

Supportive communication climate in the self-development of Generation Z

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ABSTRACT

Generation-Z has become a popular topic in mass media, due to their development amidst the growing online lifestyle of our society. Born between 1996--2010, the internet has become part of their life development, as it slowly grew into our society. Generation-Z was the true digital native. They have grown accustomed to using their handphone all day long, doing various activities with it. Such custom is enhanced by the Covid-19 pandemic which reduced, significantly, the possibility of a direct physical contact with other members of the society since March 2020. They are also facing differences of their learning and working process—where schools and offices alike were forced to take operations online. This research used the qualitative-descriptive approach to get a natural depiction of the informants, and a study case to get a holistic data from the respondents, a group of Generation-Z. The purpose of this research is to find out how Generation-Z interprets the online learning situation. Using Modern Theories of Learning and symbolic interactionism, it was found that informants grew up in a supportive communication climate while learning from home. Informants are also more productive as they could study while working, interning in several places. This finding concluded that Gen-Z could use their online situation to their development.

Keywords: Gen-Z, symbolic interactionism, modern theories of learning, supportive communication climate.

INTRODUCTION

Communication climate can affect the productivity of an individual who exists within a organization. Communication climate plays important role in the process of learning and teaching (AlAhmad, 2021; Muste, 2016; Tahrin, 2019). It was found that a cordial, supportive, intimate, and open climate in school produced positive effects on the students' productivity in class. In contrary, negative effects on the students' productivity were found when interactions between the individuals within that climate were filled with tension and control.

Along with the adjustments of educational system during this pandemic, communication climate within the education process also changed. March 2020 marked the beginning of a fully online learning and teaching process, as an effort from the government to minimize the transmission of Covid-19. Students and teachers alike had to adapt with video conference platforms, online lectures, and recent technological advancement in order to be able to utilize their working space better. Bedrooms, living rooms, even dining rooms, became makeshift classrooms. Classmates turned into more familiar faces: sisters, brothers, mother, and father.

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Concerning with such condition, whereas the already-high technological and social media consumption of Generation Z was taken further, it is urgently need to be more pay attention on their current online education process. Thinking about Generation Z are somewhat justifiable if we remember the fact that they are the next generation; today’s youngsters who would be the cantilever of our nation, decades to come. Indonesia’s first president, Soekarno, said the popular saying “Give me 1.000 old people and I’ll pull Semeru Mountain from its roots. Give me 10 young people and I’ll shake the world.” This motivational sentence exhibits the power of the younger generation, who are usually stronger in physique and in spirit. The future of a nation is determined by its young generation, and that is why the government of a country pays detailed attention to the education and national values of its young generation.

Generation Z (or as commonly known and abbreviated as Gen-Z), consists of those born in 1996 and onward (Parker & Igielnik, 2020) Gen-Z has been given quite a lot of names: the Gen-Net, the i-Gen, and influencers generation, mostly due to their most distinguishable characteristic as a ‘true digital native’(Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Other than being a generation of digital natives, Gen-Z also possesses several human values as discovered by M. Sadiyakorn. These human values are better depicted through Fig. 1, wherein we may see that Universalism and Benevolence are two of the most important values to Gen-Z.

Universalism to Gen-Z refers to “...a strong belief in the collective welfare of all living things.”(Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021). Due to this value, Gen-Z can be seen triggering and or contributing in discourses about equality (e.g: racism, gender equality, disability awareness), and environmental issues (Greta Thunberg and her environmental movements).

There are also a few things to be highlighted about the social interaction, or decline, of Gen-Z because they spend more time online than offline. But as a matter of fact, Benevolence became one of the most important values to Gen-Z according to (Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021).

