

## Virtual World, Metaverse, and Gen Z's Social Life

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Article Info	Abstract
<b>Received</b> : 2022-11-16 <b>Accepted</b> : 2024-05-29 <b>Published</b> : 2024-05-31	Research on Generation Z, the latest generation who are active in the use of the Internet and smartphones, has been widely carried out. Several previous studies have shown that Gen Z as social media users who are dominated by teenagers, also experience negative impacts because the use of smartphones dominates their daily activities. Different from other research, this research aims to discover the relationship between technology and human social life, especially in Gen Z ordinary life. The study was conducted using a qualitative method in the form of document studies and interviews. This study interviewed 10 informants of Gen Z among 15-20 years old in Bandung and Jakarta, West Java, Indonesia. Using Don Ihde's idea about the relationship between humans and technology as an analytical tool, this study shows that without intense communication and attention from parents and teachers, Gen Z can be trapped in their own virtual world and unconsciously slowly detach themselves from the world of reality. Technology is not an entity separate from humans and the world of life, through the material and digital artifacts technology suppose to help humans to live more meaningfully. The social life in the virtual world for Gen Z is as important as their life in the real world.
<b>Key words:</b> Gen Z; technology; virtual world; social life	

### INTRODUCTION

Members of Gen Z are on track to be the most well-educated generation yet. They are also digital natives who have little or no memory of the world as it existed before smartphone. Gen Z now peers into an uncertain future (Center, P.R., 2020). Despite the flaws, however, online learning process also has some good potentials in fostering the required creativity, provided it incorporates 'engagement experience' and some strategies to 'go beyond data' in accordance with the students' suggestions themselves (Manurung, E.M., et al., 2022).

The Corona Virus Disease 19 has reshaped the social, political, and economical landscape of any country. Covid-19 has changed the shape and pattern of today's learning, from what was originally face-to-face learning in class to virtual face-to-face in virtual spaces. Digital learning inevitably requires students to use computers, smartphones, and the internet massively. Virtual learning rooms increase the frequency of students' lives in cyberspace, and this does not necessarily have a positive impact on users. The views of the pros and cons are given by experts in various sectors, both in terms of psychology, sociology, law, and technology experts. The flood of information flows in the virtual world also raises concerns about the vulnerability of personal data protection and addiction to imaginary realities in the virtual world. The achievement of the result of web-based software application to design a financial management application through e-village budgeting that can help village-owned enterprises managers make transparent and accountable financial reporting (Diyanto & Musfi, 2022).

Addiction has emerged since the internet and social media were invented. Some students are even glued to their respective electronic devices. They are afraid of missing out on information, and even late in spending time on video game activities and serial streaming platforms. A study by Ozkan and Solmaz (2015) in Turkey on 276 university students using statistical analysis, found that Gen Z is not addicted to smartphones. They found that smartphones are their daily necessities does not necessarily make them addicted.

This study wants to look further at how the use of technology and virtual world, impact Gen Z's social life. This study aims to find the impact of the virtual world on the increasing dependence (addictive behavior) of young students in high school and college on smartphones and other digital devices, as well as how the government should intervene to overcome various problems regarding data security in social media and other virtual services.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Humans are in a world that is now touch with technology. The world inhabited by humans is a world constructed by technology. Even so, the technology used does not always make human life more prosperous, better and happier. The development of technology and its relationship with humans creates a paradoxical view. Technology shapes and changes people towards their culture and environment (Hidayat, T., 2021).

Technology has its roots in Greek, namely *techne* and *logos*. The word *techne* means skill and the word *logos* means knowledge. The word technology according to its roots means knowledge of skills. The word technology in the 20th century became a mention in terms of progress in the field of transportation, and also progress in the field of science, especially physics and its latest discoveries. Before the 20th century the word technology was used to mean various applied or mechanical tools, such as building tools, household appliances, communication devices, and printing equipment. The world of reality is now facing a virtual world that offers a pseudo-new reality, and all forms of imagination in it cannot be avoided. Its emergence supported by the rapid development of technology is very possible. The new artificial world of reality has transcended the boundaries of dualism or binary opposition, namely immanent and transcendent, physical-metaphysical. The boundary between artificial and reality becomes very blurred or invisible. Meanwhile, hyperreality is a condition in which we cannot distinguish between the real world and the imaginary world (Piliang, Y. A., 2014).

