Using Social Media to Engage Youth:
Education, Social Justice, & Humanitarianism

By Belle Liang, Ph.D., Meghan Commins, M.A., and Nicole Duffy, M.A.

Today's youth represent the first cohort to grow up fully wired and technologically fluent. Having been born roughly post 1990, during the time access to the internet and web-enabled technology became widely available, these adolescents and emerging adults have been called "digital natives," to distinguish them from the "digital immigrants" who preceded them (Prensky, 2001). In the United States alone, among the 33 million digital natives ages 10 to 19, 90% have access to the internet at home, and 73% have access on a school computer (Nielsen Company, 2009). On average, U.S. teenagers spend 24 hours and 54 minutes a month on the web or using internet-enabled software (Nielsen Company, 2009). And what they are doing online is not a mystery: 68% of teenagers report accessing mobile video, with 54% of these youth using their phones to download and watch music content. Nearly half of online teens ages 12 to 17 visited MySpace or Facebook in May 2009, accounting for 28% of MySpace's page views and 12% of Facebook's during that time (Nielsen Company, 2009).

Given these statistics, what has become an increasing topic of interest to economists, marketing strategists, educators, and parents is *why* do youth go to the internet, and *what* do they take away from this activity? Clearly, marketers would like to steer the digital natives toward greater consumption of the music, videos, and tangible purchases that contribute to the $133.7 billion annual internet economy (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). The teens themselves report being attracted to social networks for gossip and photo sharing, and 57% of them report that they rely on social networks as a key source of information and advice (Nielsen Company, 2009). But concerned parents, teachers, and counselors hope that the digital generation might be inspired to use its online time for more than simply chatting with friends or feeding insatiable consumerism. Can the internet, and specifically, social media, be used to engage youth and turn them toward community and cultural awareness, social justice, and humanitarianism?

The keystone to leveraging social media to inspire youth toward a greater purpose lies in understanding and capitalizing on the informal, networked, and collaborative learning styles of contemporary youth. Rather than attempt to foist old media teaching assumptions upon new media learners, advocates from the digital immigrant generations must learn to meet youth where they are—even if that means embracing and even joining their online communities, and empowering unstructured networks of youth to teach and mentor each other. Much like developing cultural competence, the efficacy of youth advocates and intervention programs depends upon their ability to navigate the technology and communicate in the language of native digital speakers.

This contribution to *The Prevention Researcher* examines two theories salient to the social development of digital natives: positive youth development and relational health. Principles taken from these theories are then discussed as they apply to the development and ongoing implementation of a social media website for youth called GenerationPulse. The article ends with best-practices toward creating social media that is engaging, safe, and growth fostering for youth.

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POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Positive youth development (PYD) theorists describe certain positive characteristics in youth as the "Five Cs" of competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring (Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000). Accordingly, such theorists suggest that successful youth development programs are those that produce these characteristics as outcomes. PYD and community theories posit that these characteristics are fostered by two distinct experiential components: participating in a community, and playing a role in improving the lives of its members (Lerner, Almerigi, et al., 2005; Lerner, Lerner, et al., 2005). As an example, a project aimed at providing this kind of experience might provide youth from an advantaged socioeconomic demographic the opportunity to connect with peers from a disadvantaged population. In the course of this interaction, and flowing from the relationships thus formed, the advantaged youth become aware of the needs, struggles, desires, and hopes of their less advantaged peers. The disadvantaged youth experience—perhaps for the first time—the genuine concern and camaraderie of peers who normally would not be part of their social spheres. Thus together, they begin to form a community. Ultimately, the second component of positive youth development arrives when the program encourages youth to seek the next level of engagement, where the advantaged youth actually intervene to improve the lives of their peers. Indeed, now that the two groups have become part of one "community," any social justice oriented interventions intended to improve one of the populations actually serves to the betterment of both.

