

The Phenomenon of "Connected but Alone" and "Constant Connectivity" among Gen Z in Surabaya Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This research discusses social media usage behavior among Generation Z in the city of Surabaya and the phenomena of connected but alone and constant connectivity that emerge in the context of modern communication digitization. Using a quantitative descriptive approach through a survey of 130 respondents, this study found that 30.8% of respondents agreed that social media is individualistic, and 32.8% agreed that excessive internet use has become part of their lifestyle. Other data shows that 53.4% agreed that connections on social media are shallow, yet 58.1% also agreed that they feel more accepted when their posts get many likes/comments. These results indicate that Gen Z uses social media daily, feels that connections on social media are shallow, but also feels the need to check for new notifications. This study uses Turkle's connected but alone theory, which highlights the paradox of digital technology on human social relationships.

The phenomenon of connected but alone not only describes the paradox of modern communication but also gives rise to complex psychological implications for young people, particularly Gen Z. In this context, constant digital connectivity creates an illusion of social closeness, while emotionally individuals actually experience loneliness and social exhaustion.

This survey data illustrates a clear modern paradox: a high dependence on the internet and social media triggers excessive use. This intensive use, in turn, produces feelings of loneliness and shallow relationships, which are the core of the "connected but alone" phenomenon. The urge for "constant connectivity" creates anxiety and shifts the source of self-validation to the digital world.

Keywords: connected but alone; FOMO; gen z; constant connectivity; communication

INTRODUCTION

The development of communication technology has brought fundamental changes in the way humans interact, communicate, and express themselves. One tangible manifestation of this transformation is the increasing role of social media in daily life, especially among Generation Z—a group born and raised in a fully connected digital era (Prensky, 2001; Dimock, 2019). This generation views technology not as an additional tool, but as an integral part of their identity and social life (Twenge, 2017).

Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and X (Twitter) allow users to present themselves, build social networks, and gain social validation through likes, comments, and follower counts (Marwick, 2013).

Gen Z refers to those born between the 1990s and 2010s. They were born familiar with technology, so their daily lives are inseparable from the internet. They have social media, are accustomed to communicating with images, maintaining relationships digitally, fear missing out, have high multitasking abilities, use connectivity to drive change, and are also susceptible to digital burnout.

However, behind the ease of interaction and self-expression, a new paradox emerges in the social life of the digital society. The phenomenon of connected but alone, proposed by Sherry Turkle (2011), describes a state

where individuals appear always connected online, but emotionally feel lonely and alienated. Constant digital connectivity does not always result in meaningful closeness, because relationships built in cyberspace are often shallow and lack emotional intimacy (Turkle, 2017).

This tendency is reinforced by the emergence of a constant connectivity culture, where individuals feel the need to always check notifications, update statuses, and follow social developments in the virtual world (Barassi, 2016). This phenomenon not only impacts the way we communicate but also affects the psychological and social balance of its users. Research by Przybylski et al. (2013) introduced the concept of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), which is the feeling of anxiety when one is not involved in online social activities. This urge to always be connected can trigger digital fatigue and a decline in the quality of real-world social relationships (Dhir et al., 2018).

Generation Z is the group most vulnerable to this phenomenon. As digital natives, they are accustomed to multitasking across various social media platforms, making the virtual world the primary space for socialization and identity formation (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). However, on the other hand, high exposure to digital content and interaction makes them susceptible to social pressure, loneliness, and social anxiety caused by the need to always appear active and exist online (Vaterlaus et al., 2021).

According to Turkle, although humans are increasingly connected technologically through digital devices and social media, the quality of interpersonal relationships is actually declining. Digital communication is often shallow, curated, and loses emotional depth. Turkle (2011) asserts that "We turn to technology to help us feel connected in ways we can comfortably control," showing that digital connections are more often used to avoid loneliness, not to build meaningful closeness.