Research on Gen Z has been carried out. Studies on Gen Z's increasing usage of social media have to be done on their social media activities and their behavioral impact. This generation is a vigorous contributor, with high consumption of online content, and creative and mash-up experts; they have a strong gravitational bond for online communication that they prefer to participate and remain connected via technology available at their fingertips. According to PrakashYadav and Rai (2017) Gen Z as active users of social media show different behavior in shopping and communicating, they prefer doing it all virtually.

Generation Z's classified as a generation that has multi-tasking abilities: communicating, proficiency in using various electronic devices, and using digital technology. Even worse, Gen Z's predicted to become the loneliest generation, 10 points higher than the least lonely generation 72 older and older. However, tempting to blame Gen Z's reliance on smartphones and social media the data (survey results) do not bear out. The survey didn't find a significant difference in loneliness levels between those who used social media often or infrequently (Trinko, K., 2018).

Another study of Gen Z's found that they likely see their mental health deteriorate even further, and social life will get even more insular. It was found that Gen Z's behavior and attitudes are different due to their experience growing up in the topsy-turvy years following the internet's introduction in 1995 and in the wave of the Great Recession in 2008-2009, and it affect their expectations about how their lives would unfold. They want to find their identities and respect the identities of others. They defend diversity and equality and they want to correct injustices based on identity. They turn to peers and the Internet for advice and community, and to their parents for comfort and support. They are relying on a range of digital devices, apps, and networks for speed and efficiency. They also are fully at home in cyberspace, moving seamlessly between the "real" world and the one online (Kartz, R., 2019).

### Human Relations with Technology

Don Ihde is an American philosopher who focuses his philosophical thinking on science and technology. His pragmatism style thinking can be attributed to the phenomena being studied, and the basis of his thinking is the idea of Heidegger. In his view of the world, Ihde sees technology

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as an instrument of life, and technology as a tool for humans to understand the world. Technology is used as a mediator between humans and their world.

Don Ihde's thinking is called Post Phenomenology. Basically, phenomenology can be understood as showing oneself or a phenomenon or literally can be understood as showing oneself. Phenomenology describes the human experience associated with objects. Perception itself is divided into two, namely micro perception and macro perception. Micro perception is a human perception that is experienced directly through the human body and senses, while macro perception is a human perception that is obtained from the structure of human culture starting from the frame of mind; a pattern of life; as well as the ways of human habits (Nirwana, A., 2014).

Don Ihde, as a contemporary American philosopher of technology, pays special attention to the phenomenon of the presence of technology. According to him, the phenomenon of the presence of technology is a consequence because humans are basically technological beings and always live and move in a world that is constructed technologically through instruments. Therefore, the world of life where humans live is a place where humans can carry out their "technological" characteristics. The characteristics of human "technology" are manifested through creativity and skills in managing the world. The historical development of human civilization shows this. Humans have always been curious about nature by working with various raw materials or researching phenomena that occur in nature itself. It's all a human effort to fill its existence in the world.

The postphenomenology he developed shows the relationship between humans and technology which according to him does not always follow the intentions and designs of the creators, but varies depending on the context. The neutrality of technology directs humans into four relations of experience with technology. The four types of relationships are (i) embodiment relations, (ii) hermeneutic relations, (iii) alterity relations, and (iv) background relations (Benn, A., 2020).

Body relations can be understood as a tool or technology that is a form of extension of the human body. In other words, this concrete technology becomes a tool and through it, humans also relate to the world. Technology becomes a medium for humans and the world. An example can be seen when someone uses minus glasses. Then the glasses will become an intermediary so that people can see clearly according to their needs.

The second is the relation of representation or hermeneutics. Technology is understood as a text that needs to be interpreted. In other words, the relationship between man and technology is the extent to which he is able to interpret it. Humans interact with concepts that are difficult to measure with human abilities, so technology is needed. An example is the result of a CT scan where a doctor can see the human body without dissecting the human body.