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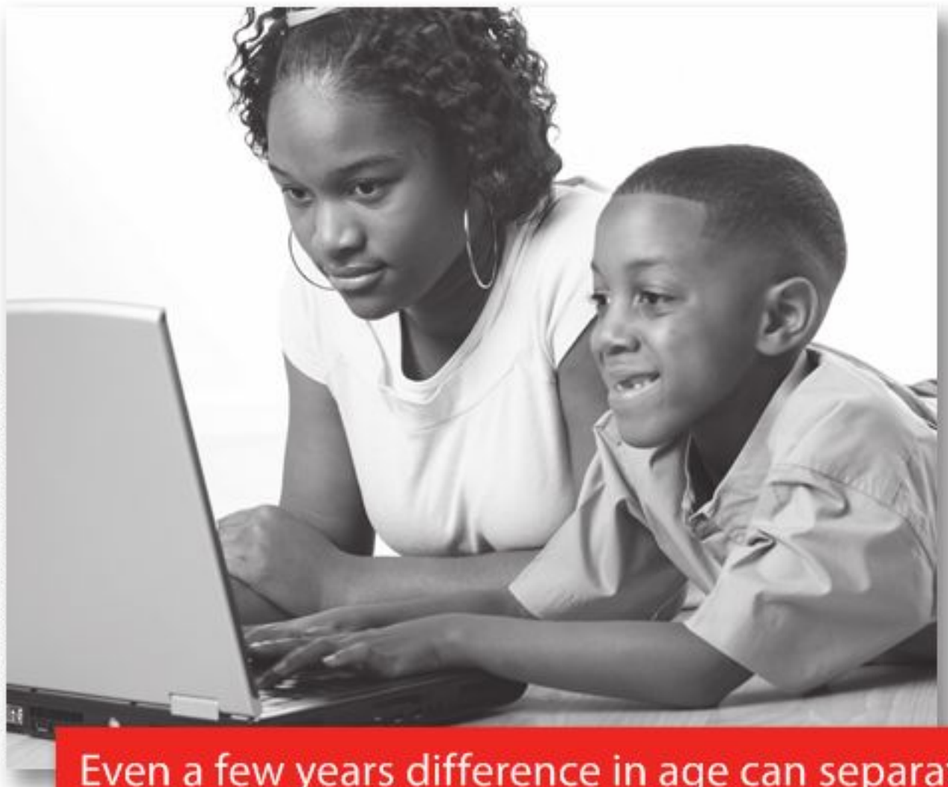
When Lerner and colleagues (2000) contributed to the development of the PYD theory, their original work was formulated to inform traditional, non-internet based youth interventions. However, the addition of web-enabled technology now opens vast opportunities to extend PYD principles to applications that would have been impractical or impossible in the traditional world. For example, given the ubiquity of social media, it is no longer necessary for advantaged youth to reach out only to disadvantaged communities within physical proximity; and communities in inaccessible areas of the world (e.g., disaster-affected areas, war-torn theaters, and geographically remote regions) need not be excluded from connection with a potential source of encouragement and empowerment. Indeed, in this new global community, youth from heretofore disconnected and unrelated environs are empowered to connect with each other on a grand scale that was unimaginable before the era of wireless networks, universal internet access, and inexpensive mobile devices.



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Even a few years difference in age can separate what is hip and acceptable from what is rejected by various audiences.

RELATIONAL-CULTURAL THEORY AND RELATIONAL HEALTH

Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) focuses on the impact of relationships on youth development, and has identified specific qualities of relationships that are necessary for healthy psychological development (Jordan et al., 1991). Such qualities are referred to as "growth-fostering," and include authentic and open communication as well as a sense of mutual engagement and effectiveness in the relationship, an aggregate of which Liang and colleagues (Liang, Tracy, Taylor, Williams, Jordan, & Miller, 2002) call "relational health." Using an instrument called the Relational Health Indices, designed specifically to assess relational health, researchers have demonstrated that if a young person does not feel empowered, engaged, authentic, and effective in relationships with others, then he or she is likely to experience psychological distress (Frey, Beesley, & Miller, 2006; Liang, Tracy, Kauh, Taylor, & Williams, 2006; Liang, Tracy, Taylor, & Williams, 2002).

Relational health specifically reflects four factors that lead to healthy development, including: 1) mutual engagement, as defined by perceived mutual involvement, commitment, and attunement to the relationship; 2) authenticity, or the process of acquiring knowledge of self and the other and feeling free to be genuine in the context of the relationship; 3) empowerment, which is the experience of feeling personally strengthened, encouraged, and inspired to take action; and 4) conflict tolerance, or the ability to deal with difference or conflict by expressing, working through, and accepting differences in background, perspective, and feeling (Jordan, 1997).

