

## A Digital Babylon: Theological Perspectives on AI and Worship

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### ABSTRACT

Artificial intelligence (AI) and persuasive digital environments are reshaping the conditions under which identity, relationships, and character are formed. While contemporary psychology, neuroscience, sociology, and educational research have examined many effects of digital technologies, these disciplines alone cannot explain the deeper crisis emerging in technologically saturated societies. This article argues that the central challenge of the digital age is not technological but formational, raising profound theological questions about worship, identity, spiritual formation, and discipleship. Drawing on Biblical theology alongside existing scholarship, the article examines how digital environments capture human attention, redirect affections, and gradually reconfigure desires. Using Daniel 1 as a framework, it proposes that today's digital landscape functions as a modern Babylon—one that forms identity not through coercion but through distraction, convenience, and emotional attachment. The analysis highlights how the attention economy and emerging forms of AI increasingly compete for human attention, affection, trust, and relational dependence. The article advances a Christian theology of attention and affection in which attention shapes desire, desire directs devotion, and devotion finds its expression in worship. It concludes that the primary challenge posed by AI is not simply technological or ethical but spiritual and formational. Consequently, a theology of attention, affection, and worship provides a vital framework for promoting authentic human flourishing in the age of AI.

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### Introduction

In 2024, a question began circulating widely across social media: 'If you were the devil, how would you destroy the next generation without them knowing it?' When users posed the question to ChatGPT, its response surprised millions. Rather than proposing violence, war, or overt oppression, the AI described a far subtler strategy:

*'I wouldn't come with violence. I'd come with convenience... I'd keep them busy. Always distracted... They'd call it freedom.'* (Haidt, 2025).

Haidt (2025), reflecting on this conversation in his *After Babel* newsletter, observed that the response was unsettling not because it revealed anything supernatural about AI, but because it closely resembled the developmental crisis he has spent



more than a decade documenting. It is noteworthy that Haidt, Professor of Ethical Leadership at New York University (NYU), has examined religion primarily from the perspective of social psychology rather than Christian theology. It is therefore striking that he chose to interpret this cultural phenomenon using the metaphor of ‘the devil’. While Haidt does not argue for a literal spiritual being, the metaphor captures his central concern: that the most serious threats to the next generation are subtle, gradual, and formative. They reshape attention, relationships, identity, and meaning while presenting themselves as freedom and progress.

The mechanisms described by ChatGPT—constant distraction, fragmented attention, shallow relationships, external validation, information overload, and the erosion of meaning—mirror many of the psychological and social consequences associated with the smartphone-based childhood and the attention economy (Haidt, 2025). Whether one interprets the language model’s response as coincidence, sophisticated pattern recognition, or simply a reflection of accumulated knowledge is ultimately beside the point. The thought experiment exposes a deeper reality: many of the technologies designed to improve human life increasingly shape the ways people believe, think, desire, relate, and ultimately understand themselves.

This raises a central research question:

*If human beings are formed by what captures their attention, how do artificial intelligence and the attention economy shape human formation, and what theological resources does the Christian tradition offer for understanding and responding to these formative influences?*

The aim of this study is to examine these dynamics by integrating insights from psychology,



neuroscience, and educational research with Biblical theology, to develop a theological framework for authentic Christian discipleship in the digital age.

In response to this question, the article advances the thesis that the greatest challenge posed by AI is not the replacement of human labour but the transformation of human formation. It argues that the central crisis of the digital age is a crisis of spiritual formation, as present technologies increasingly shape human attention, redirect affections, and reconfigure desires. Using Daniel 1 as a Biblical framework for understanding cultural formation, the article proposes a Christian theology of attention as an essential foundation for human flourishing in the age of AI.

## Research Problem and Aim

This study addresses the formative influence of AI, persuasive technologies, and the attention economy on human development. The central problem is that digital technologies do not merely deliver information but cultivate habits of desire, shaping attention, affection, identity, wisdom, and worship.

The aim of the study, therefore, is to develop a Biblical theology of human formation, integrating attention, affection, identity, wisdom, and worship through the narrative of Daniel 1. This framework is intended to inform Christian approaches to human flourishing and faithful discipleship in the age of AI.

## Objectives

This article has three primary objectives:

- To examine interdisciplinary research from neuroscience, psychology, educational research, and technology studies concerning

the formative influence of AI, persuasive technologies, and the attention economy on human development.

- To propose a Christian framework for human flourishing and faithful discipleship in the age of AI.
- To explore how a Biblical theology of human formation, interpreted through the framework of Daniel 1, informs Christian discipleship in the age of AI.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology combining thematic literature synthesis and theological hermeneutics. Such an interdisciplinary approach is appropriate because the phenomenon under investigation is inherently multidimensional, encompassing technological, psychological, neuroscientific, educational, and theological dimensions that cannot be adequately understood within a single discipline.

