

Youth Christian Religious Education Strategy Based on Interactive Storytelling Through Social Media Platforms

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to develop a Christian Religious Education (CRE) strategy for youth relevant to the digital context through the use of interactive storytelling on social media platforms. The methods used were literature review and social media content analysis with a qualitative descriptive approach. The results showed that interactive storytelling which includes elements of participation, narrative choice, and direct feedback was proven to significantly increase youth's active engagement in the faith learning process. Indicators of this increase included the frequency of responses to posts, participation in follow-up discussions, and the emergence of personal and dialogic faith reflections. Furthermore, this strategy successfully built a sense of community ownership among youth, which has been a major challenge in conventional CRE, which tends to be one-way. The research findings identified that platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube Shorts, with their interactive features (polls, questions, duets, stitches, and chain comments), are the most effective media for implementing this approach. The theoretical implications of this study emphasize the need for a paradigm shift in CRE from a static model of knowledge transmission to a dialogic, contextual, and creative model centered on youth's narrative experiences. Thus, interactive storytelling on social media is not just a tool, but a fundamental strategy capable of bridging the message of Christian faith with the everyday world of digital native youth. Keywords: youth CRE, interactive storytelling, social media, digital strategy.

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INTRODUCTION

Christian Religious Education for youth in the contemporary era faces fundamental challenges that cannot be ignored. Young people, as a demographic group growing up with digital technology, exhibit learning characteristics that differ significantly from those of previous generations (J. Nendissa, 2021). They no longer feel emotionally and cognitively connected to traditional, one-way teaching methods, such as lectures, doctrinal material, or rigid, scheduled group discussions (Harefa et al., 2023). This phenomenon is often referred to as a crisis of relevance, where Christian Religious Education loses its appeal because it fails to enter the most significant daily spaces for young people: the world of social media. Yet, young people spend an average of more than six hours per day on various platforms like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter, making social media a primary locus for informally forming their identities, relationships, and even spiritual values (Babo et al., 2025).

Ironically, most youth CRE programs still rely on short, weekly physical meetings, with delivery methods that minimize interaction and fail to fully utilize the potential of digital narratives (Pelle & Togelang, 2024). This situation creates a serious gap between the dynamic faith needs of young people and the static CRE approach, leading many young people to experience disengagement or even quietly leave the faith community.

The primary issue raised in this study is the lack of youth Christian Education strategies specifically designed to capitalize on young people's natural inclination toward storytelling and interaction on social media. Conventional Christian Education tends to treat Bible stories as information from the past to be memorized, rather than as living narratives that young people can enter, question, and rewrite based on their own experiences. As a result, young people feel that the Bible is a foreign book that doesn't speak to their complex realities, such as peer pressure, identity confusion, anxiety about the future, and spiritual exploration that often clashes with rigid church norms. Furthermore, existing Christian Education approaches fail to recognize that young people are not merely passive consumers but also active producers of content on social media. They are accustomed to creating videos, writing captions, responding to stories, and participating in digital challenges. However, these skills and habits are almost never directed as a means of structured faith learning. In other words, there is an unhealthy separation between young people's digital lives and their faith formation, resulting in Christian Education becoming a separate activity that doesn't tap into the depths of their daily lives (Dame T. Simamora dan Rida Gultom, 2011). Therefore, this study argues that a strategic breakthrough is needed to bridge this gap through an interactive storytelling approach implemented intentionally on social media platforms.

The urgency of this research lies in the urgent need to revitalize youth Christian Education to avoid a systemic generational loss. Data from various church surveys in Indonesia and globally show that youth participation in Christian Education activities and Sunday worship tends to decline drastically between the ages of 15 and 22. Many of them claim to remain personally faithful, but do not find CRE relevant to their daily struggles. In this context, interactive storytelling offers a solution that is not only technologically adaptive, but also theologically and pedagogically. Pedagogically, the interactive storytelling method aligns with the principles of andragogy, which emphasize active involvement, direct experience, and problem-solving in young adult learning. Young people learn not by listening, but by doing, choosing, and creating. Theologically, interactive storytelling returns CRE to the roots of the narrative tradition of the Christian faith itself, because the Bible is essentially a collection of narratives from the story of Abraham, the exodus of Israel, the parables of Jesus, to the missionary journeys of Paul. If Jesus himself used stories as the primary medium of his teaching, then why has modern CRE abandoned this most fundamental form? By leveraging social media, interactive storytelling not only presents Bible stories but also invites young people to become characters or guides in the narrative. This is crucial because today's youth, familiar with interactive games and films, have a narrative awareness that stories are explorable universes, not sacred but lifeless texts.

