<u>Academic Article</u>

Where are Gen Z? The Gen Z Virtual Worlds Migration: When Social Media is No Longer a Place for Socializing Anymore

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Abstract

The widespread influence of social media has long positioned it as the central digital space for human connection. However, this conceptual article investigates a notable divergence in Generation Z's (born 1997–2012) digital behavior, focusing on their shifting social interaction patterns away from traditional social media platforms. Gen Z, as digital natives, exhibits a nuanced relationship with online environments, prioritizing authentic engagement and immersive experiences, while highly valuing personalized interactions and unique brand encounters. Drawing upon previous studies and recent industry insights from GEEIQ's SXSW 2025 presentation and We Are Social Thailand's Digital 2025 reports, this paper argues that traditional social media platforms are increasingly serving as content consumption channels rather than primary social hubs for Gen Z. Instead, immersive virtual worlds and gaming

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environments are emerging as the new preferred spaces for socialization. This migration is analyzed through three key communication frameworks: Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), which explains the pursuit of richer social experiences and identity expression; Social Presence Theory, which links virtual worlds' 3D nature to a higher sense of Embodied Social Presence that drives deeper engagement (e.g., 11 minutes vs. 1.3 seconds); and Community of Practice (CoP), which illuminates the formation of strong, shared-purpose subcultures within these environments. This analysis provides a timely theoretical understanding of Gen Z's digital choices, emphasizing the critical need for communication scholars and brands to pivot their focus from broad social networks to specialized, immersive virtual communities.

Keywords: Gen Z, Virtual World, Gaming, Social Media, Metaverse

Introduction

For over two decades, social media platforms have been widely perceived as the ideal digital spaces for human connection, communication, and community building. From the early days of MySpace and Facebook to the pervasiveness of Instagram, Twitter (now X), and TikTok, these platforms have fundamentally reshaped interpersonal interactions and commercial strategies (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). However, as digital natives, Generation Z, typically defined as those born between 1997 and 2012, exhibits distinct online behaviors that challenge this conventional understanding. Having grown up in a hyper-connected world, Gen Z, as digital natives, shows a nuanced relationship with digital spaces, often prioritizing authentic engagement and immersive experiences, and highly valuing personalized interactions and unique brand experiences (Salam et al., 2024). Within this context, the socialization, consumption patterns, and engagement of Gen Z with technology are distinct from those of previous generations (Gentina, 2020). While legacy platforms such as Facebook continue to boast large user numbers, the nature of their use by Gen Z is undergoing a critical, functional shift that warrants scholarly attention. Contrary to the initial purpose of these platforms as a broad "virtual promenade" for social networking, research indicates that members of Generation Z are increasingly abandoning or minimizing Facebook for social interaction (Levak & Barić-Šelmić, 2018).

Instead, Gen Z's digital engagement is characterized by two key trends: a preference for visually oriented and private communication channels, and a strategic repurposing of older platforms for utility. For instance, in an American context, a primary driver for Gen Z's continued Facebook engagement is not socialization, but rather economic utility, specifically for collaborative consumption through Facebook Marketplace to save money on second-hand goods (Rohman, 2024).

This paper addresses a critical, yet often overlooked question: where are Gen Z truly socializing in the current digital environment? Is traditional social media increasingly becoming a content consumption channel rather than a primary social hub? We argue that the locus of Gen Z's social and community engagement is migrating towards immersive virtual worlds and gaming platforms. By synthesizing recent industry data and expert analyses from renowned agencies such as GEEIQ and We Are Social Thailand, this article aims to highlight this significant shift and its implications for academic research, brand strategy, and the understanding of modern digital culture.