The literature for this study was selected from sources that have informed my professional practice and my ongoing engagement with digital technology, child development, counselling, education, and Christian formation. This includes peer-reviewed research and academic literature, as well as selected books, articles, Substack publications, and YouTube discussions from authors and practitioners whose work I follow and engage with regularly. These sources were selected not only for their relevance to the research question, but also because they address issues that are increasingly evident in my counselling practice and in my work with children, adolescents, parents, and schools. Their relevance is therefore both scholarly and practical, particularly within the South African context. The South African context was

also considered in evaluating the practical relevance of the literature, particularly where the research relates to children, adolescents, families, schools, and Christian educational settings.

Peer-reviewed research was prioritised when making empirical claims, while books and other contemporary sources were used to provide theological, conceptual, practical, and emerging perspectives on digital technology and artificial intelligence. This article is presented as a conceptual theological study employing an interdisciplinary interpretive synthesis rather than a systematic literature review. The purpose is not to provide an exhaustive review of all available literature, but to bring representative scholarship from theology, neuroscience, psychology, education, and AI into critical dialogue to construct a coherent theological framework for understanding human formation in the digital age. Sources were selected for their relevance to the article's central themes of attention, affection, identity, wisdom, and worship, and were interpreted through the primary Biblical lens of Daniel 1.

Rather than utilising empirical human-subject testing, this paper analyses and interprets representative scholarly literature, including peer-reviewed research, scholarly monographs, and academic books authored by widely cited scholars in neuroscience, developmental psychology, and educational technology, placing these findings in dialogue with Biblical theology.

The theological analysis uses a classical historical-grammatical and narrative-critical hermeneutical approach to the text of Daniel 1. This narrative is utilised as a historical and theological paradigm for cultural formation, allowing for a comparative structural analysis



between the ancient Babylonian court and the contemporary digital ecosystem.

The synthesis is guided by the Augustinian concept of *ordo amoris* (ordered love), complemented by James K. A. Smith's understanding of cultural formation through repeated practices. Together, these provide the theoretical framework through which contemporary psychological and neuroscientific findings are interpreted alongside Biblical theology. Daniel 1 functions as the primary Biblical lens through which the formative dynamics of the digital age are examined, allowing the mechanisms of the attention economy to be interpreted in relation to Biblical concepts of attention, affection, identity, allegiance, and worship.

Having outlined the research problem, aim, objectives, and methodology, the study now turns to the conceptual and theoretical framework that underpins the analysis. This framework provides the categories and theological lenses through which the interdisciplinary findings are interpreted. The conceptual dimension clarifies attention, desire, identity, wisdom, and worship as central aspects of human formation, while the theoretical dimension develops a theology of desire and worship rooted in Augustine, William Law, James K. A. Smith, and the Biblical narrative of Daniel 1. Together, these perspectives establish the foundation for examining how digital technologies function as formative environments that shape human beings spiritually and psychologically.

### Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The rapid development of AI, social media, persuasive design, and digital platforms has generated growing concern regarding their



influence on human behaviour, mental

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health, learning and education, and social relationships. While much of the existing literature examines these technologies from psychological, educational, sociological, or ethical perspectives, relatively little research has sought to integrate these findings within a coherent theological anthropology. This section brings several disciplines into conversation, following a theoretical progression rather than a chronological review of scholarship. It begins with the Biblical understanding of human nature, before examining how attention shapes desire and how desire influences identity.

It begins by considering the Biblical understanding of human nature, before examining how attention shapes desire and how desire influences identity. It distinguishes wisdom from information, arguing that possessing information is not the same as possessing wisdom, just as having access to vast amounts of content does not necessarily result in understanding. Finally, it considers how contemporary digital technologies increasingly commodify both human relationships and humanity's relationship with God. Together, these perspectives establish the conceptual foundation for the theological argument that follows.

### *Created for Relationship: The Imago Dei and Human Flourishing*

What does it mean to be human? Genesis 1 answers this before psychology, neuroscience, or AI ever ask the question. Human beings are not fundamentally consumers, producers, or information-processing machines; we are, first and foremost, relational creatures searching for meaning and connection. Instead, we are created in the Image of God (*Imago Dei*) and therefore for covenantal relationship with God, with one another, and with creation. Human flourishing is inseparable from these relationships because

relationality belongs to the very nature of human existence.

The Genesis narrative establishes that human identity is not a self-authored project to be constructed, but a sacred gift to be received from the Creator. Before Adam accomplished anything, before he worked, named the animals, or exercised dominion over creation, he was declared to bear God's image (Genesis 1:26–27). His worth therefore preceded his performance. Six times throughout the creation account God declares that what He has made is 'good'. Then, for the first time, Scripture records God saying, 'It is not good for the man to be alone' (Genesis 2:18). This deliberate contrast reveals that although creation was good, humanity could not flourish in isolation. Human beings were created for communion—with God and with one another—establishing that isolation is contrary to God's original design.

Modern neuroscience and psychology increasingly support this Biblical anthropology. Brené Brown (2010) argues that courage, compassion, and resilience develop within relationships characterised by vulnerability and trust. Shame, she contends, derives much of its destructive power from disconnection, whereas authentic human connection creates the conditions necessary for emotional and psychological flourishing.

