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The Younger Generation and the Buddhist Sangha in Contemporary Thai Society: Social Change, Digital Media, and Institutional Adaptation

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The Younger Generation and the Buddhist Sangha in Contemporary Thai Society: Social Change, Digital Media, and Institutional Adaptation

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Abstract

This study examines the evolving attitudes of the younger generation toward the Buddhist Sangha in contemporary Thai society. In the context of rapid social transformation driven by digital technology, social media, education, and globalization, young people's perceptions of religious institutions and monastic roles are undergoing significant change. Using documentary research and a review of relevant academic literature, the study analyzes the key factors shaping youth perceptions, the influence of digital media discourse, institutional responses of the Sangha, and the role of Buddhist educational institutions.

The findings indicate that while Buddhism continues to be valued among young people as a source of moral guidance, psychological well-being, and personal development, trust in the Sangha is increasingly contingent upon transparency, accountability, ethical conduct, and social relevance. Social media plays a critical role in shaping both positive engagement and critical scrutiny of monastic behavior. Furthermore, the adaptation of Buddhist institutions and educational structures emerges as a key factor in maintaining institutional legitimacy. The study contributes to the understanding of religion-state-society relations in a digital era by demonstrating that changing attitudes toward the Sangha reflect broader socio-cultural transformation rather than a decline in religious belief. It highlights the necessity for adaptive engagement strategies between Buddhist institutions and younger generations in order to sustain relevance in contemporary society.

Keywords: Younger Generation, Buddhist Sangha, Social Media, Thai Buddhism, Institutional Adaptation

Introduction

The Buddhist Sangha has long functioned as one of the most influential institutions in Thai society, contributing not only to religious life but also to education, moral development, social welfare, and cultural continuity. Historically, temples have served as key centers of learning and community engagement, while monks have been regarded as moral authorities and spiritual guides. Buddhist teachings, preserved in canonical texts such as the Tripitaka, continue to provide foundational ethical and philosophical frameworks for Thai society (Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya, 1996). In addition, national-level religious governance continues to be documented and managed through institutions such as the National Office of Buddhism (National Office of Buddhism, 2022). However, contemporary Thai society is undergoing rapid transformation driven by globalization, digital communication technologies, and shifting cultural values. These changes have significantly altered how religious institutions are perceived, particularly among younger generations. Cultural evolution and changing value systems have reshaped human motivations and social expectations, influencing attitudes toward authority, tradition, and institutional legitimacy (Inglehart, 2018; Inglehart & Norris, 2016). Young people today are growing up in a digital environment characterized by unprecedented access to information and diverse ideological perspectives. Social media platforms have become central spaces for communication, identity formation, and belief negotiation. While these platforms provide opportunities for religious dissemination and engagement, they also expose religious institutions to greater public scrutiny and rapid circulation of both accurate and misleading information (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Vosoughi et al., 2018). Concerns regarding adolescent media use further highlight the psychological and social impacts of digital environments on youth behavior and belief systems (American Psychological Association, 2023; Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). Within this context, religious communication is no longer confined to traditional institutional channels. Digital religion has emerged as a field in which religious practices are reconfigured through new media environments, reshaping how faith is expressed and experienced (Campbell, 2013). In parallel, social media has redefined boundaries between formal and informal learning, enabling new forms of religious education outside conventional institutions (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). At the societal level, digital networks also facilitate the rapid spread of ideas, emotions, and collective action, influencing public perceptions of institutions, including religious organizations (Castells, 2015). However, these same networks can amplify misinformation and polarization, affecting trust in authority structures (Vosoughi et al., 2018). In Thailand, empirical studies indicate that social media plays a significant role in shaping religious beliefs among younger generations, including attitudes toward Buddhist institutions (Wichaichan, 2021). Educational transformation further contributes to these shifts. Communication theory suggests that meaning-making processes are increasingly mediated by complex information ecosystems rather than linear institutional messaging (Sothanasathien, 2013). Meanwhile, comparative religious perspectives highlight the dynamic interaction between belief systems and modern societal change (Sathien Phantharangsri, 2006).