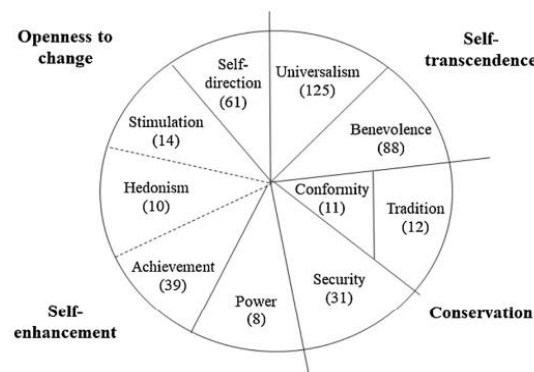


Figure 1: Salient Human Values and Four Respective Dimensions of Gen-Z (Source: Sakdiyakorn et al. 2021)

Participants narrated the importance of an honest, loving, supportive, and loyal inner circle. In that respect, social interaction between Gen-Z still happens and the need for it does not decline as extremely as previously predicted.

Even though Gen-Z do desire strong bonds with loved ones, another human value that Gen-Z seems to possess is “self-direction”. Gen-Z values freedom and independence, whether it be the result of a liberal nurture, or childhood trauma leading to desire of independence, or the impact of their idols who seem to understand them and promote such values (e.g: BTS and their “love yourself” campaign, Selena Gomez with her “Mental Health 101” campaign).

We have to be more concern to the life development of Generation Z because the environment and climate wherein they grow is vastly different due to the advancement of information technology. In this case, internet and social media intensify the connectivity in our society. People from different corners of the world can easily communicate and surf the internet

for various needs. They can send e-mails, look for data, converse, and do numerous activities—sometimes at the same time. Internet also changes people's lifestyle: from the way we communicate, our job choices, to the way we shop. Nowadays e-commerce such as Shopee, Bukalapak, Tokopedia, etc. are almost as popular if not more popular than offline stores. From the perspective of social and cultural, internet makes it easier for people to interact. From the perspective of politics, candidates can better look for mass, and voters can better find out information about their candidates.

According to a survey made by the Central Bureau of Statistics in 2019 (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2020), one in four citizens of Indonesia is between 10-24 years old. To be more precise, around 67,26 million people, 86% of which are smartphone users. These people are part of the Generation Z who possess potentials and are tech-savvy which would affect life in Indonesia within one, or two decades to come. They will lead Indonesia and fill its workforce. They are a multilayered generation, a multitasking generation, who can access the internet while watching television (TV), who like series, game show, horror series, drama, and funny light entertainments (Dolot, 2018).

Gen-Z exists in a very social situation, that is when technology and gadgets are advancing at a rapid pace. These digital natives experience life differently than their preceding generations. Gen-Z are tech-aware, tech-savvy, they know how to handle gadgets, and have virtual friends—Gen Z gets more and more used to living in the online world. This situation emphasized with the pandemic situation which required people to stay at home, rendering people with no other alternative unless do adapt and adopt the online/virtual interactions.

So, the question becomes: how has the development of technology affect the way Gen-Z interact with their environment? Especially given the concerns/stereotypes from the preceding generations about their technological and social media consumption. This research is aimed to find out on how Gen-Z interprets the online situation; how they use the online situation for their own learning productivity advantage, and how Gen-Z perceive social interaction in the digital era.

Climate is a figure of speech used to perceive the life of an organization. The term organizational climate was first introduced by Kurt Lewin through the usage of the term 'atmosphere' in Field Theory in Social Science (Burnes, 2004). Lewin defined climate as an imaginative condition; situation, that exists within an area. Whereas Tagiuri used of term 'climate' (Wahyono, 2019) in an organizational context to see the learning environment, which can withstand relatively longer time, that is experienced by the individuals within the environment, and can affect the behaviors of each individuals.

Climate can also be seen as an emotional environment that develops from the emotions of the members of the organization. If the climate can promote and support development, then it will be considered as a positive or supportive climate. On the contrary, a disruptive climate that disturbs the comfort of its members will be seen as a negative or defensive climate. A defensive communication is a defensive act that is done when someone feels threatened or in danger due to threats toward their status or pride, from the message conveyed by their interlocutors.

Defensive Communication is not just a matter of linguistic issues, but also behavioral issues (Garvin-Doxas & Barker, 2004; Nazia Jahangir et al., 2021). Communication is the exchange of message that can be done face-to-face and or through written mediums; verbal and non-verbal. Communication happens when the message exchange happens between two and or more people, in a group or an organization.