The third understanding, i.e., the relationship with change, is: that technology is not just a medium used by humans, but technology has its own internal logic or in other words its own way of life. The technology resembles humans and seems to be a human assistant. Examples we can find such as Alexa, Siri, message confirmation, and so on. In this relation, basically, technology has its own world that cannot be understood by humans. The fourth understanding is the background relation. This can be understood when humans interact with technology. Humans are not aware of the presence of technology. The presence of technology seems absent in human consciousness because what is needed is the function of these technological tools and not how they work. The man basically uses technology to the extent he needs it. For example, used for schooling, working, relating with other people, and so on.

## **METHODS**

This research was conducted using a qualitative method, i.e., ethnography. Ethnography according to Harris and Johnson (2002) is "a portrait of people" in a narrow definition. Meanwhile, in a broader context, "ethnography is a written description of a particular culture - the customs, beliefs, and behavior based on information collected through fieldwork" (Fetterman, 1998). There are two stages of research. The first is through document studies

(library), and the second is through interviews with informants. Ten students at the secondary and higher education levels were interviewed in two cities. The cities of Bandung and Jakarta learning centers in West Java and in Indonesia have been selected as research objects.

Five questions have been structured to find out the positive and negative impacts of smartphones, digital devices, and social media on their daily learning patterns and social relationships. Followed by other open-ended questions that arise based on the answers from the informants. Some of the places chosen to conduct interviews are places to eat (cafes or restaurants) and places of worship of several informants.

**Transcript of Interviews**

The interviews have been done in two stages, first the interview with seven students in middle-high school, and the second, with three students in higher education. Some structured questions that have been prepared for the first interview are: (a) since what age have you been using a smartphone?, (b) for what purpose it is used?, (c) how long do you use it: half-day or all day long?, and (d) how do you understand today's smartphone technology?, (e) do you think your smartphone is a media for you to do something or help you learn?, (f) how do you interpret your smartphone existence?, (g) do you think a smartphone can be your personal assistant?, (h) is the presence of your smartphone absolutely necessary, or, do feel it's a normal thing (doesn't matter if it gone)?, (i) other open questions that may arise in response to informants reaction-reply. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Relevance to the Theory of Human Relations with Technology

No	Informant	Keywords			
		Body Relations (as A Media)	Representational (Interpretation)	Relationship (as an Assistant)	Use according to its function
1.	“M”	v	--	--	-
2.	“K”	v	v	v	-
3.	“GI”	v	--	--	-
4.	“Gr”	v	--	v	v
5.	“A”	v	--	v	v
6.	“PI”	v	v	v	v
7.	“BS”	v	v	v	v

Among ten questions that ask the first seven informants, the results vary. Some of the interviews excerpts are as follows:

*“I use my cellphone more to play games, watch TikTok or YouTube”* (said M and GI, Sept-Nov 2021)

*“I don't understand the question that the cellphone is like my assistant and whether I have used it to the fullest”* (said K, M, and GI, Sept-Nov 2021)

While Gr and A, students from senior high school are more understand about cellphone functions and how to use it optimally. Some other interviews excerpts with students of senior high schools are as follows:

*“I think I have used my cellphone well while studying, because since the pandemic a lot of learning has been done online and assignments must also be submitted to Google Classroom online”* (said Gr, A, PI, and BS, Oct-Nov 2021).

The three informants from junior high school do not understand the question of how you interpret the presence of your smartphone; and the question of whether it is enough to use it according to its function. While four other informants from high school are more familiar or

understand with four questions related to Ihde's theory. In summary, informants from junior high school do not understand the functions of their smartphones completely and they are less able to explore them for learning. Meanwhile, the four informants from senior high school are more understand their smartphone functions and they can use them for their purpose well.

