

## Exploring the Digital Practices of Youth. A Case Study of Saigon Zoo and Botanical Garden

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### Abstract

This paper focuses on the evolving dynamics of digital youth engagement in revitalising public spaces, presenting a compelling case study of the Saigon Zoo-Botanical Garden in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The Saigon Zoo and Botanical Garden (also known as Saigon Zoo) was once a popular entertainment hub. However, during the 2000s, there was a gradual decline in interest among young visitors, attributed to negative narratives in the public media. This decline almost led to closure amid the global COVID-19 pandemic. Aware of the situation, the youth began to embrace a proactive role in promoting the site through social media. They shared delightful moments of the zoo's animals, setting a trend for taking portraits against the backdrop of its picturesque botanical scenery. Through both physical and digital involvement, the youth breathed fresh life into this historical destination, engaging in acts of photo-taking and photo-sharing when visiting the Saigon Zoo. This study explores the case of the Saigon Zoo, examining how digital involvement influences the youth's perception and engagement with space. Given the nature of this study, the interview process and Photovoice method were employed to understand the digital-related behaviours of the youth. The findings underscore the positive impact of digital engagement on well-being while emphasising the need for a balanced approach to foster optimal engagement.

**Keywords:** youth, photo, Saigon Zoo-Botanical Garden, digital media, COVID-19 pandemic

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## I. Introduction

In recent years, the well-being of young individuals has emerged as a paramount concern, particularly for those living in metropolises like Ho Chi Minh. This demographic faces an elevated risk of experiencing depression, attributed to factors such as air quality (Ali and Khoja, 2019), disconnecting with nature (Jimenez et al., 2021). Consequently, the zoo has emerged as an ideal retreat for youth seeking to enhance their well-being (Rose, P., & Riley, L, 2023). In today's tech-dominated era, youth's leisure choices go beyond a space's potential for well-being. The younger generation is motivated not only by physical experiences but also by a desire to engage in the digital realm, where presenting identity online plays a crucial role in social lives. This shift highlights the significance of visual aspects and experiences worthy of sharing within a physical space. This paper explores the Saigon Zoo and Botanical Garden as a case study, illustrating how digital involvement can shape people's perceptions and experiences of space.



Figure 1. A corner of Saigon Zoo and Botanical Gardens Credit: photo taken by the author

Established in 1864, the Saigon Zoo and Botanical Garden (also known as Saigon Zoo), one of the oldest zoos in the world, is home to more than 125 animal species and 900 plant varieties. Recognised as the city's lung due to its numerous trees, Saigon Zoo serves as the green oasis in the heart of Ho Chi Minh City, where the urban vegetation is now diminishing. Despite the wealth of its natural resources, the Zoo has grappled with challenges in effective communication with its audience. Throughout the 2000s, negative narratives circulated in public newspapers, portraying the zoo as in decline, with concerns about the well-being of the animals and the lack of infrastructure management. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated financial difficulties, pushing the zoo to the brink of closure<sup>1</sup>. In response, the Zoo administration launched a plea for donations

<sup>1</sup> Linh, T. (2020), 156-year-old zoo 'crying for help,' vnexpress.net. Available at: <https://vnexpress.net/so-thu-156-tuoi-keu-cuu-4142556.html> (Accessed: 31 January 2024).

across various social media platforms, capturing the attention of youth, who constitute the primary audience on these platforms. The youth started to engage in promoting the Saigon Zoo's activities as many young photographers visited the destination and started taking photos, presenting a unique perspective through vibrant, human-like characteristics of animals, and showcasing the botanical landscape as an ideal check-in site. This digital involvement redefined Saigon Zoo as not just for family entertainment but as the prime destination for youth to create meaningful physical experiences while benefiting their online engagement.

Following the resolution of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a noteworthy increase in young visitors to Saigon Zoo and Botanical Garden. One of the primary activities by youth during their visits is the widespread practice of photo-taking. While some argue that digital devices may divert attention from real-life experiences (Ayeh, 2018), others contend that digital involvement enhances engagement (Dieh et al., 2016) and increases visitors' level of satisfaction when sharing their experiences with others (Lee et al., 2022). Considering the widespread practice of photo-taking among young visitors, understanding the impact of photo-taking and subsequent sharing is essential to understanding how these digital activities contribute to the overall enjoyment of their experiences. Despite the prevalence of digital-related behaviors among the youth, no significant study relating to the Saigon Zoo has been done on this matter. Therefore, in this study, I investigate how the digital practices of photo-taking and sharing by Vietnamese youth impact their engagement with the surrounding space, thereby influencing the youth's experiences at Saigon Zoo and Botanical Garden.