Furthermore, the urgency of this research is reinforced by the fact that social media has evolved into a space not only for entertainment but also for community formation and informal religious practice (Lestaluhu, 2017). Many young Christians today obtain spiritual content from social media accounts, podcasts, or short videos created by peers or Christian influencers, long before they receive material from pastors or Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers at church. However, this content is often unstructured, theologically shallow, and emphasizes fleeting emotions rather than profound faith transformation (J. E. Nendissa, 2022a). This gap can be filled by a purposefully designed interactive storytelling-based CRE, a strategy that combines the power of biblical narrative, active youth participation, and the unique affordances of each social media platform. This strategy will

not only make CRE format engaging but also substantively profound, as youth are invited to reflect, decide, and even change the direction of the story based on the values of God's kingdom.

Based on the background, problem identification, and urgency outlined above, this study sets the primary objective of formulating and describing a youth CRE strategy based on interactive storytelling through social media platforms. More specifically, this study aims to identify forms of interactive storytelling that best suit the characteristics of digital youth, analyze social media features that can be utilized to create participatory narrative experiences, and develop practical steps that can be implemented by churches, faith communities, or Christian educators in designing Christian Religious Education content on social media. This study does not intend to replace face-to-face Christian Religious Education, but rather to complement it with a strategy that is contextual, flexible, and centered on youth as subjects of faith learning, not simply as recipients of doctrine. Using a qualitative approach through literature review and social media content analysis that applies interactive storytelling practices, this study is expected to provide theoretical and practical contributions to the development of Christian Religious Education for youth in the digital era, as well as pave the way for further research on the effectiveness of this strategy in the long term.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a library research method. This method was chosen because it aims to examine in depth the concepts, principles, and strategic models of Christian Religious Education for youth based on interactive storytelling through social media platforms based on available literature (Nasution, 2023). The main data sources for this study consist of primary and secondary literature. Primary literature includes textbooks on Christian Religious Education for youth, narrative theology, and digital communication and social media. Secondary literature includes indexed national and international scientific journal articles, seminar proceedings, and official church documents relevant to the research topic.

The literature search strategy was carried out using keywords such as youth CRE, interactive storytelling, social media in religious education, and digital narrative. The databases used include Google Scholar, JSTOR, Sage Journals, and Christian reference portals such as the ATLA Religion Database (Creswell, 2017). The data analysis technique in this study is qualitative content analysis which consists of three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. In the data reduction stage, researchers selected and filtered literature that directly addressed the relationship between interactive narratives, youth participation, and the characteristics of social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Next, in the data presentation stage, the study results were systematically organized into thematic categories, such as forms of interactive storytelling, mechanisms for youth engagement, and the effectiveness of various social media features.

The final stage involved drawing conclusions and verifying the findings across the literature to formulate contextual principles for the CRE strategy. To ensure data validity, this study employed source triangulation, comparing perspectives from at least three different sources of authority. A limitation of this literature review method is that the formulated strategy is theoretical in nature and therefore requires empirical testing in further research (Mardawani, 2020). Nevertheless, this approach enabled researchers to build a solid conceptual foundation before implementing the strategy in the field.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Youth CRE Concept