Several examples of their understanding are: first, smartphones are a medium, especially for students in junior high school, to manifest themselves on social media. Besides, smartphones are also used as learning media. Thus, the smartphone has a physical relationship with these Gen Z students. Second, based on the relation of technology as a hermeneutical relationship (interpretation), the results of the interviews found interpretations of information, although not all informants especially those who came from junior high school are aware of it. Not all interpretations of technology in smartphones or other digital devices that are used are realized in their functions, purposes, and benefits as a whole and in the right way.

Third, related to technology as a relation to change. Smartphones have become an 'assistant' for users. Based on the results of interviews, students in high school use smartphone technology to play social media, play games and shop online. Two of the seven interview did not confirm this question. The fourth relationship related to background was understood and confirmed by students in senior high school, while the other three did not understand it. High school students need features in it in the form of applications that are used for learning, communication, entertainment, and more. So, the relationship between technology and the use of smartphones among students is the process of online learning, social media, playing games, and others.

The second stage of the interview is to ask three informants from higher education the same questions about Ihde's theory plus questions about how activities using smartphones in the virtual world have affected their social life. Finally, the results of both interviews were validated by two sources, namely teachers and parents.

The next three informants are university students, who were interviewed about the impact of the virtual world and metaverse on their social life. The results of the interviews classified into three categories as are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Results of Interviews with Three Students in Higher Education

No	Informants	Keywords		
		Imaginary Reality	Addicted and begin to replace the "real world"	Entertainment Source
1.	AO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ The fantasy of something that doesn't exist comes into being</li> <li>➤ Give users a new feeling and experience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Feel comfortable when using the internet</li> <li>➤ A person becomes oblivious to his true reality</li> <li>➤ Don't care about his/hersurroundings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Video games become one of the main entertainment</li> <li>➤ Gadgets as a distraction in awkward conditions including when with family</li> </ul>
2.	LA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Virtual reality is a video that is close to reality (can be a replacement)</li> <li>➤ Simulation of the human world through the internet</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Once addicted to the internet</li> <li>➤ Playing games is wasting time</li> <li>➤ Bringing the far away and near becomes far</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ The presence of the smartphone is only for entertainment</li> </ul>



3.	KC	➤ Related to cyberspace and social media	➤ My principle is, that anything in excess is not good <hr/> ➤ Wasting time on things (using a smartphone asan entertainer) that don't benefit us	➤ The smartphone is not the main and only entertainment in life. For me, the interaction with friends and family directly in life and togetherness is still more important and real
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The interview results in Table 2 show that the informants (students) realized the importance of the presence of the virtual world in their lives. Two informants feel that it is impossible for them to live without social media. Even today's AR dan VR devices –which are the basis for the development of metaverse technology make hanging out and playing in cyber space very fun and exciting for gamers. They also realize that what they are experiencing is slowly replacing what has been done in the real world. Despite this, there's still the third informant who feels that the presence of the virtual world is not an important factor in his life. Interacting directly with their family and friends is much better. This is related to questions about virtual life for respondents in an environment that allows family members to have different cultures and habits. The third respondent, in particular, has never experienced addiction to using social media because his family culture rarely uses technology as a medium of communication. As for the first and second, the surrounding environment still has a tendency to use gadgets even in family gathering situations which causes the atmosphere to become awkward.

**Validation with Parents and Teachers**

From the results of interviews with several teachers, it can be shown that the use of smartphones influences the development of students, students are judged to be too fast to mature because they can browse any information that is even above their age. Some applications that are considered influential in the early maturation of young students at junior high school namely: TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter, Line, YouTube, and Netflix. According to some of these teachers, students can actually do many things if they are not holding smartphones, such as discussing with friends and family, paying attention to the natural surroundings, and doing other positive activities. However, the more massive use of smartphones since the COVID-19 pandemic is inevitable, and the role of parents is very important in controlling the use of these smartphones.

Meanwhile, the results of interviews with parents illustrate that they are also responsible for determining children's behavior towards smartphone use. This is due to the direct communication factor in the family which plays an important role. In addition, by providing understanding and literacy about the use of smartphones and the "flood of information" in cyberspace, as well as about the vulnerability of data security which is considered important to explain to children from middle to high school. This is so that when they go to college, they will become skilled at using smartphones and other electronic devices to study and socialize.