Scripture offers a deeper theological explanation for this reality. Before the Fall, Adam and Eve were 'naked and felt no shame' (Genesis 2:25). Shame entered human experience only after sin disrupted humanity's communion with God. Their immediate response was to hide—from God and from one another. When Adam confessed, 'I was afraid because I was naked,' God addressed him with the searching question, 'Who told you that

you were naked?' (Genesis 3:11). This question reaches far beyond Adam's physical nakedness. It shows the moment humanity began allowing another voice to shape its understanding of reality, identity, and worth.

Sin fractured the relationships God had created for human flourishing: communion with God gave way to fear, openness between husband and wife gave way to shame and blame, and humanity's relationship with creation itself was broken. From the beginning of Scripture, shame is therefore inseparable from relational brokenness. Redemption begins not with humanity searching for God, but with God seeking those who have hidden themselves, calling them back into restored relationship.

Brown describes the opposite of shame as wholeheartedness—a way of living characterised by authenticity, courage, compassion, and meaningful connection. Although her work is grounded in psychology rather than theology, the concept resonates strongly with Scripture's call to live out of our true, God-given identity. Yet the Biblical understanding of wholeheartedness extends beyond psychological health. It is rooted in covenantal trust. In the Bible, only Caleb is commended because he 'followed the Lord wholeheartedly' (Numbers 14:24; 32:12), not because he was fearless, but because his confidence rested in God's faithfulness rather than in the giants before him. While others interpreted reality through the lens of fear, Caleb interpreted it through the lens of God's covenant promises. Biblical wholeheartedness, therefore, is not the absence of fear but a life anchored in trust, allowing God's character rather than changing circumstances to shape one's identity, courage, and hope.



This theological vision finds remarkable support within contemporary neuroscience. Drawing upon interpersonal neurobiology, Curt Thompson (2010) demonstrates that the human brain develops through relationships rather than in isolation. Neural pathways responsible for emotional regulation, empathy, attachment, and identity are formed through repeated relational experiences. Human beings are therefore not merely biologically capable of relationships; they are neurologically formed by them. Psychology, neuroscience, and Scripture thus converge on a common conclusion: authentic human flourishing is fundamentally relational, emerging through rightly ordered relationships with God and with one another.

This relational understanding of personhood provides an essential foundation for evaluating AI. Technologies that replace, weaken, or commodify authentic human relationships cannot be regarded as morally neutral because they reshape one of the fundamental dimensions of what it means to bear God's image.

### ***The Attention Economy: The Formation of Human Desire***

Long before smartphones, AI, and social media emerged, Neil Postman warned that every technology carries with it a particular philosophy of life. Technologies are never merely tools; they reshape habits of thought, patterns of communication, and ultimately the cultures that adopt them (Postman, 1993). What distinguishes today's digital environment, however, is not simply the presence of new technologies but the emergence of an economic system built upon the systematic capture of human attention.

Nobel laureate Herbert Simon observed decades ago that 'a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention' (Simon, 1971, p. 40). In an economy

where information is abundant, attention becomes a scarce resource. Modern technology companies therefore compete not merely to provide information but to maximise engagement through persuasive design, personalised recommendation systems, infinite scrolling, algorithmic feeds, and intermittent rewards.

This shift has profound implications because attention is never morally neutral. Scripture repeatedly portrays attention as formative. Proverbs exhorts believers 'Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it' (Proverbs 4:23 NIV). Yet the Biblical concept of the heart extends beyond emotion to include thought, desire, will, and affection. What consistently occupies attention gradually shapes the heart.

Jesus similarly taught, 'Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also' (Matthew 6:21 NIV). Although Jesus teaching in Matthew 6 arises in the context of wealth, the principle extends beyond material possessions. What a person treasures inevitably captures the heart's attention, directs its desires, and ultimately shapes loyalty. The nineteenth-century preacher Charles Spurgeon, reflecting on Matthew 6:22 in his sermon *A Single Eye and Simple Faith*, emphasised that the eye reveals the orientation of the heart and shapes the direction of one's spiritual life (Spurgeon, 1860/2020). Long before neuroscience described neuroplasticity, Christian theology recognised that repeated attention gradually directs the affections.

Existing neuroscience now provides empirical support for these Biblical insights. First proposed in 1993 and revisited thirty years later, Robinson and Berridge's incentive-sensitisation theory distinguishes between 'liking' and 'wanting' (Robinson & Berridge, 1993; Robinson & Berridge, 2025). Anna Lembke (2021) similarly argues that



the dopamine system is designed to motivate pursuit rather than produce lasting satisfaction. Repeated exposure to rewarding stimuli generates craving rather than contentment.

Educational research further illustrates the consequences of this attentional environment. Jared C. Horvath (2025) argues that many educational technologies fragment sustained attention, reducing opportunities for deep learning, critical reflection, and face-to-face interaction. Likewise, Cal Newport (2019) contends that uninterrupted concentration has become increasingly rare precisely because modern digital environments are designed to prevent it.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the attention economy is not merely competing for time. It is shaping desire itself. What repeatedly captures attention gradually influences what individuals value, pursue, and ultimately love.