Buddhist educational thought itself provides alternative frameworks for understanding human development and sustainability, emphasizing ethical cultivation and holistic well-being. These perspectives remain relevant as Thai society negotiates between traditional religious values and modern socio-cultural expectations. Overall, the intersection of digital transformation, cultural change, and religious institutional adaptation forms the central context for examining contemporary attitudes toward the Buddhist Sangha among younger generations in Thailand.

Changing Attitudes toward the Buddhist Sangha

The relationship between younger generations and the Buddhist Sangha in contemporary Thai society has undergone significant transformation. These changes are closely associated with developments in digital technology, educational expansion, globalization, and shifting social values. While Buddhism continues to be regarded as an important source of moral guidance and spiritual development, younger people increasingly evaluate religious institutions through critical reflection, empirical observation, and personal experience rather than through unquestioned adherence to tradition. Consequently, contemporary attitudes toward the Sangha are characterized by greater expectations regarding transparency, accountability, ethical conduct, and social relevance.

Factors Shaping Contemporary Attitudes toward the Sangha

One of the most significant factors influencing contemporary perceptions of the Sangha is the rapid expansion of digital technology and social media. Online platforms enable young people to access information about monks, temples, and Buddhist institutions more extensively than ever before. While these platforms facilitate the dissemination of Buddhist teachings and religious activities, they also expose religious institutions to increased public scrutiny and criticism (Campbell, 2013). In addition, modern education has encouraged analytical thinking, rational inquiry, and evidence-based evaluation. Younger generations are therefore more likely to assess religious authority through reasoned judgment rather than through traditional acceptance alone. This shift should not be interpreted as a decline in religious commitment but rather as a transformation in the basis of religious trust. Young people continue to value Buddhism, yet they increasingly expect religious leaders to demonstrate integrity, wisdom, and consistency between doctrine and practice (Phra Brahmaganabhorn [P. A. Payutto], 2016). Globalization has further contributed to these changing perceptions by exposing younger generations to diverse cultural perspectives and universal values such as equality, social justice, transparency, and civic responsibility (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). Consequently, expectations toward the Sangha have expanded beyond traditional religious functions to include broader social responsibilities. Many young people now expect Buddhist institutions to contribute actively to contemporary issues such as environmental sustainability, mental health, social welfare, and community development.

Characteristics and Implications of Contemporary Attitudes

A defining characteristic of contemporary attitudes toward the Sangha is the emergence of faith grounded in rational consideration. Respect for monks is increasingly based on observable conduct, ethical integrity, and practical relevance rather than institutional status alone. Monks who possess deep knowledge of Buddhist teachings, communicate effectively with modern audiences, and engage constructively in social welfare activities tend to receive greater recognition and support from younger generations (Suchip Punyanuphab, 1998). At the same time, transparency and accountability have become essential factors influencing public trust. The rapid circulation of information through digital media means that incidents involving inappropriate monastic behavior can quickly affect public perceptions of the Sangha as a whole. As a result, effective governance, ethical leadership, and transparent administration have become increasingly important for maintaining institutional legitimacy. Furthermore, younger generations increasingly engage with Buddhism through digital platforms such as YouTube, podcasts, TikTok, and online sermons. Communication that is accessible, concise, and relevant to everyday life has proven particularly effective in fostering religious engagement among young audiences (Campbell, 2013). These developments present both challenges and opportunities for the Sangha. While greater scrutiny requires increased institutional accountability, it also provides opportunities for strengthening social relevance through educational innovation, digital communication, and community engagement. Ultimately, changing attitudes toward the Sangha should be understood as a reflection of broader social transformation rather than a decline in religious faith. These changes offer an important opportunity for the Sangha to renew its role and strengthen its connection with younger generations in contemporary Thai society.

In conclusion, contemporary attitudes toward the Buddhist Sangha should be understood as part of a broader process of social and cultural transformation. The continued relevance of the Sangha in modern Thai society will depend on its ability to adapt to changing expectations while preserving the fundamental principles of Buddhist teachings. Strengthening transparency, social engagement, and meaningful communication with younger generations will be essential for sustaining public confidence and ensuring the enduring role of Buddhism in contemporary Thailand.