"This condition is exacerbated by the constant connectivity culture which causes symptoms like fear of missing out (FOMO), digital stress, and reduced social empathy (Przybylski et al., 2013).

Several studies show that social media can be an effective means for self-expression and building a positive image, but it can also cause feelings of isolation if users get trapped in social comparison and the search for external validation (Lee et al., 2020; Beyens et al., 2020). For example, a study by Dhir et al. (2018) found that high frequency of social media use is associated with increased FOMO and symptoms of loneliness.

This research aims to analyze how Generation Z in Surabaya uses social media as a means of self-expression while facing the paradox of connected but alone and constant connectivity. The main focus is to understand the extent to which the level of social media use influences perceptions of social connectedness and the tendency towards feelings of digital loneliness.

Thus, this research is expected to provide theoretical and practical contributions to the study of digital communication, especially in understanding the dynamics of social relationships in the era of non-stop connectivity. Theoretically, this research enriches the understanding of Connected but Alone Theory in the context of Generation Z in Indonesia.

METHOD

The research type is descriptive quantitative without testing relationships between variables. This research examines aspects of the nature of connected but alone, consisting of feeling lonely and shallow connections. The aspects of constant connectivity examined are the need to stay connected and external validation through likes. The population is Gen Z in the city of Surabaya, with a sample of 130 people within the age range representing Gen Z who are still in college. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research involved 130 respondents from Generation Z in the city of Surabaya, consisting of 55% female and 45% male. Based on daily internet usage data, the majority of respondents (56.9%) use the internet for more than 6 hours every day, while 30% use it for 4-6 hours, and only 13.1% use it for 1-3 hours. These findings

reinforce the view that Generation Z is a community group that is highly digitally connected and has high intensity in interacting through social media (Putri & Rahmawati, 2023). This data also shows that Generation Z has a very high level of digital connectivity and falls into the category of heavy internet users. This usage pattern depicts the characteristics of digital natives who live in an always connected culture (Przybylski et al., 2013).

The results related to connected but alone are as follows:

As many as 53.4% of respondents gave a score of 4 or 5 to the statement "I feel connections on social media are shallow or temporary". This is strong evidence that although technically connected with many people, the quality of these relationships is not felt to be deep. As many as 50.9% stated feeling that no one truly knows them in the digital world. As many as 51.2% agreed that they "often feel lonely even though active on social media". This data directly supports the "connected but alone" phenomenon, where digital interactions are unable to fulfill the need for authentic emotional relationships.

As many as 32.5% felt that "social media makes me lose real closeness with people around me". This shows an awareness that the time and attention devoted to the online world can erode real-world relationships. Regarding the statement "I feel no one truly knows me well online," 50.9% agreed with this.

Meanwhile, the results for constant connectivity are as follows:

Need to Stay Connected: The urge to "always check notifications or new messages" is very strong, with 74.8% giving a score of 4 or 5. This behavior is characteristic of constant connectivity, where individuals feel they must always be on and fear missing information. Indications of digital addiction are seen from 53.7% who feel "anxious if they don't open social media for a long time". This reinforces that constant connectivity is no longer a choice, but a need that triggers stress when not met.

External Validation through "Like": As many as 58.1% admitted that they feel "more accepted when their posts get many 'likes' or comments". This shows that self-esteem and feelings of acceptance are increasingly dependent on external validation from the digital environment, which is a psychological impact of an always-connected environment.

The very high tendency of internet use indicates that digital media has become an integral part of the daily activities of Generation Z, both for communication, entertainment, learning, and self-development. This phenomenon illustrates a shift in communication culture towards a pattern that is entirely online and instant (Nasrullah, 2020).

The research results show that 30.8% of Generation Z respondents stated they agree that social media is individualistic. This finding confirms that social media has transformed into a personal space for individuals to express themselves, build identity, and control the image they want to show to the public.

