK needs to shift toward reflective and dialogical learning regarding digital culture. In this study, reflective learning is understood as a pedagogical process that encourages students to connect their daily digital experiences with reflections on the Christian faith. This strategy can be implemented through critical discussions on digital identity, self-presentation practices, the culture of image-making, and the phenomenon of social comparison on social media. This approach is essential so that students not only understand Christian teachings theoretically but are also able to internalize them in their real digital lives (Triposa & Lumingas, 2025). Thus, PAK serves as a space for fostering critical awareness of the mechanisms of digital culture that have the potential to distort human identity.

Fourth, the reconstruction of PAK needs to strengthen the synergy between the church, school, and family as an ecosystem for the formation of adolescent identity. In the digital age, identity formation no longer takes place solely within the formal educational setting, but also through ongoing digital interactions. Therefore, collaboration between the family, church, and school environments is necessary to build consistent spiritual guidance for adolescents (Kristi & Suhendra, 2025). This synergy is essential so that identity formation based on the *Imago Dei* does not stop at theoretical learning but becomes a way of life lived out in adolescents' daily lives, including in their use of digital media.

Fifth, this study also emphasizes the importance of transforming the use of technology in PAK instruction. Technology is not merely positioned as a learning aid but as a pedagogical space for fostering reflection on faith and spiritual identity. In this context, digital media can be used to facilitate participatory, reflective, and contextual learning for the digital generation. However, the use of technology in Christian Religious Education must remain rooted in a theological orientation to avoid being trapped in the reproduction of a digital culture that

emphasizes only performativity and popularity (Poluan, 2025). Therefore, technology needs to be directed as a means of fostering character, spirituality, and authentic relationships.

Thus, the reconstruction of Christian Religious Education in this study is not merely normative but offers concrete pedagogical implications through a digital pedagogy model based on the *Imago Dei*. This model is an application of the “Distortion of the *Imago Dei*” analytical framework developed in this study. Through this approach, Christian Religious Education (PAK) is positioned not merely as religious moral education, but as a space for identity formation that helps adolescents build a holistic, reflective self-understanding rooted in their identity as the image of God amidst the complexities of contemporary digital culture.

CONCLUSION

The development of digital culture has transformed the process of adolescent identity formation from one rooted in intrinsic values and a relationship with God toward an identity that is performative, fluid, and dependent on digital social validation. This study demonstrates that the adolescent identity crisis in the digital age is not merely a psychosocial issue but an anthropological-theological crisis related to the distortion of humanity as the *Imago Dei*. This distortion manifests through ontological reduction, identity dislocation, and a shift in relationality shaped by algorithmic logic, the culture of visibility, and the validation systems of digital social media.

The main contribution of this study lies in the development of the concept of “Distortion of the *Imago Dei*” as an interdisciplinary analytical framework for understanding adolescents’ digital identities. This concept is constructed through a synthesis of *Imago Dei* theology, developmental psychology, digital identity theory, and digital media studies to explain how digital technology not only influences adolescents’ social behavior but also shifts the theological orientation of human identity. Thus, this study expands the study of *Imago Dei* from the doctrinal realm to a contextual analytical framework in the digital age and offers a new paradigm in the study of contemporary theology and digital identity.

The implications of this research suggest that Christian Religious Education needs to be reconstructed through an *Imago Dei*-based digital pedagogical approach that emphasizes spiritual identity formation, theological digital literacy, and critical reflection on algorithmic culture. This approach is essential to help adolescents build authentic, reflective identities rooted in Christian values amid the complexities of the digital space. Future research is encouraged to develop empirical studies on the implementation of *Imago Dei*-based digital pedagogy in the contexts of schools, churches, and families to strengthen the practical relevance of the conceptual framework offered by this study.

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