Generation z & the uses and gratification theory

Generation Z (Gen Z), born between 1997 and 2012, is recognized as the first true generation of digital natives, highly fluent with technology and constant connectivity (Gentina, 2020; Jasrotia et al., 2022; Kathuria, 2023; Supalakwatchana, 2023). The Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) effectively explains Gen Z's media consumption, emphasizing their active role in selecting media to satisfy needs such as communication, entertainment, instant gratification, and belongingness (O'Carroll & Rooney, 2020). The assumption of UGT is supported by the result of a previous study, which discovered that people actively choose media to satisfy their needs and goals, especially in different generations (Supalakwatchana et al., 2024). A core driver is the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), leading to preferences for easy, accessible, and mobile-friendly media (O'Carroll & Rooney, 2020; Sayyed & Gupta, 2020). The Multiplayer Online Game (MOG) industry taps into these motivations, where perceived enjoyment, achievement, and game personalization foster intrinsic gratification and strong psychological engagement that translates into economic behaviors like purchasing in-game items (Anubha & Islam, 2022; Jasrotia et al., 2022).

Social presence theory

Social Presence Theory addresses the degree to which users perceive others as "real" in computer-mediated contexts, explaining satisfaction and engagement in virtual environments central to Gen Z's digital life (Bulu, 2012; Mennecke et al., 2011). Embodied Social Presence (ESP) extends this by emphasizing avatars as communication tools enabling first-person cognitive immersion, enhancing the richness of interaction beyond traditional media cues (Mennecke et al., 2011). Social presence also facilitates trust in virtual collaborations by reducing uncertainty through nonverbal cues, complementing formal trust mechanisms (Srivastava & Chandra, 2018). Applying the Computers as Social Actors (CASA) paradigm, Gen Z forms strong social and telepresence bonds with AI-driven virtual influencers, which significantly drive customer engagement (Lin et al., 2024). Supporting these theoretical claims, Pang et al. (2025) provide empirical evidence that participation in online gaming communities not only enhances social presence but also fosters bonding social capital (the close, trust-based relationships), which in turn improves players' life satisfaction. Their study, based on a Chinese sample, shows that the social attributes of online games, such as cooperation and frequent communication among players, strengthen a sense of community and emotional connectedness, which are pivotal dimensions of social presence. This indicates that virtual gaming environments offer a more immersive and emotionally supportive social experience compared to traditional social media, reinforcing social presence theory's application in explaining higher levels of satisfaction and engagement within virtual worlds.

Community of practice

The Community of Practice (CoP) framework conceptualizes learning and identity formation through social participation in shared digital spaces (Schott & Hodgetts, 2006). Online gaming platforms like Fortnite exemplify CoPs, where players collaboratively develop specialized vocabularies and social capital via legitimate peripheral participation (Marlatt, 2020; Schott & Hodgetts, 2006). However, motivational challenges such as free-riding can hinder group success (Li & Jhang-Li, 2010). The CoP lens is also pertinent for understanding Gen Z's active role in shaping emerging virtual cultures such as the metaverse (Arghashi & Gunalay, 2025).

The evolving digital landscape and gen z engagement

The digital experiences of Gen Z differ considerably from those of previous generations. As digital natives, Gen Z was born into an era where digital connectivity was a given, leading to a more perceptive and dynamic approach to online interactions. This generation is characterized by its expertise with technology, unique shopping behaviors, a strong pursuit of authenticity, and highly valued personalized and engaging experiences in their interactions with brands (Salam et al., 2024).

Recent industry reports and conference insights emphasize a palpable shift in where Gen Z allocates its valuable attention and social energy. GEEIQ, a data platform specializing in virtual worlds and gaming, presented convincing evidence at South by Southwest (SXSW) 2025, declaring that "Social Media Marketing is Dead: Long Live Gaming" (GEEIQ, 2025a). This bold statement reflects a growing industry consensus that traditional social media platforms are losing their efficacy as primary social pipelines for younger demographics.

The migration to immersive virtual worlds and gaming

Facebook used to be a main place where Gen Z expressed their emotions, as Thai students were heavier users than US students (Magpanthong & McDaniel, 2015), but as newer platforms emerged, that may not be true anymore. A critical and highly sought-after gratification in online gaming is Social Interaction, often acting as a key mechanism for deepening player engagement (Anubha & Islam, 2022; Jasrotia et al., 2022). MOGs function as robust socialization platforms by providing channels for users to communicate, meet, and interact, effectively extending social circles and supporting existing relationships (Anubha & Islam, 2022).