The Influence of Social Media

Social media has become one of the most influential forces shaping the relationship between younger generations and the Buddhist Sangha in contemporary society. Through digital platforms, information concerning Buddhism, monks, and religious institutions can be disseminated rapidly and accessed by broad audiences regardless of geographical boundaries. Consequently, social media has transformed the ways in which young people acquire religious knowledge, evaluate religious authority, and engage with Buddhist teachings. While these platforms create unprecedented opportunities for religious communication and education, they also introduce new challenges related to public scrutiny, misinformation, and changing patterns of religious participation.

Social Media, Religious Communication, and Access to Knowledge

Social media refers to internet-based platforms that facilitate the creation, sharing, and exchange of information through interactive digital networks (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Unlike traditional forms of communication, these platforms allow users not only to consume information but also to participate actively in its production and dissemination. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X have become integral parts of everyday life, particularly among younger generations, and increasingly serve as important spaces for learning, social interaction, and religious engagement. Within the context of Buddhism, social media has expanded the channels through which religious teachings can be communicated. Sermons, podcasts, online discussions, digital publications, and short-form videos enable Buddhist teachings to reach audiences beyond the physical boundaries of temples and monasteries. Furthermore, digital communication provides rapid access to religious knowledge and educational resources, encouraging self-directed learning and lifelong engagement with Buddhism (Castells, 2015; Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). As a result, social media has broadened participation in religious learning and created new forms of interaction between monks and lay communities.

Social Media and Public Perceptions of the Sangha

Beyond its educational role, social media significantly influences the formation of attitudes and values among younger generations. Continuous exposure to diverse perspectives, lifestyles, and public discussions shapes perceptions of social institutions, including the Buddhist Sangha (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). Positive examples of monastic leadership, community service, and Dhamma propagation can be widely shared, strengthening public confidence and encouraging greater interest in Buddhism. At the same time, social media increases the visibility of controversies involving members of the monastic community. Reports of misconduct, ethical violations, or institutional disputes can spread rapidly, influencing public perceptions of the Sangha as a whole. The speed and scale of digital communication have therefore heightened expectations regarding transparency, accountability, and ethical leadership. Moreover, the prevalence of misinformation and unverified content presents additional challenges, highlighting the importance of media literacy and responsible communication (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018).

These developments create both opportunities and challenges for Buddhist institutions. While social media provides powerful tools for religious communication and public engagement, it also requires the Sangha to operate in an environment characterized by continuous public evaluation and immediate feedback. Consequently, effective communication strategies, institutional transparency, and ethical conduct have become increasingly important for maintaining public trust and ensuring the continued relevance of Buddhism in the digital age. Ultimately, social media has emerged as a transformative force that reshapes religious communication, public perceptions, and the relationship between younger generations and the Buddhist Sangha.

In summary social media has significantly transformed the relationship between younger generations and the Buddhist Sangha by expanding access to religious knowledge and creating new forms of engagement with Buddhist teachings. At the same time, digital platforms shape public perceptions of the Sangha by amplifying both positive representations and public scrutiny of controversies. These developments present opportunities for religious communication while increasing demands for transparency, accountability, and ethical conduct. Overall, social media serves as a transformative force that continues to redefine religious participation and the relevance of the Buddhist Sangha in the digital age.

Adaptation of the Sangha in the Contemporary Era

Rapid social transformation in the twenty-first century has created significant challenges for religious institutions worldwide. Advances in digital technology, globalization, changing cultural values, and new forms of social interaction have reshaped how individuals access knowledge, construct identities, and engage with religious traditions. Within this context, the Buddhist Sangha in Thailand faces increasing pressure to adapt its methods of communication, education, and social engagement in order to remain relevant to contemporary society. While preserving the fundamental principles of the Dhamma and Vinaya, the Sangha must respond effectively to the changing expectations and needs of younger generations.