Communication climate can be defensive if the message to be conveyed are: a) criticizing, evaluating; b) controlling or forcing; c) strategizing or deceiving; d) rigid towards rules/regulation; and or e) instructional, or an absolute decision that cannot be debated.

On the contrary, a communication climate can be supportive if:

- a) The members of the climate look for information when conflict arises, which means members put solving the problem before looking for someone to blame
- b) Focus on the problem and looking to cooperate to solve the problem
- c) Spontaneous and honest, which means members have a candid attitude around each other, not hiding information and is more supportive; and they don't easily doubt the other members.
- d) Empathy, which means showing their feelings and showcase an understanding towards their environment; to give help without expecting something in return. For example: checking up on their friends' conditions.
- e) Equal, a mutual sense of trust, which means that members consider themselves to be equal, not belittled nor belittling another member of their climate/environment
- f) Expecting feedback, which means giving a chance for others—in this case to friends and their environment—to discuss.

BF Skinner introduced the Behaviorism Theory within the modern theories of learning. Behaviorism Theory explained how individuals would learn better when they're responding to various external stimuli. An example of external stimuli is the reward-punishment system. When an individual is faced with reward, they will try to achieve said reward, whereas when faced with punishment, they will try to avoid it. The same concept is applicable to another external stimuli: fear and desire. This theory shows on how humans are actively and independently capable of choosing a situation that best supports themselves. They can decide for themselves what feels good and bad, what's difficult and easy, and they can also choose which friend supports and which friends trouble them instead.

Usually, individuals grow and interact as a group, a network, and organization to create a shared identity, whether formal or informal. Herbert Mead in symbolic interactionism theory depicted on how, first, humans not only respond to their environment, but also interpret it all of their life time. It means that individuals actively create realities. Second, humans believe in something based on its benefits or may trigger a belief, learned it as knowledge, memorized, and implemented according to their capabilities. Thirdly, humans act in a selective manner by paying attention to situations and how such situations may fit to their purpose (Purbaningrum, 2011)

The self-development of an individual happens in a self-adaptation process that happens continuously towards many influences, challenges, and opportunities. This process would make an individual, in this case Gen Z, filled with lots of pressure (stress). Such pressure is experienced as a consequence of their effort to process information which involve many symbolic meanings (Brent D. Ruben, 2006). The more challenges or opportunities gotten by an individual, the more pressure they experience as well. Both positive and negative things can be the source of a pressure, for example: deadline for college assignments, presenting in front of the class, dealing with supervisors and assignments during their internship experience, different assignments that come simultaneously—they can all be considered as symbolic threats that can trigger hormonal work. Individual will try to adapt themselves to the pressure, to deal with the emotional stress.

Groups or friendship relations become important to individuals, in this case Gen Z, because groups can lessen the load by asking for information to friends or other members of the group, joke around, and release emotional pressure. Gen Z and their groups are active in Instagram, Line, WhatsApp, Twitter, and many other social medias. They interact in various groups, in a dynamic and fast-paced virtual space, which enables an individual to connect with and even befriends various types of people. The anonymity of online world also enables people

to act brave/braver without having to show themselves. Walther & Whitty (2021) introduced the term “hyper personal” to describe online interaction. Those who interact through digital media usually have a relatively higher emotional intensity and self-disclosure level, rather than those who prefer to do face-to-face interaction. A virtual identity can also vary greatly, according to the purpose and wish of the individual.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research used qualitative-descriptive approach that describes the learning situation of Generation Z as they make use of their learning time during the stay-at-home situation. Subjects are a group of university students (seven people) from the Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Indonesia. The reason behind the subject decision was because Universitas Indonesia is one of state universities that is set as the barometer of educational success. Data was collected within one month (1-30 October) through in-depth interview using online platforms. Afterwards, a thematic categorization was done according to two categories: 1) activities (internship, college), and 2) productivity and interaction (friends and family) to see their communication climate.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tools used by individuals to support their activities vary, but two of the most prominent ones used by Generation Z are handphone (HP) and laptop. All informants use handphone and laptop more than 12 hours a day for various activities: college lessons, internships, organization, and even their own business activities (see: **Table 1**).