Each of the four factors has been shown to have a positive impact on development and well-being. For instance, studies have linked engagement (i.e., closeness and empathy) with higher self-esteem and self-actualization and have shown how such qualities mediate stress and depression (Burnett & Demnar, 1996). Studies have also suggested a positive connection between authenticity and being liked as well as liking others and motivation in relationships (Collins & Miller, 1994). Additionally, research indicates a direct impact of empowerment on positive affect, meaningful activity, and creativity (Hall & Nelson, 1996). Similarly, conflict tolerance has been associated with higher self-esteem, psychological well-being, less depression and anxiety, as well as higher internal locus of control (Kashani, Burbach, & Rosenberg, 1988; Zhang, 1994).

Interestingly, as in the case of the original work on PYD, the foundational work on RCT and the concept of relational health were performed in traditional settings, involving communities where face-to-face interactions were the norm. The assumption for youth interacting in the web-connected domain is that positive relational health is no less critical. Accordingly, the tools of social media must be tailored to foster engagement, authenticity, empowerment, and conflict tolerance even while the involved parties are connecting virtually and often asynchronously.

APPLYING THEORY TO SOCIAL MEDIA: GENERATIONPULSE

The goal, then, is to translate PYD and RCT theory into actual programs that safely and successfully leverage social media, web-based technology, and youth learning style to transcend traditional outreach. But this is a complex endeavor. One such project, called GenerationPulse (www.GenerationPulse.org), serves as a reasonable example of an effort to accomplish that goal. Informed by theories of positive youth development and relational-cultural theory, as well as ongoing empirical research on these concepts, GenerationPulse was created intentionally to foster connection, open communication, and encourage primary prevention efforts among youth and their allies across great geographic and social distances.

The unfortunate inspiration for GenerationPulse was the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. In Fall 2005, on their safe, dry campus at Boston College, Dr. Belle Liang and her Adolescent Psychology students joined the country in watching helplessly as thousands of youth lost their homes, schools, and social supports to the swollen waters of Lake Pontchartrain. Yet, while she and her students applauded the efforts of volunteers around the country who traveled to the Gulf Coast to render aid, Liang and her class realized that what the young people in the flood-affected region had lost could not be easily recaptured by visitors giving a month or two of their time. The youth of New Orleans had lost their social networks.

Working with the technical assistance of the instructional technology staff at Boston College, Liang and her students created a social networking site, called GenerationPulse, intended to provide a conduit through which youth from New Orleans could share their experiences, thoughts, and hopes with peers from around the country. And youth from unaffected areas could have the opportunity to express their encouragement and solidarity. Relying on PYD and RTC theory, the student-led GenerationPulse design team aimed to create a website where the atmosphere was positive, the tone inspiring. The initial site was set up to allow students to post a myriad of content, from open letters, to poems, to songs, photographs, and digital artwork. Students from Liang's psychology course created and posted research-based articles written in youth-accessible styles about depression, racism, coping with stress, leadership, youth volunteerism, activism, and other psychosocial issues relevant to youth. Secondary schools in the Boston area were

recruited to contribute content; and several school principals and teachers in New Orleans began to encourage students to participate in the project. To ensure safety, the decision was made to referee all material posted to the site.

By the end of the first school term, over 200 youth had posted content to the GenerationPulse site. Participating students from affected New Orleans parishes reported an increased sense of connection with people who cared about them, increased motivation to return to school and return to writing, and a sense that their actions could affect change. Students from the Boston area, 1,500 miles away, experienced a greater awareness of the plight of their Gulf Coast peers, as well as a greater sense of affiliation and compassion. The website had transcended the trauma of a natural disaster and emerged as an oasis for sharing ideas about loss, family concerns, peer pressures, friendship, hope, and survival—issues that the youth themselves identified as important to them.

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Today, the website continues its mission to promote risk-prevention and social justice among youth. Currently, it is structured around three sections: Explore, Share, and Act. Each section encourages users to explore and learn about themselves and their world, share their stories and ideas, and act in a way that positively impacts themselves, their schools, their communities, their nations, and the world. A steering committee of approximately 25 students in New England (including middle school, high school, undergraduate, and graduate students) work collaboratively to maintain the content and generate new users through outreach efforts.