### ***From Desire to Worship: A Theology of Human Formation (Theoretical Framework)***

*Building on the conceptual categories outlined above, this subsection develops the theoretical dimension of the framework. It traces how desire culminates in worship, drawing on Augustine's theology of love, later theological insights, and contemporary applications to digital culture.*

Even before neuroscience described the formation of desire, Christian theologian, philosopher, and Bishop Augustine of Hippo (354–430 AD) recognised that the fundamental problem of humanity was not merely intellectual ignorance but a disordered *ordo amoris* — a misdirected ordering of love. Human beings are creatures of desire. The central theological question is therefore not whether people love, but what they

love and whether those loves are rightly ordered toward God.

Building upon Augustine's understanding of rightly ordered love, William Law similarly emphasises the formative power of devotion: what a person continually loves and pursues ultimately shapes the direction of life (Law, 1898/1752). People created in the image of God become like the objects of their devotion because repeated attention gradually shapes affection. More recently, James K. A. Smith (2016) has renewed this Augustinian insight by arguing that people are shaped less by abstract ideas than by repeated practices, habits, and cultural liturgies—everyday rituals and patterns of life that direct human desires. In *You Are What You Love*, Smith emphasises that human formation takes place through participation in these practices, as repeated actions gradually shape what people desire and ultimately who they become (Smith, 2016).

This perspective helps explain why digital technologies are spiritually significant. They do not merely deliver information; they cultivate habits of desire. Social media platforms, digital entertainment, personalised algorithms, and increasingly AI companions quietly shape human desires through the repeated patterns of everyday life, directing what people pay attention to, value, and ultimately love. Formation occurs not only through what people consciously believe but also through what they repeatedly practice.

Scripture consistently presents this process as fundamentally spiritual. Paul urges believers, 'Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind' (Romans 12:2 NIV). Transformation is not merely behavioural modification but the reordering of desire through renewed worship.



The New Testament recognises that spiritual formation occurs within the context of spiritual conflict. Believers are instructed not to be ignorant of Satan's schemes (2 Corinthians 2:11), reminded that their struggle is 'not against flesh and blood' (Ephesians 6:12), and warned that 'the god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers' (2 Corinthians 4:4). These passages do not encourage technological fear, but they do remind readers that every cultural system participates within a larger contest over worship, allegiance, and truth.

Theologically understood, therefore, the digital age presents more than a technological challenge. It presents a formative challenge. If repeated attention shapes desire, and desire directs worship, then the central question is no longer simply what people believe about technology, but what kind of people they are becoming through their continual participation within digital environments.

### ***Identity Formation in the Digital Age***

Having established that attention shapes desire, the next question concerns identity. Scripture consistently presents identity as something received before it is achieved. Human beings do not create themselves; they receive their identity from the God in whose image they are created (Genesis 1:26–27). Throughout Scripture, God repeatedly reminds His people who they are before instructing them how to live. Identity precedes behaviour.

The digital environment reverses this order. Social media platforms encourage individuals to construct and continually reconstruct their identities through performance, visibility, and external validation. Worth increasingly becomes measured through followers, likes, views, comments, and online approval. Identity shifts

from being received as a gift to becoming an ongoing project requiring constant maintenance. Freya India (2026) vividly describes how digital culture increasingly teaches young people to understand themselves through categories of visibility, performance, popularity, and consumption.

This development is particularly significant during adolescence, a developmental period in which identity formation takes place. This development is particularly significant during adolescence, a developmental period in which identity formation takes place. Twenge (2017) argues that growing up with smartphones and social media has altered the developmental experiences and patterns of behaviour of today's adolescents, while recent research has identified associations between problematic smartphone use and dimensions of adolescent identity development (Kaya & Güneş, 2023).

Rather than exploring identity within stable relationships involving family, community, mentors, and real friends, many young people increasingly construct their sense of self within digital environments characterised by comparison, performance, and continuous social evaluation. The result is heightened anxiety, loneliness, perfectionism, and diminished psychological well-being.

Educational research raises similar concerns. Horvath (2025) argues that excessive dependence on educational technology risks reducing learners to measurable data points while diminishing opportunities for in-person learning, creativity, sustained attention, and authentic human interaction. Emily Cherkin (2025) similarly questions whether many educational technologies primarily serve children's developmental needs or the commercial interests



of technology companies seeking to maximise engagement. Her frequently repeated observation that 'EdTech is Big Tech' succinctly captures her central argument that educational technologies increasingly operate according to the same commercial incentives, data practices, and engagement models that characterise the broader technology industry (Cherkin, 2025).

### ***Wisdom in an Age of Information***

The formation of identity inevitably raises another question: *How does one live wisely in an age of unprecedented technological capability?* Modern society enjoys extraordinary access to knowledge, convenience, and digital connectivity, yet many people experience increasing loneliness, anxiety, and a profound loss of meaning and belonging. Technologies designed to save time often leave us unsure how to use the time they create. Rather than cultivating wisdom, contemporary culture frequently rewards immediate gratification over long-term flourishing, entertainment over reflection, dopamine over discipline, and convenience over character.

This tension echoes the Biblical account of Esau, who exchanged his birthright for a single meal (Genesis 25:29–34). The book of Hebrews later describes Esau as someone who exchanged something sacred for immediate satisfaction (Hebrews 12:16–17).