## **2. Observation and interview process**

To understand how young visitors experience the Zoo, I visited Saigon Zoo every day for a week (15-21 January 2024) and conducted interviews in Vietnamese with 52 young visitors (aged 18-25 years old) in total. To gain an overall perspective, I also conducted interviews with Zoo workers, adults (aged 30 and above), and foreigners. The study employed a combination of semi-structured and open-ended interviews and the Photovoice method. Photovoice is the practice of utilising photographs taken by participants, allowing them to reflect upon and share their personal experiences (Anderson et al., 2023). The Photovoice method was also used to facilitate the social media activities of the youth. This was crucial as, despite the variety of social media activities related to the zoo, young visitors often didn't tag their social posts with the location where the photos were taken, making it difficult to collect data.

Firstly, participants were asked about their motivations for visiting the Zoo, and the overall assessment of experiences, encompassing aspects such as the engagement with animals, and the landscape. Subsequently, following the Photovoice method, we asked the participants to select and share their most meaningful or favorite photo. We had follow-up questions such as: What inspired you to take this photo? What does the photo mean to you? What are the main platforms for sharing photos? This dual approach aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between the digital and physical experiences of the youth when visiting the Zoo.

### 3. The results

A total of 44 photos from 52 visitors are shared with permission from the owner. These photos fell into two distinct categories: animal photography and portraits of visitors captured by their friends. Within the portraits of the visitor’s category, 8 out of 18 images showcase individuals against the backdrop of the natural landscape, while the remaining 10 are positioned at iconic check-in sites within the Zoo. Among the 40 photos dedicated to animal subjects, 19 photos are about animals. Of these, 15 highlight cute reactions or funny behaviors displayed by the animals. Four photos feature animals not traditionally associated with zoos, such as stray cats, which also garnered significant attention from the youth.

Category	No of images	Themes
Animal Photography	15	Funny/cute moments of the Zoo animals
	4	Squirrels, cats
Portrait of the visitors	8	In front of the natural landscape
	10	Iconic check-in sites of the Zoo
Others	7	Botanical garden, art photography, selfies, group photos

Table 1. Overview of photos taken by youth from January 15th to January 21st, 2024

### 4. Findings & Discussions

When asked about their main motivation for visiting the Zoo, 40 out of 52 respondents indicated a desire to capture photographs. Influenced by the widespread social media activities about the Saigon Zoo, many young visitors are encouraged to visit the place and enjoy novel experiences, such as observing the animals, or connecting with nature, and subsequently capture these experiences to share them online. Hence, taking photos emerges as a central and integral activity for Vietnamese youth during their visits to the Saigon Zoo and Botanical Garden.

### 5. Photo-taking as a way to enhance the experience

According to a comprehensive study (Gillet et al., 2016), photo-taking has been identified as a means to enhance engagement with positive experiences. This finding supports the positive experiences the youth are having with the “green spaces” in the Zoo. The natural landscape is cherished not only for providing a tranquil space but also as a photogenic backdrop for photo-taking. In a conversation with a young volunteer at the Zoo, she explained, “I think many young people would like to take pictures in the Zoo because the green background makes them look better in photos” (Binh, 2024).

Taking photos requires attention to be directed toward the experience one wants to





Figure 2. The youth taking photos in the Saigon Zoo and Botanical Garden.  
Credit: photo taken by the author

capture. Kaplan (1995) states that maintaining focused attention on natural aspects has been found to result in better engagement with space and an enhanced effect of stress relief. To have nice-looking photographs, the youth are encouraged to explore the surrounding space of the zoo, seeking ideal green spots for their pictures. Through the pictures shown by the youth, the youth inevitably enjoyed taking pictures in front of the greenery or natural scenery (see Fig 3). In the assessment of their experiences, most of the respondents expressed a positive attitude towards the Zoo landscape, using descriptors such as “chill,” “refreshing,” and “a different world in Saigon,” reflecting the restorative effect of nature on the youth.