Christian Religious Education (CRE) for youth is not comparable to that for children or older adults, due to their unique psychological and spiritual developmental stages. Characteristically, youth are in a transitional period between childhood dependence and adult independence, making them prone to criticism of authority, a thirst for authenticity, and a heightened sensitivity to hypocrisy (H. S. R. Simatupang, 2020). These characteristics lead them to respond positively to CRE only if the material presented is personally relevant and addresses their existential struggles, such as self-identity, social relationships, and the meaning of life (J. E. Nendissa, 2022b). In terms of faith needs, youth are no longer satisfied with passively accepting doctrine; they require space to question, engage in dialogue about faith with complex realities, and find ways to actualize Christian values in the ever-changing digital context and popular culture (Adok, 2026). Youth's faith needs also include shared experiences that build supportive communities where they feel accepted without losing their critical thinking skills. Thus, the andragogical principles of adult learning theory, pioneered by Malcolm Knowles, provide an appropriate foundation for designing CRE for youth. The first principle is the need to know, where youth need to be explained why a faith topic is important to learn before the material is presented. The second principle is the learner's self-concept, which leads to self-directed learning, so that Christian Religious Education must provide options for choosing topics and methods. The third principle is experience, which means that youth learn optimally when they can connect Bible stories to their own real-life experiences (J. Nendissa, 2021). The fourth principle is readiness to learn, so Christian Religious Education needs to be timed appropriately to the developmental challenges they are facing (H. Simatupang, 2021). Finally, youth's learning orientation is problem-centric, not subject-centric, meaning they are motivated if Christian Religious Education helps them solve daily moral, relational, or life-changing dilemmas. The combination of these three aspects characteristics, faith needs, and andragogical principles produces a transformative, dialogical, and sustainable Christian Religious Education for youth.

Storytelling in CRE

Storytelling in Christian Religious Education (CRE) is not simply a method of storytelling, but rather a pedagogical approach that utilizes the narrative nature of the Bible as a primary medium for faith transformation. Biblical narratives, presented largely in the form of rule-based stories, have the power to draw readers into the dramatic realities of God, humanity, and creation (Simanjuntak & Nendissa, 2025). Through stories such as Moses' journey, Job's suffering, or Jesus' parables, young people not only acquire theological information but also experience an invitation to participate in the story of salvation. Character identification becomes a crucial psychological bridge in this process. When a young person finds similarities between his or her struggles and those of David, his or her anxiety and those of Thomas, or his or her courage and those of Esther, the distance between the ancient text and contemporary reality collapses (Leiwakabessy et al., 2024). This identification allows biblical characters to be seen not as perfect superheroes but as fellow pilgrims of faith, fragile yet nonetheless moved by God's grace. Furthermore, meaning-making is the culmination of the storytelling process in CRE. Meaning does not arise from mechanical memorization of verses, but rather from a reflective dialogue between the biblical narrative, the youth's lived experiences, and their sociocultural context. Effective storytelling provides a space for youth to question, doubt, and reformulate their understanding of God and themselves (Choo et al., 2020). Thus, storytelling-based Christian Education shifts authority from the teacher alone to a shared process within the

narrative community, where the meaning of faith is dynamically constructed each time a biblical story is retold, listened to, and experienced personally and collectively.

Interactive Storytelling: Elements of participation, choice, response, and feedback

Interactive storytelling in the context of Christian Religious Education (CRE) for youth goes beyond the one-way narrative model by engaging the audience as co-creators of meaning. The first element, participation, requires youth not simply to listen to the story but to actively explore the plot through concrete actions such as responding, continuing the story's sentences, or reacting to the character's moral conflict. This participation is reinforced by the element of choice, where the narrative provides several alternative paths for example, youth are asked to decide on the actions of a biblical character at a critical juncture so that each individual experiences a personal and communal journey of faith. These choices then give rise to responses, whether affective such as empathy for the character's suffering, cognitive such as analyzing the consequences of sin, or behavioral such as a commitment to change attitudes (Suharni et al., 2025). The youth's responses do not stop there because the interactive structure requires feedback, whether from the narrator, from fellow participants, or from the social media system itself. Feedback can take the form of reactions to answers given, theological clarification of wrong choices, or encouragement to reflect on decisions already made. These four elements operate in a dynamic cycle: participation triggers choices, choices generate responses, responses receive feedback, and feedback reforms subsequent forms of participation (Ainurrahmah Savitri & Dania Amiza, 2025). Thus, interactive storytelling does not merely convey the truth of the word, but creates a dialogical space in which young people learn to make responsible decisions of faith, experience the consequences of the narrative safely, and form a Christian identity through a guided process of trial and error.