Furthermore, the research results also show that 32.8% of respondents agree that excessive internet use has become part of the Generation Z lifestyle. This generation grew up in an always connected era, where the line between need and dependence on the internet is increasingly blurred. According to Kuss and Griffiths (2017), excessive use of digital media can lead to internet addiction, characterized by loss of control, increased tolerance, and the emergence of withdrawal symptoms when not connected.

Kuss and Griffiths (2017) state that excessive use of digital media can lead to internet addiction, characterized by loss of control, increased tolerance, and the emergence of withdrawal symptoms when not connected.

Twenge (2019) adds that the high intensity of social media use among Gen Z is closely related to increased anxiety, stress, and feelings of loneliness. Thus, although social media has great benefits in supporting communication, entertainment, and social connection, its uncontrolled use can negatively impact psychological well-being.

The phenomenon of individualistic nature and excessive internet use among Gen Z has important social implications. On one hand, social media provides space for this generation to expand their network and express themselves freely. But on the other hand, individualistic orientation can weaken the quality of authentic social interactions in the real world. Turkle (2017) calls this condition the "connected but alone" phenomenon, where individuals feel always digitally connected but lose emotional closeness in face-to-face relationships. According to her, digital communication is often shallow and loses emotional depth because users tend to seek connections that can be controlled. She writes, "We turn to technology to help us feel connected in ways we can comfortably control."

In the context of Gen Z, this is evident from their tendency to rely on digital interactions to fulfill social needs. However, communication that is fast, brief, and fragmented reduces emotional closeness. Liu et al. (2022) state that the always on condition causes a decline in empathy and attention, because individuals are accustomed to dividing their focus between the physical and digital worlds simultaneously.

This phenomenon impacts the increase in social anxiety, digital stress, and digital loneliness—loneliness that arises not from a lack of connections, but because those connections do not provide emotional meaning (Lim et al., 2023).

This phenomenon is very relevant to Gen Z, a generation that grew up in a culture of constant connectivity. They are accustomed to instant responses, status updates, and continuous existence in the virtual world. Turkle (2017) in *Reclaiming Conversation* emphasizes that the ability to enjoy solitude is increasingly declining because individuals prefer fast yet shallow digital interactions.

Generation Z lives in an always connected culture, where online presence is considered part of social existence. Kuss and Griffiths (2017) explain that excessive use of digital media can cause internet addiction, characterized by loss of control and the emergence of stress when not connected. Przybylski et al. (2013) add that the pressure to always be active on social media gives rise to fear of missing out (FOMO)—the fear of being left out from digital social activities.

For Gen Z in Indonesia, this phenomenon is even stronger due to the still prevalent cultural collectivism factor. Sari and Prasetyo (2022) note that individuals in collective societies tend to feel anxious if they do not follow the social flow of their group, even in the digital world. As a result, constant connectivity becomes a new social norm that reinforces digital fatigue and decreased psychological well-being (Dhir et al., 2021).

However, despite all of the above, 74% of respondents agreed that they feel happier when interacting directly compared to online, and 79.7% stated they are aware of the time spent in the digital world, so they try to balance online and offline life.

Candiotto (2022) introduced the term extended loneliness, a form of loneliness that arises precisely because of too many online connections without relational depth. He emphasizes that "loneliness can arise from an abundance of connections in the online sphere." In the context of Gen Z, this means that although they have many friends on social media, most of these relationships are superficial and do not provide real emotional support. Thus, social media creates an illusion of connectedness that often masks the reality of digital loneliness.

The connected but alone condition also impacts Gen Z's ability to interact face-to-face. Turkle (2011) found that many individuals feel awkward without a digital device in their hands, even when in the middle of a direct conversation. This shows that the presence of technology has changed the norms of interpersonal communication. According to Liu et al. (2022), constant connectivity causes a decline in attention capacity and empathy because individuals are accustomed to dividing their focus between the physical and digital worlds simultaneously.