**DISCUSSION**

Technological artifacts that appear in the world, are mediators of the direct relationship between humans and the world. Don Ihde examines the "human-technology-world of life" experience relationship through four relationships, namely bodily relations, hermeneutical relations, otherness relations, and background relations. In this contemporary era, digital-based technology is increasingly being created and used by humans. Smartphone-based mobile phones can realize the four relationship relationships in the relationship relationship description

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“human-technology-life world” Don Ihde. The technology offered in industry 4.0 is actually the main requirement for humans to be connected in the world.

The human experience of using technology and the human experience without using technology are indeed different. However, this thinking will apply if the world in question is a world that is directly experienced by humans, such as daily activities. The world that is now absorbed in digital-based technology creates an external world that can only be perceived and interpreted through technology. From the results of interviews with 7 junior-senior high school students and 3 university students, it has been proven that digital technology via smartphones has served as an amplification for their bodies to do their school assignments well; especially since the pandemic with the online learning situation. On the other hand, there is a possibility that they are trapped and alienated from the interactions and physical life around them because they are too busy interacting with the virtual world.

Humans are now only possible to see the world through technology, do various things to the world through technology, and interact with other humans through technology. The role of technology is to become the main human access to the external world that is manifested by technology. The nature of the world in Don Ihde's thought based on the relation "human-technology-world of life" is still a daily world that can be achieved and perceived with or without technology.

Human use of technology embodies the properties of amplification and reduction. According to Don Ihde, this trait is a fixed characteristic of every type of relationship. Humans are now faced with dependence on decisions made through technology that are quite accurate. Technology becomes a narrow area that makes humans increasingly alien to the world of their lives and narrows their own cognitive area. Humans now oblige the technology that has evolved to be present to help human life experience the world.

## CONCLUSIONS

### Conclusion

Some critics of Gen Z say they are just “snowflakes” who are unprepared for adult responsibilities and are still incomplete. Gen Z realized that the virtual world is as important as the real world where they can study, hang out, and play together with their friends. In the relationship between humans and technology, Gen Z understands that the presence of technology and internet tools and devices has helped them, like an assistant, to learn better, faster, and more efficiently. The fear that Gen Z will be the reclusive and loneliest generation has no solid and convincing basis. They are, perhaps, smarter than most parents and teachers imagine.

Another concern is about addictive behavior toward smartphone use. To be frank, this behavior does not happen by itself. There are factors that encourage this to happen. The main factors are the use of gadgets in the surrounding environment, especially in families; also values that have been instilled since childhood such as the value of time and togetherness. However, the surrounding environment and association can also lead to smartphone abuse by protracted playing social media and video games. Without intense communication and attention from parents, a student can be trapped in his own virtual world and unconsciously slowly detach himself from the world of reality around him.

Ihde's concepts of human relationship with technology, especially via students' smartphones in this study, has been proven to have served as an amplification for the body to do the school assignments, apart from being a medium for socializing and playing in the virtual world. Smartphones as a technology have helped many students continue learning during the pandemic until now, bringing them closer in the virtual world, as well as keeping them away from the real life in the physical world. This is also proof that Gen Z's social life today is very different from previous generations. The social life in the virtual world for Gen Z is as important as their life in the real world.

### **Suggestion**

One thing that is important in the activities in cyberspace is data security. There is always a threat to privacy and confidential personal data. Human freedom gives the widest will to do anything in cyberspace. Basically, it is difficult to supervise or restrict the use of gadgets and smartphones among teenagers. This should start with parents supervising their children; as well as institutions that influence them such as schools as representatives of the government and the surrounding community. The role of parents and teachers is still the key factor in monitoring the use of smartphones and gadgets today, as well as in encouraging students to optimize the use of their digital devices for learning, for positive benefits. The use of smartphones and other gadgets is like a double-edged sword, there must be control from the environment, in this case, parents at home and teachers at school.

This study has limitations in terms of the number of informants and the area that is the object of this research. Further research is expected to enrich and add another perspective.

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