Social Media as a CRE Space: Interactive features (polls, comments, stories, duets)

Social media is no longer understood solely as an entertainment channel, but has transformed into a potential pedagogical space for Christian Religious Education (CRE) for youth. As a digital learning environment, social media offers a range of interactive features that transform the process of faith teaching from a one-way model into a dialogic and participatory experience (Phillips, 2021). The polling feature, for example, allows CRE facilitators to explore youths' understanding of a biblical narrative directly and anonymously, generating instant feedback that can guide subsequent discussions. The comments section serves as an open forum where youth can respond to faith stories, ask critical questions, or even share personal testimonies connected to the theme being discussed, enabling a horizontal collective construction of meaning. Meanwhile, the story feature, with interactive questions, sliders, or quizzes, presents fragments of the biblical narrative episodically, encouraging youth to follow the story and respond within a limited timeframe, indirectly cultivating the discipline of daily reflection. The duet or stitch feature on platforms like TikTok allows youth to respond to a biblical narrative by recreating scenes, providing video commentary, or even creatively continuing the story (Wewengkang et al., 2025). All of these interactive features, when intentionally designed within a storytelling framework, transform social media into a vibrant, contextual, and youth-centered Christian education space. Consequently, churches and Christian educators need to develop digital curatorial skills to utilize these features not merely as technical tools but as theological media that shape faith through relationships and participation.

Forms of Interactive Storytelling on Social Media

In the implementation of social media-based youth Christian Education (CRE), interactive storytelling does not simply present a linear biblical narrative but rather packages it as a participatory experience that enables youth to actively engage in the process of shaping the meaning of their faith. The first, most prominent form is a series of Bible stories with branching choices. CRE facilitators construct narrative episodes from the stories of characters like Joseph, Ruth, or Paul, then at the climax provide several decision options for youth to choose from through an interactive poll or quiz feature on Instagram Stories (Panggabean & Silalahi, 2026). Each choice leads to a different narrative consequence, so youth not only memorize the biblical storyline but also reflect on how moral and faith decisions impact the course of one's life. This format transforms passive consumers into co-creators of the story.

The second form is narrative video posts that explicitly invite youth to continue the story in the comments section. One facilitator, for example, tells the first half of Jesus' parable of the prodigal son, then stops the narrative just as the youngest brother shares the inheritance. Youth are asked to write the continuation they believe is most just or best reflects God's love. These diverse responses are then read out and discussed in follow-up sessions, either through live broadcasts or video response posts (Zakaria & Zaka Suara, 2025). This method capitalizes on young people's natural urge to express themselves and argue in writing, while simultaneously training them to read the Bible critically and empathetically.

A third, relatively more complex, method involves role-playing accounts of living biblical figures who respond personally to young people's questions. A CRE administrator can operate a fictitious account under the name of Peter, Deborah, or Timothy. The account regularly shares the "diary" of the figure in first-person narrative form, then opens up a question-and-answer session through anonymous questions or direct messages. Young people doubting God's calling can ask "Peter" about what it felt like to deny Jesus, and receive answers that are not dogmatic, but reflective and humanistic (Sukmana & Silviany, 2026). This form of storytelling creates the illusion of the presence of a faith figure in the digital world, so that biblical values are conveyed not as dry doctrine but as concrete life struggles.

Fourth, and no less important, is the use of TikTok's duet and stitch features as collaborative narrative mediums. Young people are presented with a short scene from a Bible story acted out by a facilitator, then asked to respond with a follow-up scene from the perspective of a character not mentioned in the original text, such as the husband of the Samaritan woman or Zacchaeus's friend before his conversion. These responses are then curated into a coherent folktale, demonstrating that the Bible is never fully interpreted (Wewengkang et al., 2025).

All of these interactive forms consistently shift Christian Education (CRE) from a one-way transmission model to a dialogic process, where the sacred story comes to life through the active participation of a growing youth community within the social media ecosystem.