Esau's decision illustrates a timeless truth: human beings are continually tempted to exchange what is eternal for what is immediate, what is sacred for what is convenient, and what is ultimately life-giving for what merely satisfies present desires. This temptation remains one of the defining challenges of the digital age, where immediate gratification is often prized above enduring wisdom, character, and covenantal faithfulness.

From a Biblical perspective, wisdom is therefore far more than accumulated knowledge or sound judgement. It is a gift received from God (James 1:5), revealed most fully in Jesus Christ, 'in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (Colossians 2:3 NIV). As believers abide in Christ, the Holy Spirit leads them into all truth (John 16:13), grants spiritual discernment (1 Corinthians 2:10–16), and progressively conforms them to the likeness of Christ. Biblical wisdom is therefore not merely knowing what is true but becoming the kind of person who faithfully lives according to God's truth.

AI may process information, recognise patterns, and generate remarkably sophisticated responses, but it cannot participate in this relational reality. Christian wisdom is not the product of computational power but of communion with the living God. It is formed through faithful obedience, immersion in Scripture, participation in the body of Christ, and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

This distinction has become increasingly important in the age of AI. AI systems possess extraordinary computational power. They can organise vast quantities of information, identify complex patterns, generate persuasive content, and answer questions with remarkable speed. It is called after all a Large Language Model, better known as LLM. Yet information and wisdom are not synonymous. AI can process knowledge, but it cannot exercise moral judgment, cultivate virtue, or enter into a covenantal relationship with God. It can imitate wisdom without possessing it.

The Biblical concern has never been the accumulation of knowledge alone. From Genesis onward, Scripture repeatedly warns that knowledge divorced from obedience to God becomes dangerous. The temptation in Eden was



not simply to acquire information but to seek autonomy—to determine good and evil independently of the Creator (Genesis 3:5–6). Throughout the wisdom literature, true understanding is consistently linked to humility, reverence, and faithful dependence upon God rather than intellectual achievement alone.

This distinction also challenges contemporary education. Increasingly, success is measured by access to information rather than by the cultivation of wisdom, character, and discernment. Horvath (2025) argues that educational technologies often prioritise efficiency, speed, and measurable outcomes while neglecting the slower developmental processes through which deep thinking, critical reflection, creativity, and sound judgment are formed. When learning becomes primarily transactional, education risks producing knowledgeable individuals who have never learned to live wisely.

For the Christian, wisdom is ultimately relational before it is informational. It is formed through communion with God, faithful participation within the believing community, immersion in Scripture, and the lifelong work of spiritual formation. These realities cannot be automated or outsourced to algorithms. AI may become an extraordinary tool for organising information, but it cannot replace the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, who alone forms the mind and character of Christ within the believer (Romans 12:2; 1 Corinthians 2:16).

The challenge facing the Church is therefore not whether tactics should include AI, but whether Christians will continue to pursue wisdom in a culture increasingly content with information. As AI becomes more capable of answering questions, believers must recover the deeper Biblical practice of asking not merely, ‘What can I know?’

but ‘What is true, what is good, and what is pleasing to God?’ (Philippians 4:8; Ephesians 5:10).

### ***The Commodification of Human Relationships***

If attention shapes desire, and desire shapes identity, it follows that relationships themselves inevitably become subject to the same commercial forces governing the digital environment. Increasingly, people no longer simply experience human relationships; they design, mediate, measure, and monetise them. The business model of the contemporary technology industry depends upon sustained user engagement. Human attention is converted into economic value through advertising, data collection, subscription models, and predictive algorithms. Consequently, relationships increasingly become products to be optimised rather than gifts to be cultivated.

India (2026) argues that this process extends even into humanity's deepest longings. Social media encourages individuals to transform friendships, romance, grief, family life, and personal identity into consumable online content. Experiences once regarded as deeply personal increasingly become opportunities for visibility, branding, and public performance.

AI represents a significant development within this trajectory. AI companions, virtual romantic partners, conversational agents, digital therapists, and personalised assistants increasingly offer simulations of empathy, companionship, affirmation, and emotional support. While these technologies may provide temporary comfort or practical assistance, they also raise profound theological questions concerning the nature of authentic relationship.

As established in the preceding discussion, humanity is created *Imago Dei*. They flourish



through real, reciprocal, covenantal relationships characterised by mutual presence, vulnerability, responsibility, and love. AI, regardless of its sophistication, does not participate in these realities. It lacks consciousness, moral agency, or genuine self-giving love. Rather, it generates convincing simulations of relational behaviour based upon statistical prediction.

This distinction becomes increasingly significant as loneliness rises globally. Twenge (2026), analysing data from more than 1.7 million adolescents across 36 countries, found that school loneliness increased in most countries, particularly between 2012 and 2022, with larger increases in countries where adolescent smartphone access and electronic device use also rose. These findings indicate a significant association between the increasing presence of electronic devices and adolescent loneliness, although they do not establish a simple causal relationship. In a culture marked by declining community and increasing relational fragmentation, AI companions may appear to satisfy the universal human longing for connection and attachment. Yet relationship simulations cannot provide the reciprocal human presence, embodied community, and covenantal relationships through which human beings experience genuine belonging.