Working and Classes

Internship is an obligatory practical activity for students in their 8th (eighth) semester and done for the minimum of three months, usually after students finish their obligatory classes in the 7th semester. Internship is done in companies as a work practice and counts for 6 credits in the academical transcript. Ever since the pandemic and online class situations, informants had started taking and applying for internships in their 5th semester. That means, when they interned at that time, they were still actively participating in seven online classes. Other than that, some of the informants were also still active in their organization and online business.

Table 1. Variety of Gadget and Usage by Gen-Z

Informant	Gadget	Duration of Usage	Activities	Double Device Usage
A	1 HP, 1 laptop	HP >14 hours, laptop 4.5 hours	4 classes, internship (twice), online business, side project (validating data for project with the Bank of Indonesia)	Internship and organizational meetings—focus on internship.
B	1 HP, 1 laptop	HP >14 hours, laptop 6 hours	4 classes, internship (twice), executive board of a student organization	Internship and classes—focus on internship (can review class from recordings or

				by asking friends)
C	1HP, 1 laptop	HP 18 hours, laptop 16 hours	4 classes, internship (three times), student committee (Jazz Goes to Campus), side project (tutoring)	Internship and class—focus on internship.
D	1 HP, 2 laptops	HP 5 hours, laptop 12 hours	4 classes, internship (three times), chief of a student organization, side projects (making modules, teaching, validating data for project with the Bank of Indonesia)	Internship, scholarship classes from NUS (National University of Singapore), and class from home university (Universitas Indonesia). Switch focus.
E	1 HP, 1 laptop	HP 4 hours, laptop 12 hours	4 classes, internship (twice), online business	Internship and class—focus to internship (can ask friends about class materials).
F	1 HP, 1 laptop, 1 iPad	HP 16 hours, laptop 12 hours, iPad 3 hours	4 classes, internship (twice), member of a student organization, side projects (start-up with friends)	Internship and class—focus to internship, unless must present in class.
G	1 HP, 1 laptop, 1 iPad	HP 6 hours, laptop 16 hours, iPad 3 hours	4 classes, internship (4 times, 3 at the same time), side projects (making modules, teaching assistant in faculty, start-up with friends)	Internship and class (often), focus to internship.

Internship, to the informants, is also considered as a validation that they are somewhat valued as enough for the working world. Informants felt some sense of pride when they could get accepted as interns in big companies (e.g: Bukalapak, Shopee, Procter and Gamble/P&G, Boston Consulting Group, and one among the Big 4 Public Accounting Firms). The main reason for their decision to intern was to practice working in the “real world”, and to add experiences in their curriculum vitae (CV/resume). Informants also call their virtual internship space as “the office”—where they work. This means, these Gen-Z have the desire to take on and show their sense of responsibility towards their assignments and life purpose. After a three-month long internship, as per the contract, they can apply for an internship position in other companies. Another option is if they’re offered to extend their contract in their old company—which some informants agreed to.

The working environment is of course differ from the class environment, mainly due to the strict demand from the office for even interns to do their assignments as per the performance indicator of the company. The job demands quite often clashed with university demands, and sometimes even require informants to “be in two places at the same time.” In this online situation, this means operating “double devices”—either their handphone and laptop, or laptop

and iPad—two screens with two different activities: usually handphone for classes, and laptop for internship. Informants who put internship before class, said that it was because most of the time, they could ask around about the class material—to their friends, or through class recordings. Ideally, of course, doing office work, organization, and class work are to be done in separate times. But there would be times when informants would have to work in two virtual rooms simultaneously, or in three back-to-back meetings. “Of course, it’s tiring,” said informant D, who once had to work on their internship assignments, join an online class in their host university (Universitas Indonesia), and another online class in NUS (National University of Singapore). Afterwards, there would still be meetings for the organization that they currently lead as its chief. In working their internship assignments, paychecks are usually one of the things that motivate all informants and something they would look forward to.