Another common subject in photo-taking is the zoo’s animals. Renowned for their funny characteristics, the Saigon Zoo’s animals serve as a significant draw for the youth on various social media platforms. Observing the animals could provide many opportunities for young visitors to learn about the animal’s habitat, which can also





Figure 3. Some of the portraits taken by the youth Credit: images used with permission

lead to greater enjoyment of experiences (Rose, P., & Riley, L, 2023). Nevertheless, the capacity for engaging in animal-watching is constrained at the Saigon Zoo due to infrastructure limitations. Other visitors, including foreigners and older-aged groups, expressed disappointment with the living conditions of the animals and the lack of on-site educational information at the Saigon Zoo.

While other visitors engaged in observing both animal behavior and the surrounding conditions, the youth exhibited a different approach. Their focus is primarily on observing



Figure 4. The langur, raised in semi-natural habitats, often received food from the visitors. Credit: photo taken by author

and capturing photos of the animals, accompanied by jokes or humorous comments shared with friends. Even when capturing moments of animals in seemingly dull or inactive states, the youth refrain from negative comments, often interpreting sleeping behaviors as normal and looking funny. A psychological study (Diehl et al., 2016) supports this phenomenon, demonstrating that observing and taking photos significantly heightens active participation. The act of capturing enjoyable moments through photography involves the youth in the experience, and it can even prompt them to formulate their narratives about the animals. For example, in the photos of the giraffe sitting on the grassland (see Fig 5.1), one young visitor posted with her caption, “*The short neck giraffe.*” Another took a photo of the tiger sleeping (see Fig 5.2). When asked why they liked this photo, the young visitor commented: “*Because it looks so funny. The tiger looks like I am on the weekend when I am too tired to care about everything else.*” (Anonymous, 2024)

## 6. Social media engagement: The public eyes

Forty-five individuals shared photos of their zoo trip on various social media platforms.



Figure 5.1. (left): The photos of a giraffe sitting on the ground. Credit: images used with permission  
Figure 5.2. (right): The photos of the tiger sleeping. Credit: images used with permission

Commonly-used platforms included mainstream social media channels such as Instagram and TikTok, as well as instant photo-sharing applications like Facebook Stories and Instagram Stories. Some visitors also utilise more private channels, such as Locket, the widget that shares live photos within the circle of close friends. Despite the diversity in social media activities, a recurring concern among respondents was how online audiences would perceive and engage with their posts. For instance, one respondent explained why she avoided sharing her experience on Facebook.

“I am afraid to post photos on Facebook because it often attracts less engagement than other platforms, such as Instagram. Moreover, the audience on Facebook includes not only friends but also teachers, and family, so I usually post more formal content there.” (Anonymous, 2024)

Previously, digital media involvement was studied as a tool for individuals to maintain or connect with social relationships (Ozkul, 2010; Firth, 2012). However, social networks also serve as a space for youth to present their idealised selves, seeking validation from their social circles (Boyd, 2009). Drawing from Goffman’s works on the representation of

identity, Papacharissi (2012) explained how the enhanced digital involvement of the youth has transformed travel experiences into 'performative' tourism. They no longer travel to 'discover' themselves but now think about an experience in terms of how they will share it with others. During interviews and through the photos shared by visitors, a prevalent pattern emerged where many expressed a strong inclination towards capturing images of animals that allow them to present their self-identity on social media platforms. One visitor showed a photo of stray cats in the Zoo (see Fig 6) and explained that she chose this photo simply because she is a cat-lover.

The intrusion of social media activities in the youth's travel experience is noteworthy as it contradicts their common motivation to visit the zoo as an escape from city life, seeking a worry-free environment. The pressure to actively participate in social media activities, through photo-taking and photo-sharing, may hinder youth from appreciating their own travel experiences. Instead, they may find themselves preoccupied with how their experiences are being received by others and how to capture the moments that may attract high levels of engagement. However, photo-sharing nowadays is deemed