Theologically, this development reflects a broader movement in which technologies increasingly offer substitutes for capacities and relationships that Scripture locates within human community and ultimately within communion with God. The challenge facing the Church is therefore not merely technological but anthropological. As AI becomes increasingly relational, Christians must recover a robust Biblical understanding of what it means to be human, recognising that authentic love, covenant, and communion remain



gifts that cannot be manufactured or commodified.

### ***Digital Babylon and the Liturgical Power of Environment***

Continuing the theoretical framework, this section draws on the Biblical narrative of Daniel 1 to establish a paradigm for understanding how immersive technological environments function as active agents of spiritual and psychological formation.

### ***Formation Before Worship***

Daniel 1 presents one of Scripture's clearest accounts of cultural formation. Following the conquest of Jerusalem, King Nebuchadnezzar did not simply deport the brightest young men from Judah to serve within his court. He subjected them to a carefully designed programme intended to reshape every aspect of their identity. Daniel and his companions were removed from their families, immersed in Babylonian education, taught a new language and literature, given new names honouring Babylonian gods, and invited to eat from the king's table (Daniel 1:3–7). None of these actions appeared overtly religious. Yet together they formed a comprehensive strategy to redefine who these young men were and to whom they ultimately belonged.

Babylon understood a principle that contemporary neuroscience increasingly confirms: before behaviour changes, repeated exposure gradually shapes patterns of attention, desire, and identity. Nebuchadnezzar did not begin by demanding worship. He first sought to shape what Daniel learned, valued, consumed, and how he understood himself. Worship would eventually follow formation.

This pattern echoes the core argument developed throughout this study: human beings become what they repeatedly behold. Attention directs

affection; affection shapes identity; identity determines allegiance; and allegiance ultimately finds expression in worship. Augustine (1998) recognised that human beings are formed by their love. James K. A. Smith (2016) argues that repeated practices gradually shape those loves, while contemporary neuroscience demonstrates that repeated habits strengthen the neural pathways through which perception, desire, and behaviour are formed. Daniel 1 provides the Biblical narrative that unites these insights.

Daniel's response is therefore deeply significant. Scripture records that Daniel 'resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine' (Daniel 1:8 NIV). His refusal was not merely about dietary laws but about preserving covenant identity within a culture seeking to redefine him. Long before he faced persecution or the lions' den, Daniel won the quieter battle of daily faithfulness. His resistance began not in public confrontation but in the private determination that his identity would remain rooted in the God of Israel rather than in Babylon's values.

Daniel's example suggests that the greatest threat to God's people is not always persecution but assimilation. Babylon did not seek to destroy Daniel physically; it sought to reshape him spiritually. The question confronting the contemporary Church is therefore whether similar processes of formation are taking place within today's digital culture.

Taken together, these conceptual and theological perspectives provide the foundation for addressing the research problem. They establish the categories through which the formative influence of AI and the attention economy can be interpreted and provide the basis for addressing the research aim: to develop a Biblical theology of

human formation, rooted in Daniel 1, that informs Christian discipleship in the digital age.

### Findings and Implications

When theology, psychology, neuroscience, education, and AI literature are considered together, four recurring themes emerge. Viewed through the Biblical framework of Daniel 1, these themes form the study's principal findings.

Taken together, the literature suggests that human formation follows a discernible progression in which attention shapes affection, affection shapes identity, identity shapes devotion, and devotion ultimately shapes worship.

The interdisciplinary synthesis produced four overarching findings:

1. This finding emerged consistently from scholarship on habit formation, attention, spiritual formation, neuroscience, and Christian anthropology (Augustine, Smith, Thompson, Horvath).
2. Contemporary digital technologies increasingly participate in that formative process by directing attention, shaping desire, and influencing how human beings relate to God, to one another, and to themselves. (Simon, 1971; Newport, 2019; Haidt, 2024; Horvath, 2026).
3. AI represents a significant shift because it increasingly moves beyond capturing human attention to competing for human affection, trust, and relationships. (Marcus, 2023; India, 2026; Smith, 2016).
4. Daniel 1 provides a coherent Biblical framework for understanding how identity, devotion, and worship are progressively formed. (Goldingay, 1989; Augustine, 1998; Smith, 2016).



### **Theological implications**

The interdisciplinary synthesis identified three principal theological implications concerning human formation in the age of AI. When interpreted through the framework of Biblical theology, these findings illuminate three interrelated dynamics that shape attention, affection, identity, and ultimately worship.

- **Attentional Captivity Reorders Affection:**

Persuasive technologies do not merely consume attention; through repeated engagement, they gradually reshape neural pathways and influence the affections through which human desires are formed. From a Biblical perspective, this has implications not only for cognition but also for worship, as attention increasingly becomes directed toward created technologies rather than the Creator.

- **AI Simulates Covenantal Communion:** Emerging relational AI platforms represent a paradigm shift from capturing *attention* to capturing *affection*. By simulating empathy, AI companions are increasingly used to occupy relational spaces historically reserved for face-to-face human community (*koinonia*) and spiritual communion.