Gen Z. Liu et al. (2022) state that constant connectivity causes a decline in attention capacity and empathy because individuals are accustomed to dividing their focus between the physical and digital worlds simultaneously. As a result, face-to-face communication loses emotional depth and is replaced by digital symbols like emojis and reaction icons.

The social implications of this phenomenon are quite significant. First, face-to-face communication loses emotional depth because it is replaced by short messages and digital symbols like emojis or reaction icons. Second, social pressure to always be active on social media causes digital stress and a feeling of never being enough (fear of missing out or FOMO) (Przybylski et al., 2013). Third, individuals begin to judge self-worth based on others' responses in the virtual world, not from real interactions or self-reflection. Consequently, social relationships are increasingly influenced by performative logic: how to appear, not how to interact sincerely.

Furthermore, the constant connectivity phenomenon describes a condition where individuals feel they must always be connected to the digital world, whether through messages, notifications, or social media. According to Vorderer et al. (2018), this state causes digital fatigue because users have no time to truly disconnect from the demands of the online social world. For Generation Z, this becomes more complex because most of their activities—whether learning, working, or socializing—take place digitally.

From a communication perspective, constant connectivity blurs the boundaries between public and private space. Social media users tend to keep checking their phones even when interacting directly with others, which causes attention disruption and lowers the quality of face-to-face communication (phubbing) (Roberts & David, 2017). As a result, interpersonal relationships become superficial, and empathy between individuals decreases.

The phenomena of connected but alone and constant connectivity describe the paradoxical condition of Generation Z: they are highly connected, yet lose the depth of social relations. In the context of this research, this explains why some respondents consider social media to be individualistic—because digital interactions emphasize self-expression and the need for validation more than authentic interpersonal relationships.

From a psychological perspective, constant connectivity can create feelings of excessive attachment to digital devices. A study by Hunt et al. (2018) found that the more often individuals use social media, the higher the level of social anxiety they feel. This condition is worsened by the pressure to always respond to messages, update statuses, and maintain online existence. Ultimately, this leads to a condition called digital fatigue, which is exhaustion due to gadget exposure.

In the context of Gen Z culture in Indonesia, social media becomes a highly individualistic arena for identity formation. They not only use social media to communicate but also to display an ideal version of themselves. Digital identity for Gen Z is performative, where users display certain aspects of themselves according to prevailing digital social norms.

Digital social fatigue (social media burnout) becomes a subsequent impact of constant connectivity. This phenomenon occurs when individuals feel pressured by social expectations to always be active and responsive. According to Dhir et al. (2021), this pressure lowers psychological well-being and triggers the desire to temporarily withdraw from the digital world. However, because social needs and self-image on media remain high, Gen Z often quickly returns to using social media.

Overall, this phenomenon shows that Gen Z is in a modern communication dilemma: they long for authentic connection, but are trapped in a digital system that forces them to constantly perform and connect. Indonesian digital culture reinforces this paradox through social pressure to appear "ideal" in cyberspace, which often eliminates space for self-authenticity and personal reflection.

CONCLUSION

The phenomena of connected but alone and constant connectivity reflect the modern communication dilemma of Generation Z: they long for authentic connection but are trapped in a digital system that demands them to constantly perform and connect. Social media provides space for self-expression but also reinforces individualism and digital loneliness. Therefore, digital literacy needs to be directed not only at technical skills but also at emotional awareness and ethics of technology use so that Generation Z can balance digital connections and meaningful human relationships.

The phenomenon of connected but alone is also closely related to the concept of "digital loneliness". In recent research, Lim et al. (2023) explain that digital loneliness does not always mean lacking social connections, but arises when online relationships do not provide deep emotional meaning. For Gen Z, whose interactions are mostly conducted through digital media, these pseudo-relationships actually create an inexplicable sense of emptiness.

Interestingly, behind all these negative impacts, respondents showed a high awareness of this problem and have a desire to change. This indicates that although trapped in the cycle of constant connectivity and experiencing connected but alone, individuals essentially still long for authentic interaction and are aware of the importance of balance.

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