Institutional and Educational Adaptation

Historically, temples functioned as important centers of education, cultural transmission, and community life. However, social and technological developments have transformed the educational landscape, with schools, universities, digital media, and online learning platforms assuming many functions once associated primarily with Buddhist institutions (Suchip Punyanuphab, 1998). At the same time, younger generations increasingly obtain information through the internet and social media, encouraging more critical engagement with religious teachings and reducing the exclusive authority traditionally enjoyed by religious institutions (Campbell, 2013). In response, the Sangha has increasingly integrated digital technologies into religious communication and education. Social media platforms, online lectures, podcasts, and digital learning resources have expanded access to Buddhist teachings and enabled more direct engagement with contemporary audiences. These innovations allow Buddhist teachings to reach individuals who may have limited opportunities to participate in traditional temple activities while creating new channels for religious learning and spiritual support. Educational development within the Sangha has also become an important strategy for adaptation. Buddhist universities and monastic educational institutions have expanded their curricula beyond traditional Buddhist studies to include social sciences, communication studies, humanities, and information technology. This broader educational foundation equips monks with the knowledge and skills necessary to engage effectively with contemporary social issues and communicate Buddhist teachings in ways that are relevant to modern society (Phra Dhammapitaka [P. A. Payutto], 2000).

Social Engagement, Challenges, and Future Directions

Beyond education and communication, the Sangha has increasingly expanded its role in promoting social development and community well-being. Many temples have initiated programs related to education, environmental conservation, poverty alleviation, public health, disaster relief, and community development. These activities demonstrate the practical application of Buddhist teachings and reinforce the relevance of Buddhism in addressing contemporary social challenges (Payutto, 2017). Despite these efforts, the Sangha continues to face significant challenges. Declining participation in traditional religious activities among some younger people, combined with the influence of social media, has increased public scrutiny of religious institutions. Incidents involving individual monks can rapidly affect public perceptions of the Sangha as a whole, creating greater expectations regarding transparency, accountability, and ethical leadership (Swearer, 2010). Consequently, one of the Sangha's most important tasks is cultivating meaningful relationships with younger generations. Buddhist teachings must be communicated in ways that are understandable, practical, and responsive to contemporary concerns such as mental health, personal development, ethical decision-making, and social responsibility. Creating opportunities for dialogue through educational programs, digital engagement, and community-based activities can strengthen trust and foster greater participation among young people (National Office of Buddhism, 2022).

Overall, the adaptation of the Sangha is not merely an institutional strategy but a necessary process for ensuring the continued vitality of Buddhism in contemporary society. By integrating technological innovation, educational development, and social engagement while maintaining the core principles of Buddhist monastic life, the Sangha can continue to serve as a source of moral guidance, spiritual leadership, and social development in contemporary Thai society.

Education and the Role of Buddhist Institutions

Education has long been one of the most important functions of Buddhist institutions in Thai society. Beyond serving as centers of religious practice and spiritual development, Buddhist institutions have historically contributed to intellectual cultivation, moral education, cultural preservation, and community development. Although modern educational systems have assumed many responsibilities once carried out by temples, Buddhist institutions continue to play a significant role in shaping ethical values, social awareness, and spiritual well-being. In the context of rapid social transformation, their educational mission remains highly relevant for fostering meaningful engagement between Buddhism and younger generations.

Educational and Cultural Contributions of Buddhist Institutions

Education occupies a central position within Buddhist thought. The Buddha emphasized learning as a process of human development aimed at cultivating wisdom (*paññā*), moral conduct (*sīla*), and mental discipline (*samādhi*). Rather than promoting blind faith, Buddhist teachings encourage critical reflection, rational inquiry, and experiential understanding (Mahachula