Paychecks serve as a validation that they are not fully dependent on their parents’ economical condition. They can buy books, subscribe to newspaper, subscribe to Netflix, treat their friends and parents, and still save up some of their paycheck. Sending one another food using online food delivery service (e.g: ShopeeFood, GrabFood, and GoFood) becomes something pleasant and fun to do—something to convey their affection toward their friends. This affectionate gesture confirms “benevolence” as one of the most important human values they hold, as found by M. Sadiyakorn. Informants realize the meaning of working; how eventually everyone would have to fend for themselves and prepare themselves since early on to enter the workplace. This finding also confirmed Sadiyakorn’s finding on how they hold “self-direction” as another important human value.

Interaction

Interaction with friends within a group is done every day, whether to finish their assignments, casual conversations, or chats, or to release stress and tiredness by telling stories about their work and or what’s going on in their social media. All informants interpret “group” or “peer group” as a place to confide in, to finish up assignments with, and to release stress. They trust each other, confide in each other, listen to each other, can work together, finish up tasks together, help one another, as well as support and remind each other. Medium used to communicate mostly are Line, Instagram, and WhatsApp. A comfortable situation can be built within these groups, as the groups have a supportive climate, as told by Gibb (Forward et al., 2011). Within this group they can look for information, and they’re certain their friends would help them. Their complaints and stories are confided to their respective groups because they believe their friends would be able to give them a solution and sympathize. They see their friends as trustworthy and would keep their secrets (See Table 2).

Interaction with the family also became better than before pandemic for several informants’ families, for example informant A, D, and E. Pandemic and online situations somehow make communication climate at home better and more intimate. The contrary could be seen in informant B, C, F, and G’s families. Before and after the online situation, their families didn’t really have that much contact.

Previously, offline interaction with their family and friends happened less interaction than before, which means that most of the interactions with their family happened online. But during this pandemic/online situation, while most of people stay at home, offline interaction with their family didn’t really improve significantly, and yet online interaction with their friends increase significantly. It could be seen how not all informants could communicate with their families due to other family members’ busyness as well.

Informant A narrated how, ever since the pandemic/online situation, communication with their family got better, as now they have a new habit: have dinner and then afterwards pray

together. During dinner time, parents would have the chance to talk with their children—to converse, or to monitor the development of their children. Communication with family, however, admittedly, is less than communication with friends. Even so, families still support the child (informant)’s development and learning process by providing facilities for school.

Table 2. Interaction with friends and family

Informant	Friends	Family
A	Friends are to remind informant about assignments, study group, chat with friends, play games to release stress.	After online class situation, communication became more frequent; now the family dines and prays together.
B	Chat, do assignments and study together	No difference between before and after online class situation; minimum interaction with family.
C	Friends are very important to coordinate and finish assignments together, look for information, struggle together, chat with friends to look at cute stuffs together—three people a day at the minimum	More communication after online class situation, but still limited to dining together, afterwards each member goes back to their own rooms. Mom works, older sibling too, and younger siblings are in their boarding school.
D	Ask about assignments, to do organizational works, to chat with, sometimes it feels rewarding just to ask friends how they’re doing, to release stress together.	Communicate often; mom likes to chat and looks for her child, calling the child to eat. Can study Korean language at home too.
E	Friends are very important to ask about assignments to, and to chat with to avoid boredom and to recharge social battery	After the online class situation, interaction increased drastically; 70% of interaction now is with family. Now can converse with family more often, and more time to take care of their ill father.
F	Friends are very important to remind informant to study, to support and cheer informant.	Communication with family increased after the online class situation; previously stayed at the dorm and didn’t get to meet with family often, but now informant could meet their family anytime.
G	Almost every day call friends for about 30-60 minutes; friends are important to do assignments and internship assignments together, to confide in, and share each	Doesn’t communicate much with the family—usually only over dinner. Communication situation/condition is the same as it was before online class.

	other's struggle.	
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Virtual Identity

Virtual identities are owned by the informants since they were younger, as they are the true digital natives. As could be seen from all seven informants, they all said that the virtual world (i.e: internet) can somehow replace the offline or face-to-face world. They also unequivocally confirm, that internet can replace the existence of the physical world—to a certain extent. At first the online world was seen as a complement for the physical (offline) world. But now, even though informants agree that emotional proximity cannot be fully reached through online interactions, the online world is slowly shifting to be a substitute for the physical (offline) world. This condition was significantly enhanced by the pandemic/online class situation that forced them to stay at home and adapt with almost 100 percent online living.