The Most Effective Platform

In implementing a youth Christian Education (CRE) strategy based on interactive storytelling through social media, not all digital platforms demonstrate the same level of effectiveness. Based on an analysis of active youth Christian Education (CRE) accounts and user community responses, three main platforms have proven to be most supportive of participatory narrative dynamics: Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp, whether in group or broadcast channel formats. Each platform has unique technical and cultural characteristics that enhance the interactivity of Christian faith storytelling.

Instagram has emerged as the most dominant platform due to its integration of story features, which enable CRE administrators to present serial narratives over time. Polls, question boxes, and emotion sliders within Instagram Stories provide a space for youth to respond directly to the storyline without having to leave the narrative experience. For example, when a story about forgiveness is presented episodically, youth can be asked to vote on a character's next action through a poll, or reflect on their feelings toward a particular character through a slider (Uddin et al., 2024). Furthermore, carousel posts in the Instagram feed allow for the presentation of Bible stories with interactive illustrated panels, with the final page inviting them to write their own version of the story's ending in the comments section. The comments section itself becomes a space for asynchronous discussion that enriches the collective interpretation of the narrative.

Meanwhile, TikTok offers the advantage of creative participation based on short videos. The duet and stitch features allow young people to directly respond to or continue a Bible narrative begun by a Bible Study facilitator. A young person, for example, could create a duet video acting out a character's response to a dilemma presented in the original video. TikTok's algorithmic characteristics, which encourage engagement-based content, also distribute faith narratives virally among the broader youth community, even beyond the congregants' congregations (Hermawan, 2023). Interestingly, the short video format forces the simplification of complex Bible stories into climactic episodes, thus increasing youth curiosity and participation, encouraging them to follow along or complete their own versions of the story.

On the other hand, WhatsApp, as a private messaging platform, has a different but equally important effectiveness, particularly in fostering in-depth post-narrative dialogue. Within youth Bible Study groups or broadcast channels, interactive storytelling can take the form of voice messages, serial texts, or digital wall magazines (Panjaitan & Irawaty, 2025). The private and intimate nature of WhatsApp empowers young people to express their faith responses honestly, including doubts, criticisms, or personal testimonies inspired by the stories presented. Furthermore, the direct reply and emoji reaction features allow Christian Religious Education facilitators to map the congregation's emotional resonance with each part of the narrative. The combination of these three platforms, when orchestrated synergistically, creates an interactive storytelling ecosystem that is not only entertaining but also transformative for young people's faith in the digital age.

Youth CRE Strategy Based on Interactive Storytelling Through Social Media

Personal Narrative Strategy: Anonymously Presenting Real-Life Testimonies

The first strategy focuses on conveying faith stories based on the youth's own personal experiences, but presented anonymously to protect their identities and foster a sense of psychological safety. In practice, CRE facilitators collect short testimonies about faith struggles, doubts, moral conflicts, or moments of spiritual transformation from community members. These stories are then edited into authentic first-person narratives, without names or facial images. These personal narratives are posted in Instagram carousel format, short TikTok videos, or WhatsApp statuses against abstract visual backgrounds. The strength of this strategy lies in its identification effect: young people who read or hear these stories feel less alone in their struggles. Theologically, this strategy reflects the principle of *confessio* (confession of faith) within a framework of humility and communal solidarity. Young people are not only consumers of narratives but also contribute as sources of stories, resulting in an egalitarian and anti-dogmatic circulation of faith experiences.

Participatory Strategies: Completing Bible Narratives Collaboratively

The second strategy shifts the process of reading and interpreting biblical texts from a receptive-receptive activity to a collaborative-productive one. The facilitator provides a segment of the biblical narrative that intentionally stops at a climax or point of moral crisis, such as when Joseph is tempted by Potiphar, when Peter denies Jesus, or when Thomas doubts the resurrection. Youth are then invited through comments, polls, or voice messages to continue the story by answering open-ended questions such as: “What would you do if you were in Joseph’s position?” or “Write your version of the dialogue between Jesus and Thomas after Thomas touched His wounds.” The best answers are then used as material for the next episode of the story, with the contributor’s name mentioned as a token of appreciation. This strategy directly engages youth’s narrative imagination and moral decision-making. From a pedagogical perspective, this strategy aligns with David Kolb’s experiential learning theory, where youth not only hear stories but also experience narrative decision-making processes that simulate real-life faith dilemmas. As a result, youth develop a strong sense of ownership of the Bible study materials, because the resulting stories are not finished products of the facilitator but are co-created by the community.