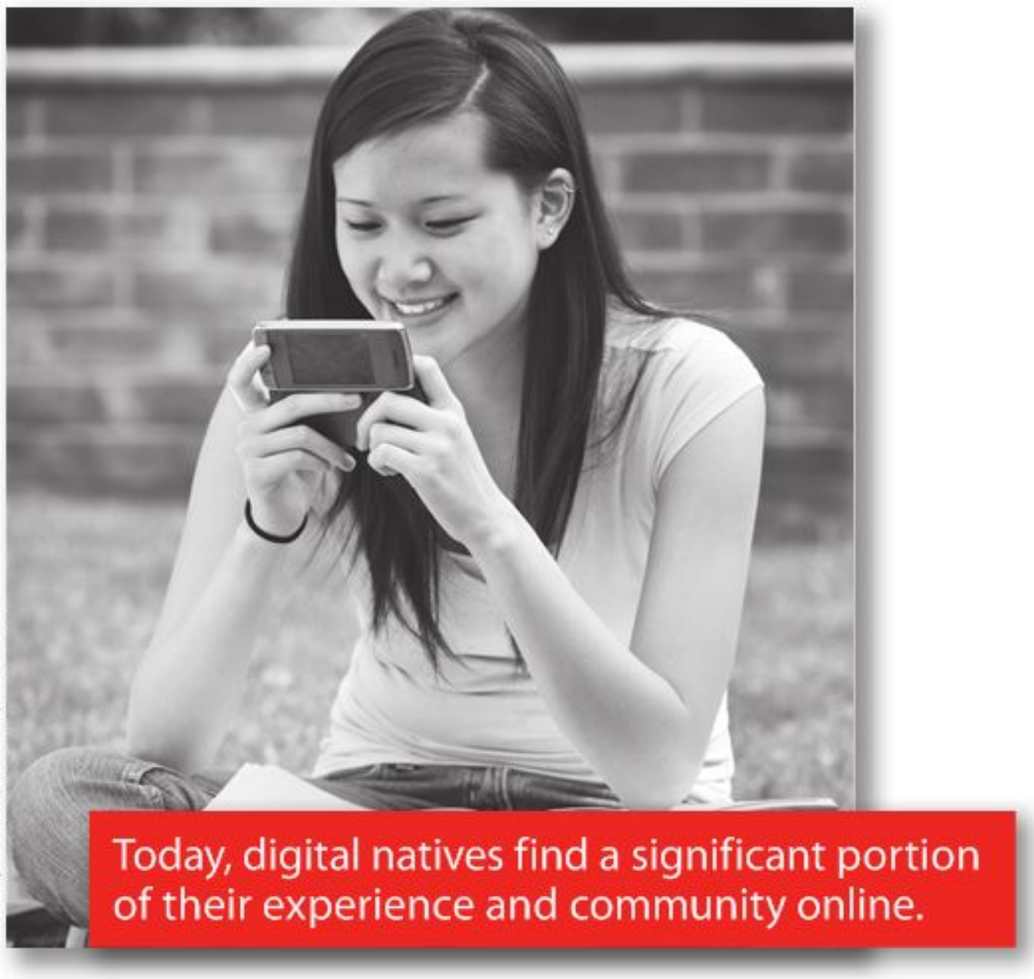
Reaching beyond its initial focus on New Orleans and the resilience of its youth, GenerationPulse now showcases articles written by students on topics ranging from the environment, globalization, health and nutrition, human rights, personal identity, and emotional well-being. And its most recent flagship project, Postcards for Peace, uses the exchange of digital postcards to connect privileged youth with their disenfranchised peers around the globe affected by war, violence, natural disaster, and poverty. To this end, students and entire classrooms in China, Uganda, Haiti, as well as the United States, have contributed thousands of writing submissions and pieces of artwork to date.

By anecdotal reports of those involved in GenerationPulse, the project's attraction has been its potential to provide youth with a way to engage in social justice and service learning on their own time and in their own way, through an online user experience that is engaging, familiar, and comfortable for digital natives. This higher level of engagement on the internet has already resulted in desired outcomes. Specifically, in 2009, students from Boston-area secondary schools and Boston College created and exchanged postcards with children affected by the 22-year ongoing civil war in Northern Uganda. These beautiful and poignant postcards were posted on GenerationPulse as open letters. Research currently in progress is showing that not only were the American students exposed (most for the first time) to the devastating realities of an "invisible" war halfway around the globe, but initial data collected from Ugandan school teachers indicated that the very act of writing or drawing a card to a peer outside the war zone immediately inspired their students—across gender—to attend and stay in school.