When asked whether they still need offline classes, however, all informants answered rather quickly that they still do need offline classes and interactions, but they still hope for more online rather than offline sessions. It's been proven for them that online activities are more time-efficient, and cost-efficient. The virtual world can now, almost if not for the fact that emotional proximity of online world can yet replace those felt during offline interactions, substitute the physical (offline) world. Gen Z is used to the virtual world, even though offline world is still needed (see: **Table 3**).

Table.3. Participation and perception of online world

Informant	Participation in the online world
A	The internet or online world's existence are getting more and more obvious.
B	It's highly possible and quite clearly felt now how online reality may replace offline reality. At first it did feel weird, but over time online meetings and even team buildings became more and more usual.
C	The online world is starting to integrate with the offline world, the lines are blurry. If there is no online connection at home, there is no other sign of life; nobody can work, nobody can do anything. It's almost a perfect substitute for the offline world, except for emotional proximity, but even family in close physical proximity also doesn't emit/put importance into that kind of intimacy.
D	Online world can replace offline world, most especially for interaction, work, class, and even conversing with friends, even though the informant doesn't really prefer it. At first the online world is a complement for the offline world, but now it's rapidly becoming a substitute for the offline world.
E	The online world can replace the offline world in quite a lot of aspects, but still, it's not favorable, because extroverts usually derive their energy from physical interaction with people, and online world makes interactions less genuine. Body language and visual gestures cannot be seen through phone calls.
F	The online world can be an almost perfect substitute for the offline world because it creates a significantly more efficient time usage. During offline periods, to attend meetings or seminars we had to travel quite far and used up travel time, but now it's a lot

	easier and faster.
G	Feels like online world can replace offline world, because now online activities feel comfortable—the faster, easier, cheaper world with more possibilities. It’s more efficient to communicate through gadgets. Back then there was no other option but to meet up (physically) for meetings, but now there is no other option but to meet up virtually for meetings.

CONCLUSION

During the pandemic situation, all informants went on with their classes virtually through online classes, to reduce physical interactions. They are obedient towards the regulations that asked them to stay and learn from home. All informants have a specific life purpose and fill their time more productively compared to offline situations. They don’t have to pay for transportation and can cut on commuting time. An unsupervised (by lecturers) online interaction can be used for various activities, especially internships, or as referred to as “working.” Their main reason was to fill their curriculum vitae, which will be used for future job search. Another

reason is to earn money on the side. All informants had done internships several times during their online learning situation, and they enjoyed it. All informants share the same spirit to do their internships, care for their self-quality and self-development, and to prepare themselves for their future.

Friends and groups play important roles in creating a supportive communication climate. They support informants, become the place for them to confide in, look for information, and to have fun with. Families also play an important role in enabling a supportive climate to happen, even though communication climate with family is not as—ironically—familiar nor comfortable as communication climate with their friends. Moreover, interaction with families amidst the online situation is not only dependent upon the children/Gen Z’s interaction with their friends or social media consumption, but also whether their family.

As are their friends, informants expressed how they feel more productive than ever during this pandemic/online class situation. All works and assignments are done in virtual rooms using their handphones and laptops. These virtual spaces, to Gen Z, are regarded as substitutional for offline or physical spaces which would require time and transport money. It’s far more cost and time-efficient to finish up work from their virtual spaces.

The decisions to resort to productive activities (internship, online business, etc) were shown to be powered by the acknowledgement of their self in their supportive communication climate. When the friends and family are supportive of their development, informants have a good sense of self that allow them to be more productive. Internships and extracurricular activities are seen as the manifestation of their confidence in themselves. At the end of the day, social media and technological advancement bring, to Gen-Z the true digital natives, opportunities for better productivity and more rigorous self-development. They can experience more than the preceding generations could during their age at that time. This kind of development is also kind of glued to, and or can be seen as the consequence of the blurry lines between the online and physical world today.

Conclusively, technological, and worldly development can affect our youth of today in a good way, but if they too are exposed to a supportive communication climate.

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