This environment is particularly valuable to Gen Z, as online interactions facilitate relationship enhancement, strategy development in-game, and combating feelings of loneliness by connecting with physically known people (Jasrotia et al., 2022). For many users, particularly those with a strong desire for interaction, MOGs create a sense of belonging and community that is comparable to or even surpasses traditional social media platforms (O'Carroll & Rooney, 2020). The fulfillment of this social need, alongside other intrinsic gratifications, significantly contributes to player retention, immersion, and a sustained, favorable attitude toward the online gaming environment (Anubha & Islam, 2022).

The core of GEEIQ's argument, substantiated by their data, is that Gen Z's preferred hangout spots have transitioned from conventional social media to immersive gaming platforms and virtual worlds. Quantitative analysis presented at SXSW 2025 revealed a striking contrast in engagement. Gen Z's average engagement time with branded content on traditional social media platforms is approximately 1.3 seconds. In stark contrast, branded content within immersive environments like Roblox sees average engagement times extending to 11 minutes (GEEIQ, 2025b).
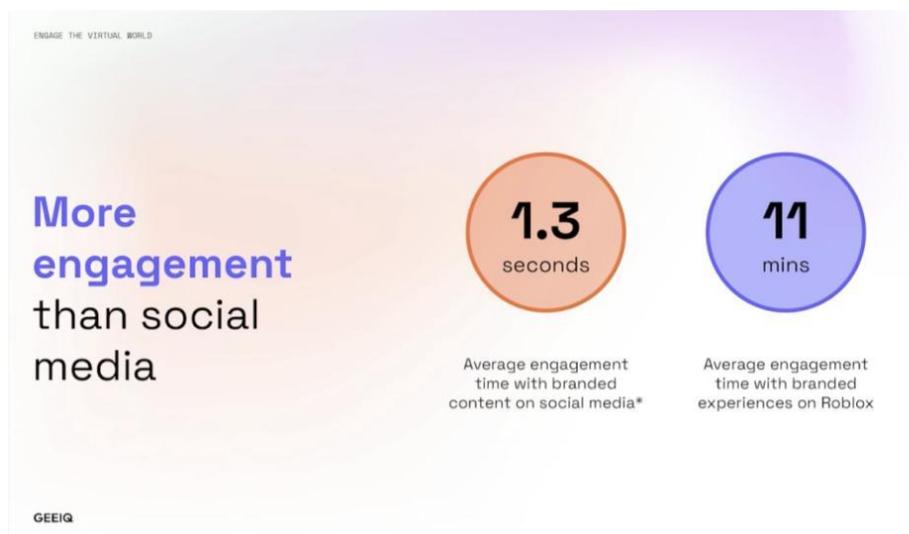
Figure 1 Branded content engagement comparision between social media and virtual world
Source: GEEIQ (2025b)

This represents a brutal difference, as reported by GEEIQ's CEO & Co-Founder Charles Hambro, indicating that these virtual spaces foster a much deeper and sustained level of attention and interaction.

Further supporting this global trend, We Are Social Thailand's "Digital 2025 April Statshot" report provides a localized case study, revealing that 93.2% of Thai internet users aged 16 and above play video games, positioning Thailand as the third-highest gaming nation globally, significantly exceeding the global average of 83.5% (We Are Social Thailand, 2025a).

Figure 2 Percentage of internet users aged 16+ who play video games on any device
Source: We Are Social Thailand (2025a)

We Are Social Thailand clearly states that "Gen Z's attention is shifting toward games and virtual environments, while engagement on traditional social media continues to decline" (The Nation, 2025). This confirms the view that gaming is not merely an entertainment pastime but has evolved into a dominant virtual space for social engagement.

The appeal of these immersive platforms stems from their capacity to facilitate the following:

1) Active Participation and Co-creation.

Users are not passive consumers but active participants in shaping their experiences and building communities.

2) Deeper Community Building.

Virtual worlds foster niche communities and subcultures where shared interests drive genuine connection, a factor emphasized by We Are Social Thailand's focus on understanding these subcultures (We Are Social Thailand, 2025b).

3) Experiential Engagement.