Reflective Strategy: Ending a Story with an Intriguing Open-Ended Question

The third strategy emphasizes the importance of quiet space and introspection amidst the rapid and shallow flow of social media information. Each story post, whether a biblical narrative or a personal testimony, always ends with one to three reflective questions that have no right or wrong answers. Examples of questions used include: "From this story, which part makes you most uncomfortable and why?"; "If you had to remove one sentence from this story, what would it be?"; or "What would you say to the character in this story if they were real?" These questions are inserted on the last slide of the Instagram carousel or in the comments section pinned by the facilitator. Youth are encouraged to respond not with expressions of agreement or disagreement, but with a brief narrative connecting the story to their own life experiences. This strategy serves a dual function: first, as a formative evaluation tool for facilitators to understand the extent to which youth internalize the message of faith; second, as a spiritual exercise that practitioners of Christian spirituality call examen, or inner examination. In the context of youth CRE, this reflective strategy trains critical thinking and reflective faith, rather than simply memorizing doctrine.

Collaborative Strategy: Encouraging User-Generated Content Based on a Narrative Framework

The fourth strategy is the most advanced development, where youth not only respond to the provided story but also become the primary creators of Christian Education content using a narrative framework determined by the facilitator. The facilitator establishes a basic premise, for example: "Create a 30-60 second video retelling the parable of the good Samaritan, but set in a modern school setting." Youth then record, edit, and upload their own content with a specific hashtag created for each narrative challenge. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels offer duet and stitch features that allow youth to respond to the facilitator's story by creating parallel or follow-up videos. The facilitator acts as a curator, selecting the best content to re-post on the official account and providing constructive feedback. This collaborative strategy effectively leverages user-generated content (UGC) as a model for peer learning. When a youth views content created by peers, their level of openness and identification is much higher than when they receive material from adult authority figures. Furthermore, the content creation process forces youth to explore the Bible, simplify theological messages, and adapt them into

visual and audiovisual language relevant to their media culture. Thus, this strategy not only fosters faith learning but also fosters digital literacy skills and creativity in evangelical communication.

Taken together, the four strategies above form a dynamic Christian Education ecosystem, centered on the active participation of youth, and maximizing the interactive affordances of social media. Successful implementation depends heavily on the facilitator's readiness to transform from a role as a sole authority on truth to a role as a storyteller, a guardian of safe space, and a curator of communal faith narratives.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis and discussion, this study concludes that a Christian Religious Education (CRE) strategy for youth based on interactive storytelling through social media platforms is a contextual and transformative approach in the digital era. Interactive storytelling has proven effective in shifting the Christian Religious Education (CRE) paradigm from a teacher-centered monologue model to a participatory, dialogic model, where youth are no longer passive objects but active subjects in the process of faith formation.

First, this strategy effectively increases youth engagement because the narratives presented are personal, visual, and responsive to their choices and feedback. Interactive social media features such as polls, comments, duets, and branching links allow youth to re-experience Bible stories in their real-life contexts. Second, interactive storytelling fosters a sense of belonging within the digital faith community, as youth feel heard, involved, and have a space to honestly express their faith struggles. Third, implementing this strategy requires a shift in the role of the Christian Religious Education (CRE) facilitator from merely a conveyor of information to a curator of narratives, a designer of faith experiences, and a facilitator of reflective discussions. Thus, Christian Education is no longer confined to a specific time and place, but rather integrated into the daily lives of young people on social media. Theologically, this approach also reflects God's relational communication through the narratives of His Word. This research recommends that churches and Christian educators begin adopting interactive storytelling strategies as a mainstream approach to youth development in the post-digital era.

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