LESSONS LEARNED

Now in its fifth year, the GenerationPulse project has amassed a number of lessons learned, some of which may be taken as "best practices" for the application of social media toward inspiring youth awareness and engagement in social justice and humanitarianism.

- **Involve youth directly in the design, implementation and evaluation of the prevention message.** GenerationPulse relies on a base of adolescents and young adult volunteers (middle school, high school, and college students) who create digital content with a nod to their understanding of youth language, style, and interests. In order to design an effective intervention, it is imperative to involve representatives of the populations being served.
- **Seek ongoing feedback from the digital natives to maintain relevance.** Recognizing that even a few years difference in age can separate what is hip and acceptable from what is rejected by various audiences, GenerationPulse meets regularly with its own GenerationPulse Advisory Board, a group of select students from different middle schools and high schools, which provides feedback to the undergraduate and graduate team of volunteers at Boston College.
- **Plan ahead for future accessibility and sustainability.** A foray into social media requires consistent financial and technical resource investment in order to keep the technology current. When GenerationPulse was formed in 2005, the Blackberry smartphone was only two years old, and was entirely the purview of the high-end business class. Two years later, Apple released the first iPhone, and in the ensuing three years, the marketplace was flooded by a proliferation of smartphones and less expensive web-enabled handsets – many are now within the financial reach of teens and young adults. To stay accessible to this mobile wave, GenerationPulse seeks to expand to Facebook and smartphone applications. But this expansion will require additional investment and support to have a web developer create and maintain these applications as the platforms and technologies continually advance. Expanding GenerationPulse's accessibility will entail not only maintaining standard compliance with ADA recommendations for screen reader compatibility and proper functioning of all aspects of the current website, but also extending future applications across a wide range of populations and settings: from the most up-to-date phones and web browsers in the United States to remote populations in the developing



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world limited by variable internet connectivity, inaccessibility to updated software and hardware, and often lower levels of English fluency. A related project goal that may further enhance domestic and global usability is to enable the technology required for the website to be translated into multiple languages.

- **Think flexibly and creatively.** Social networking for prevention and promotion is new and thus creates problems that likely do not have readily available solutions.
- **Make it interactive.** Engage youth in hands-on participation, and encourage them to invite their peers to participate. Part of the appeal of the use of social media is that it involves active participation and contribution. While this offers the implicit benefit of meaningful engagement, outreach must be designed in a way that elicits digital participation.
- **Make it personal.** Content must reflect personal relevance to users.
- **Practical problems require practical solutions.** While the development team may become enthused about the latest webpage gadgets or streaming content, the project must be prepared for a myriad of practical limitations and challenges. For instance, when concerns about confidentiality arise, or the limits of the technology are reached, practical solutions must be found before further development can proceed.

CONCLUSION

Positive youth development theorists maintain that the measure of success for a youth program is the evidence of the "Five Cs" of competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring in involved youth. Relational-Cultural theorists would add that positive relational health and well-being, as evidenced by engagement, empathy, authenticity, empowerment, and conflict tolerance, should also be a desired outcome. Both orientations agree that experiential learning and relationships are critical elements toward achieving positive outcomes.

Today, digital natives—teens and young adults—find a significant portion of their experience and community online. In order to reach this generation, an internet-ready, web-enabled approach is needed. Web-based social justice projects, such as GenerationPulse, have begun to reconcile these needs and concepts, by providing a safe, engaging, social network experience that draws youth toward positivity, connection, empathy, and action. Educators and counselors may consider supplementing their efforts by leveraging social media that is attractive and familiar to the digital natives.


Belle Liang

Belle Liang completed her Ph.D. in clinical and community psychology from Michigan State University, and post-doctoral fellowship in Harvard Medical School's Victims of Violence Program. She is Associate Professor of Counseling and Developmental Psychology in the Lynch School of Education at Boston College. Her research and publications have focused on building global youth mentoring networks via the internet and new media, mentoring and relational health in adolescence and young adulthood, and trauma recovery and resiliency. Dr. Liang is a member of the Research and Policy Council of MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership; and she and her students founded GenerationPulse in 2005 as an innovative approach to youth mentoring.


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