Brands are leveraging these platforms for immersive experiences, ranging from virtual concerts and fashion shows to commerce and loyalty programs, rather than just traditional advertising (e.g., UEFA

and Versace on Fortnite, Walmart and Paris Hilton on Roblox, BBC integrating IP like "Doctor Who" into Roblox) (GEEIQ, 2025b; GEEIQ, 2025c).

The redefinition of "social media"

The data suggests that the very definition of social media for Gen Z is undergoing a fundamental transformation. While platforms like TikTok and Instagram remain dominant for content consumption, entertainment, and identity expression, their role as primary spaces for intimate social interaction is diminishing. We Are Social Thailand explicitly articulates this shift, noting that traditional social media is "not an area where new generation consumers use to exchange interests or connect, but rather an area for creating and posting content only" (Dailynews Online, 2025).

Generation Z's engagement with social media marks a significant departure from the practices of previous cohorts, effectively redefining the function of these platforms. While platforms such as Facebook were initially conceived and popularized for broad social networking (i.e., the "virtual promenade"), members of Gen Z are increasingly abandoning or minimizing their use for primary social interaction, turning instead to platforms centered on visual content like Instagram and Snapchat (Levak & Barić-Šelmić, 2018).

The functional shift away from social networking toward utility and closed-group communication is a prominent trend observed globally. In an American context, a major driver for Gen Z's continued engagement with Facebook is not socialization but economic utility, with the platform primarily used for purchasing and selling second-hand goods via Facebook Marketplace as a means of saving money (Rohman, 2024). This reflects Gen Z's broader interest in thrifting and collaborative consumption (Gentina, 2020).

Similarly, research in Turkey found that a portion of Gen Z is either not active on Facebook or uses it primarily to follow humor pages, often favoring face-to-face interactions over the platform's virtual communication (Yücebalkan & Aksu, 2018). This pattern reinforces the notion that Gen Z is highly selective about which platforms they use for specific purposes, often seeking more private, direct, or visually-oriented communication channels (Levak & Barić-Šelmić, 2018). For communication scholars, this behavioral change highlights the evolution of a platform like Facebook from a broad social network

into a fragmented tool serving specific, practical, or entertainment-based needs for the new generation (Rohman, 2024; Yücebalkan & Aksu, 2018).

This means that marketers and researchers must recognize that simply having a presence on conventional social media is insufficient to genuinely engage Gen Z. The strategic imperative is to move beyond chasing fleeting attention on overcrowded feeds and instead focus on building sustainable, meaningful engagement within the more immersive ecosystems where Gen Z naturally assembles and socializes.

A theoretical lens on gen z's digital migration

The observed shift in Gen Z's digital socialization patterns can be comprehensively understood through several key communication theories, providing a robust framework for interpreting the underlying motivations and implications.

1. Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) posits that audiences are active participants in their media consumption, deliberately choosing media to satisfy specific needs or gratifications (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Rubin, 1994). Rather than viewing users as passive recipients, UGT emphasizes what people do with media (Rubin, 2009). The data presented by GEEIQ and We Are Social Thailand firmly aligns with UGT. Gen Z's disengagement from traditional social media for genuine social interaction, coupled with their deeper engagement in virtual worlds, suggests that these distinct platform types fulfill different gratifications.

Traditional social media platforms, with their short-form content and emphasis on broadcasting, increasingly cater to gratifications such as information seeking (e.g., news updates), entertainment (e.g., watching viral videos), and casual pastime (Whiting & Williams, 2013). However, if Gen Z's primary need is for deeper social interaction, authentic community building, or meaningful experiential engagement, these platforms may fall short. Virtual worlds and gaming environments, conversely, offer gratifications related to active participation, embodied identity expression through avatars, co-creation of experiences, and a heightened sense of belonging (GEEIQ, 2025b; The Nation, 2025). Gen Z actively chooses these

immersive spaces because they expect to obtain a richer, more fulfilling social experience, thereby achieving gratifications that traditional social media no longer consistently provides.

2. Social Presence Theory

Social Presence Theory, introduced by Short et al. (1976), focuses on the degree to which a communication medium allows users to perceive others as real or psychologically present. A higher sense of social presence fosters warmer, more personal, and intimate interactions (Garrison et al., 2010). The contrast in engagement times revealed by GEEIQ (1.3 seconds on traditional social media vs. 11 minutes in virtual worlds) can be directly attributed to the varying levels of social presence afforded by these platforms.