- **Performance-Based Identity Counteracts *Imago Dei*:**

Algorithmic optimisation and digital self-branding enforce a performative framework of identity. This directly stands in contrast to the Biblical ontology revealed in the Genesis narrative, where human identity and sacred worth are fundamentally received as a gift of grace

rather than constructed through external digital validation.

### **Discussion: AI as a Contemporary Babylon and the Call to Faithful Presence**

#### **Artificial Intelligence as a Contemporary Babylon**

AI is increasingly shaping human thought, relationships, identity, and worship. Unlike earlier technologies that expanded human capacity, AI reshapes how people think and decide, mediating learning, companionship, and even spiritual practice.

The danger is therefore not merely the spread of false information but the gradual erosion of trust, discernment, and the capacity to distinguish truth from illusion. Gary Marcus (2023) said in testimony before the United States Senate on May 16, 2023: *'I come as a scientist, as someone who has founded AI companies, and as someone who genuinely loves AI — but who is increasingly worried'*. He warned of what he calls 'datocracy'—the opposite of democracy—arguing that AI chatbots are capable of *'clandestinely shaping our opinions, in subtle yet potent ways,'* potentially exerting even greater influence than social media. He cautions that seemingly technical decisions regarding the datasets on which AI systems are trained may exercise 'enormous, unseen influence' over human thought. Marcus's warning extends beyond concerns about misinformation to a deeper question of human formation. If AI increasingly mediates how people learn, interpret reality, and make decisions, it also helps shape the beliefs, values, and desires through which identity forms.

AI companion systems are designed to facilitate ongoing social and emotional interaction with users, including forms of friendship and relational engagement (Malfacini, 2025; Baylor et al., 2025).



Generative AI is also being used to produce sermons, devotional material, and worship music, while other AI systems have been developed to simulate conversations with religious figures, including representations of Jesus (Reed, 2025; Tang, 2025; Associated Press, 2026). These developments represent a significant shift from AI merely providing information about religion to participating, through human interaction with the technology, in activities traditionally associated with companionship, pastoral guidance, worship, and spiritual practice.

From a Christian theological perspective, AI does not possess consciousness or spiritual agency. The theological concern, therefore, lies not in AI's spiritual agency, but in the possibility that people may increasingly trust, grant authority to, and attach emotional or spiritual significance to technologies incapable of knowing, loving, or worshipping God. Christian worship is not simply the production of aesthetically pleasing music or religious content, and preaching is not merely the transmission of information about God. Both involve human spiritual discernment, responsibility, prayer, and dependence upon the Holy Spirit. Consequently, using generative AI as a substitute for the human responsibility involved in preaching, teaching, or composing worship music raises profound questions about discipleship, pastoral ministry, and communion with God. The distinction is therefore between AI as an assisting tool and AI as a substitute for Spirit-led human participation in ministry and worship. Concerns about emotional dependence and the transfer of relational needs to AI systems further reinforce the importance of this distinction (Sood & Gupta, 2025; Malfacini, 2025).

The danger is therefore not simply what AI can produce, but what human beings may begin to trust, depend upon, and allow to shape

them. Technologies that initially compete for human attention may increasingly invite emotional attachment, relational trust, and spiritual dependence. Like Babylon, the digital age rarely demands immediate worship. Instead, it gradually reshapes the habits through which worship eventually emerges. From the perspective of Daniel 1, the central question is therefore not merely what AI does, but who or what is forming the attention, affections, identity, devotion, and ultimately the worship of God's people.

### ***Remaining Faithful in Babylon***

Daniel's narrative offers a model of faithful presence: engagement without surrender. He learned Babylon's language, served within the government, and demonstrated remarkable wisdom, yet he refused to surrender the convictions that defined his identity before God. Significantly, although Babylon sought to rename Daniel, Scripture overwhelmingly continues to call him by the name given within God's covenant community. The narrative itself refuses to allow Babylon the final word over Daniel's character.

Likewise, AI is neither inherently evil nor redemptive; it reflects the love of its creators and users. The question is whether Christians will allow technology to define identity or remain formed by Christ.

The response is not fear but formation. If technologies shape desire through repeated habits, the Church must cultivate practices — prayer, Scripture, worship, fellowship, hospitality — that conform believers to Christ. These practices remind God's people that flourishing is found not in optimisation but in communion. Ultimately, the question remains: *Who will shape our loves?*



## Conclusion

This article has argued that the primary challenge presented by artificial intelligence and persuasive digital environments is not technological but theological: the central issue is human formation. Digital technologies do more than occupy attention; through repeated habits, persuasive design, and relational simulation, they shape desire, identity, and ultimately worship.

Interpreted through the Biblical framework of Daniel 1, the digital environment may be understood as a modern expression of Babylon — a pervasive system of cultural formation that seeks allegiance long before demanding worship. This study's principal contribution is the proposal that human formation follows a progression: attention shapes affection, affection directs devotion, and devotion culminates in worship. This framework allows contemporary research to be read theologically, showing that the struggle is no longer merely for attention but increasingly for affection.

Where digital systems commodify attention and AI competes for affection, Scripture presents a different vision of flourishing: identity as *Imago Dei*, received as covenantal gift of grace rather than constructed worth through external validation. Genuine flourishing flows from rightly ordered love, centred on God.