longkornrajavidyalaya, 1996). From this perspective, education extends beyond the acquisition of knowledge and encompasses the holistic development of individuals, enabling them to contribute positively to society and pursue genuine well-being (Phra Dhammapitaka [P. A. Payutto], 2000). Historically, temples functioned as the primary centers of education in Thai society. Monks served as teachers, intellectual leaders, and custodians of local knowledge, transmitting religious teachings, ethical values, and cultural traditions across generations (Suchip Punyanuphab, 1998). Although the educational role of temples has evolved with the expansion of formal education, Buddhist institutions continue to provide important opportunities for lifelong learning through Buddhist studies, Dhamma education, moral training, and community-based educational activities. In addition to their educational functions, Buddhist institutions play a vital role in preserving Thailand's cultural heritage. Temples serve as repositories of religious literature, historical records, traditional arts, architecture, manuscripts, and local wisdom. Religious festivals, merit-making ceremonies, and cultural traditions continue to strengthen social cohesion, reinforce cultural continuity, and promote intergenerational connections within local communities (Sathien Phantharangi, 2006). Through these contributions, Buddhist institutions remain important centers of both cultural preservation and social integration.

Buddhist Institutions in Contemporary Society

In response to rapid technological and social change, Buddhist institutions have increasingly adapted their educational and religious activities to contemporary conditions. Digital communication technologies, including online sermons, live-streamed teachings, podcasts, and social media platforms, have expanded access to Buddhist knowledge and enabled institutions to engage more effectively with younger generations. These innovations allow Buddhist teachings to reach broader audiences while creating new opportunities for religious learning beyond the physical boundaries of temples. At the same time, Buddhist institutions continue to contribute to social development through activities related to moral education, community welfare, disaster relief, mental health support, and public service initiatives (Phra Brahmagunabhorn [P. A. Payutto], 2016). Such efforts demonstrate the practical relevance of Buddhist teachings and reinforce the role of religious institutions in addressing contemporary social challenges. Nevertheless, Buddhist institutions face significant challenges in maintaining their relevance within an increasingly digital and pluralistic society. Changing social values, declining participation in traditional religious activities, and the growing influence of online information sources have transformed the religious landscape. Consequently, Buddhist institutions must continue to develop innovative educational approaches and communication strategies that resonate with younger generations while preserving the core principles of Buddhism.

Overall, the continuing significance of Buddhist institutions lies in their ability to integrate traditional Buddhist wisdom with contemporary social realities. By promoting education, ethical development, cultural preservation, and community engagement, these institutions remain essential contributors to both individual well-being and social cohesion in contemporary Thai society.

Conclusion

Contemporary social transformations driven by digital technology, social media, globalization, and educational development have significantly influenced younger generations' attitudes toward the Buddhist Sangha in Thailand. While Buddhism continues to be valued as a source of moral guidance and spiritual development, young people increasingly evaluate the Sangha based on ethical conduct, transparency, accountability, and social relevance rather than on traditional authority alone. Social media has emerged as a major factor shaping public perceptions of the Sangha. Although digital platforms provide new opportunities for disseminating Buddhist teachings and engaging younger audiences, they also increase public scrutiny and influence attitudes toward religious institutions. Consequently, the Sangha must adapt by developing effective communication strategies and strengthening institutional credibility. The study also highlights the continuing importance of Buddhist institutions in education, moral cultivation, and cultural preservation. Despite changing social conditions, temples and monastic communities remain important contributors to social cohesion and human development. Their ability to integrate traditional Buddhist values with contemporary educational and social needs will be essential for future relevance.

In conclusion, changing attitudes toward the Sangha should not be viewed solely as a decline in religious faith, but rather as a reflection of broader social transformation. By embracing appropriate adaptation while preserving the core principles of Buddhism, the Sangha can continue to serve as a vital institution for moral, spiritual, and social development in contemporary Thai society.

Recommendations

The Sangha should strengthen transparency, ethical conduct, and accountability to maintain the trust of younger generations. Greater engagement through digital platforms and social media can help communicate Buddhist teachings more effectively and foster meaningful interaction with youth. Buddhist educational institutions should also integrate traditional teachings with contemporary social issues and digital literacy to enhance relevance.

The study reveals that changing attitudes toward the Sangha do not necessarily reflect declining religious faith. Rather, they indicate a shift in how young people evaluate religious authority, placing greater emphasis on transparency, social responsibility, and relevance. These findings contribute to understanding the adaptation of religious institutions in a rapidly changing digital society.

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