Traditional social media, with its asynchronous, text-and image-dominant communication, often creates a lower sense of social presence. Interactions can feel superficial and less personal, contributing to content consumption rather than socialization dynamics (Dailynews Online, 2025). In contrast, immersive virtual worlds, characterized by 3D environments, real-time avatar interactions, spatialized audio, and collaborative activities, have a high potential to significantly enhance the perception of being there with others. This heightened social presence allows for more nuanced non-verbal cues (through avatar movements and expressions), shared contextual experiences, and a greater sense of mutual awareness, thereby facilitating richer and more meaningful social connections that Gen Z appears to gravitate toward. The brutal difference in engagement underscores that Gen Z seeks media environments that maximize social presence for their interactive needs.

3. Community of Practice (CoP) Theory

While initially developed in organizational and learning contexts, Community of Practice (CoP) theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) offers valuable insights into the formation and dynamics of online communities, particularly within gaming and virtual worlds. A CoP is defined by three key dimensions: a shared domain of interest, a community of people engaged in that domain, and a shared practice or repertoire of resources.

The gaming and virtual world environments precisely exemplify CoPs for Gen Z. They gather around a shared domain (e.g., a specific game like Roblox or Fortnite, or a particular virtual space), forming a community through regular interaction. Their practice involves not just playing the game, but

also co-creating content, participating in virtual events, developing shared norms and language, and solving in-world challenges together (GEEIQ, 2025b; We Are Social Thailand, 2025b). We Are Social Thailand's emphasis on understanding subcultures within these digital spaces directly reflects the concept of CoPs, where niche groups are formed around shared passions. For Gen Z, these CoPs within virtual worlds provide a sense of belonging, collective identity, and shared purpose that may be harder to find on broader, less focused traditional social media platforms. Brands looking to engage Gen Z must therefore integrate themselves authentically into these existing CoPs, contributing value to the shared practice rather than merely broadcasting messages.

Conclusion

The concept that social media is synonymous with online socialization, particularly for younger generations, is becoming increasingly outdated. Evidence from previous studies and leading digital agencies overwhelmingly suggests that Generation Z is shifting its primary social interactions towards immersive virtual worlds and gaming platforms. These environments offer the depth of engagement and community focus that traditional social media, increasingly dominated by content consumption, can no longer provide.

This conceptual shift can be effectively understood through communication theories such as the Uses and Gratifications Theory, highlighting Gen Z's active pursuit of specific fulfillments from media. The notably higher engagement times in virtual worlds spotlight the salience of Social Presence Theory, suggesting these immersive environments offer a richer, more real sense of connection compared to conventional social feeds. Moreover, the formation of distinct subcultures and interest-based groups within gaming platforms aligns strongly with the Community of Practice Theory, where shared activities foster deep social bonds.

Future research should empirically measure Gen Z's specific gratifications across digital platforms, applying UGT frameworks to compare traditional social media with virtual worlds. It's also crucial to develop and validate scales for social presence in highly immersive virtual environments, identifying features that enhance it for Gen Z. Longitudinal qualitative studies are needed to observe the formation, evolution, and impact of online Communities of Practice within gaming on Gen Z's social

development and identity. Furthermore, expanding this research to cross-cultural comparisons will determine if observed trends are universal or influenced by cultural nuances in digital migration patterns. Finally, an in-depth investigation into the ethical implications of immersive socialization is essential, covering potential psychological, social, and moral issues such as digital well-being, addiction, and online safety for Gen Z.

To remain relevant and effectively connect with Gen Z, brands, marketers, and researchers must acknowledge this fundamental digital migration. The future of online social engagement, and consequently effective digital strategy, lies not in chasing fleeting attention on conventional platforms, but in understanding and actively participating in the rich, interactive, and often co-created worlds where Gen Z truly socializes. This paradigm shift demands concerted effort in re-evaluating digital strategies and calls for robust academic exploration into the profound implications of this evolving digital sociology.

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