The Church's challenge is not whether to use AI but whether it will remain intentional about practices that shape its loves — prayer, Scripture, worship, fellowship, hospitality, and Church community. These are not merely religious activities; they are God's appointed means of human formation.

Throughout the Biblical narrative, humanity is repeatedly warned against exchanging God's gifts for convincing substitutes. In Genesis, Adam and

Eve exchanged trust in God's Word for the serpent's deception. Israel later exchanged the glory of God for a golden calf, while the Apostle Paul declares that humanity 'exchanged the truth about God for a lie' (Romans 1:25). The same pattern appears in the reign of King Rehoboam. After the treasures of the Temple were plundered, including Solomon's gold shields, Rehoboam replaced them with shields of bronze (1 Kings 14:25–28; 2 Chronicles 12:9–11). Bronze resembled gold, but it lacked its purity, value, and glory. The replacement was subtle enough to preserve appearances while concealing what had been lost. This image provides a striking metaphor for the digital age.

Artificial intelligence increasingly offers convincing simulations of wisdom, companionship, intimacy, creativity, and even Christian discipleship. Yet simulations, however sophisticated, cannot replace the covenantal relationships for which humanity was created. The greatest danger is therefore not always open opposition to the truth, but the gradual substitution of the authentic with convincing counterfeits that satisfy immediate desires while quietly diminishing the deeper realities for which God created humanity.

Ultimately, AI competes for affection. The enduring question is whether what captures our attention will displace the One worthy of our deepest devotion. As Jesus asked, 'When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?' (Luke 18:8). In an age captivated by technological power, Christian discipleship will depend not on innovation but on ordering our loves toward Christ, in whom identity, wisdom, and flourishing are found.



### Scope and Boundaries of the Framework

Several boundaries should be acknowledged. First, this study is conceptual and theological in nature. It employs an interdisciplinary synthesis of existing scholarship rather than generating primary empirical data. Consequently, the theological framework proposed here is interpretive and requires future empirical investigation to explore how the formative dynamics identified here may be observed within contemporary digital practices.

Second, the field of artificial intelligence is developing at an exceptional pace. Advances in generative AI, relational chatbots, and emerging digital technologies continue to outpace the peer-reviewed publication cycle. As a result, some technological developments discussed in this article may evolve rapidly and require ongoing scholarly reassessment.

Third, while this study adopts Daniel 1 as its primary Biblical framework for understanding cultural formation, other Biblical narratives and theological motifs could equally enrich this discussion. Future research might explore themes such as Israel's wilderness formation, the prophetic critique of idolatry, the Gospels' vision of discipleship and self-denial, or the imagery of faithful witness in Revelation. Such perspectives would not necessarily challenge this study's conclusions but would complement and extend its theological framework. The present study therefore does not claim to offer an exhaustive Biblical theology of artificial intelligence but instead proposes Daniel 1 as a particularly fruitful lens for examining the formative dynamics of the contemporary digital age.

Finally, this article intentionally integrates insights from neuroscience, psychology, educational research, and Biblical theology. While this

interdisciplinary approach offers a richer understanding of human formation than any single discipline could provide, it also requires careful interpretation to avoid reducing theological claims to scientific explanations or scientific observations to theological conclusions. Throughout this study, these disciplines have therefore been treated as complementary conversation partners rather than as mutually determinative sources of authority.

### 10. Further Theological and Practical Implications

The interdisciplinary framework developed in this article opens several avenues for continued exploration and application. These recommendations are not empirical prescriptions, but extensions of the theological argument presented.

- **Interdisciplinary Research:** Future work could investigate empirically how digital habits, AI, and attention shape identity and discipleship, complementing the theological insights offered here.
- **Theological Development:** Building on Daniel 1, additional Biblical motifs — Creation, Fall, wisdom literature, idolatry, prophetic critique, Christ's teachings, and Revelation — could enrich a fuller theology of technology and human formation.
- **Christian Leadership:** Leaders and educators should integrate theology with psychology, neuroscience, and technology studies to cultivate intentional practices that shape attention, affection, and identity in Christ.
- **Educational Formation:** Christian education should move beyond online safety, addressing how persuasive



technologies shape desire, relationships, and moral decision-making.

- **Recovery of Formation:** Communities must recover embodied practices — prayer, Scripture, worship, fellowship, hospitality — as irreplaceable means of Spirit-led formation, resisting AI's simulations of intimacy and discipleship.

## Ethical issues

### Competing interests

There is no conflict of interest to report.

### Ethical considerations

Because this study relies entirely on theoretical analysis and the synthesis of previously published, publicly available literature, and does not involve interaction with human participants or the

collection of personal data, formal institutional ethical approval was not required.

### Declaration of Artificial Intelligence Use

Generative AI was used to prepare this manuscript by assisting with language refinement, structural development, and editorial revision. All theological interpretations, scholarly arguments, literature selection, Scriptural exegesis, and final editorial decisions remain the author's sole responsibility. All references, quotations, and factual claims were independently verified against the original sources before submission.

### Conflict of Interest

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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