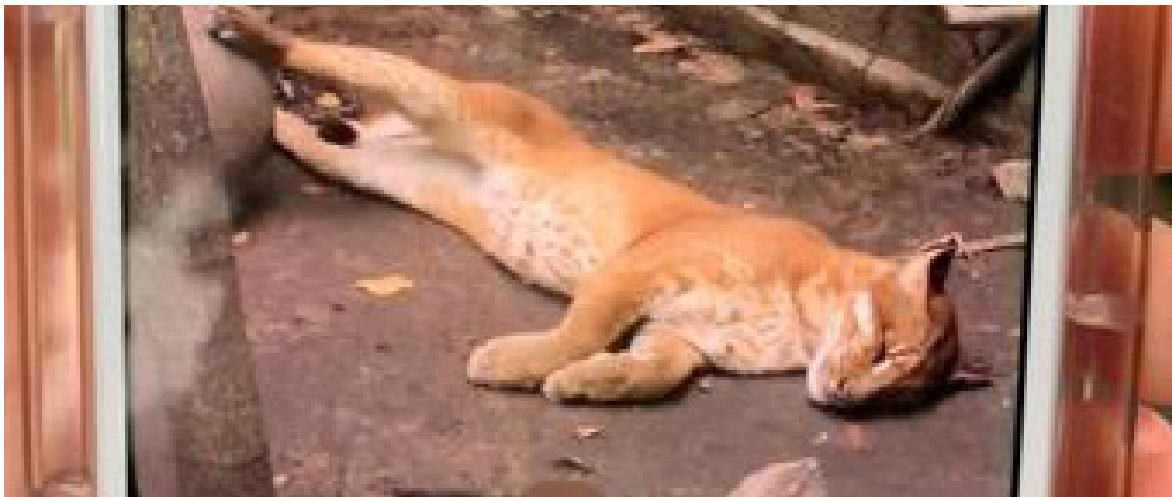


Figure 6. The photo of the stray cat living in the Zoo Credit: image used with permission

imperative to travel experiences, and the inability to share is linked to a reduced sense of completion and negative emotions (Lee et al., 2023). Therefore, numerous young visitors expressed a shift in their social media activities, choosing to refrain from sharing their photos on mainstream social media platforms, such as Facebook or Instagram. Instead, they opt to share them discreetly through "stories" or in private spaces like their Locket. This approach allows them to share their pleasures and the novelty of visiting the Zoo and animals while not getting concerned about others.

## **7. Conclusion**

This study aimed to examine young visitors' experience in the Saigon Zoo and Botanical Garden, which predominantly focused on engagement with destination elements in the physical space. We explored the present-day on-site experience of the young visitors with attention paid to the online photo-taking and photo-sharing endeavors of the visitors.



Young tourists both valued the on-site experience and images produced and shared during the trip, which many perceived to be key motivations for their experiences. We observed that the act of capturing photos had a positive impact on the well-being of visitor visits. However, while acknowledging the positive effects of photo-taking and photo-sharing, it is essential to recognise the potential role of digital involvement in distracting from the overall experience. Striking a balance between physical engagement and digital usage becomes crucial for young visitors, as it enables them to derive optimised benefits from both social media activities and real-life experiences.

The Saigon Zoo and Botanical Garden case underscores the significance of social media in connecting with a broader audience. Young visitors use these platforms to visually share and discuss their experiences with physically absent individuals. This intention is to include and, to some extent, attract other “online audiences” to visit and experience the Zoo. The active engagement of the youth in various social media activities has played a pivotal role in reshaping the perception of the Zoo that they are no longer just a place for families and children, broadening its appeal to a more diverse demographic.

It is noteworthy that the lack of activities offered by the Zoo has heightened the prevalence of photo-taking behaviors among youth. However, the lack of adequate information about the nature and habitats of the animals at the Saigon Zoo increases the likelihood that the youth may inaccurately capture and share photos on social media. For instance, many social media posts depict visitors feeding inappropriate foods to captive animals, a prohibited act that can introduce diseases to the animals (see Fig 6). Interviews with young workers at the Saigon Zoo reveal the impact of inaccuracies in social media posts. These workers proposed creative ideas for transforming the Saigon Zoo into an educational space for young audiences. One such idea includes integrating audio technology into exhibit signs to help young audiences better understand the stories of the animals at the Zoo. However, they expressed concerns about the rigid structure of the Saigon Zoo, as it is still under the management of the city, making it uncertain whether innovations will be implemented soon.

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