Besieged City of time: Control and negotiation of generation Z youth in platform swinging

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ABSTRACT

The rapid development of information technology and the proliferation of digital media have made social media platforms an integral part of Generation Z's daily lives. In this context, the "distributive use" behavior of social media has emerged or what is referred to as platform swinging, which is the habit of constantly switching between platforms. This behavior causes constant distraction and keeps many young Generation Z individuals stuck in a "time warp". In this context, the "distributive use" behavior of social media has emerged or what is referred to as platform swinging, which is the habit of constantly switching between platforms. This behavior causes constant distraction and leaves many young Generation Z individuals stuck in a "time warp". This research aims to understand the characteristics and logic behind Generation Z's platform swinging behavior and its impact on their time management. Using a qualitative approach, this research utilizes in-depth interviews and virtual ethnography to capture the patterns of media interaction that occur in the real world. The results show that platform swinging behavior is driven by various factors, such as the need for social connectedness, boredom, and platform algorithms that encourage constant interaction. However, this behavior also has negative impacts, such as decreased productivity, stress, and poor time management. The discussion leads to the importance of awareness of wise media use and strategies to manage platform swinging so as not to disrupt life balance. It is hoped that this research can help Generation Z find ways to control and negotiate their use of social media so that they can escape the "siege of time" and achieve a better balance in their daily lives.

1. Introduction

According to the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) 52nd Statistical Report released on August 28, 2023, by June 2023, the number of internet users in China reached 1.079 billion, with an internet penetration rate of 76.4%. Mobile internet users amounted to 1.076 billion, accounting for 99.8% of the total, and 52.5% of these users were aged 20 to 49. This data highlights the exponential growth of technology, with diverse social media platforms emerging and mobile network-based social media making tremendous achievements. As such, "no era has provided us

with such an abundance of social media options" as today, and Generation Z is at the forefront of this phenomenon.

Narrowly defined, Generation Z refers to individuals born between 1995 and 2009. However, more broadly, Generation Z is not strictly defined by age, but rather encompasses those who were born and raised during the era of internet and technological revolutions. As digital natives, they have been immersed in the online world from an early age, quickly learning how to navigate various apps with ease. According to a 2022 survey by China Youth Daily and Zhongqing Campus Media, the most commonly used social media platforms among respondents were WeChat (95.76%), QQ (72.25%), Douyin (65.57%), Xiaohongshu (36.50%), Weibo (35.91%), Bilibili (34.54%), and Zhihu (14.42%), among others. In this context, Edson et al. introduced the concept of "platform swinging," which refers to users constantly rotating among multiple social platforms. Given the close relationship between technology and temporal forms, the logic of time inevitably intervenes in every instance of platform swinging.

Generation Z, defined as those born between 1995 and 2010, are digital natives immersed in the online world from an early age (Sitompul et al., 2023; Tulak et al., 2023). They are highly proficient in navigating various social media platforms such as WeChat, QQ, Douyin, Xiaohongshu, Weibo, Bilibili, and Zhihu (Emeraldien et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2019). A defining characteristic of Generation Z's media interaction is the phenomenon of "platform swinging," where users frequently switch between multiple social platforms (Yu et al., 2019).

The relationship between technology and temporal forms suggests that the logic of time inevitably influences platform-swinging behaviors (Yu et al., 2019). Generation Z's media interaction is marked by a tension between accelerated digital living, driven by societal pressures, and "slow wandering," which resists social norms. This tension reveals their struggle for autonomy over time, leading to issues such as time deprivation and time anxiety becoming more pronounced in this generation (Yu et al., 2019).

With the advent of the social media era, media technologies are quietly reshaping perceptions of time, particularly among Generation Z (Parry, 2014). Whether it is the accelerated digital living under societal pressures or the slow wandering against social norms, these phenomena reveal a tension between time constraints and time liberation in Generation Z's platform use (Carr & Hayes, 2015). Moreover, while this generation strives to gain autonomy over time, issues such as "time deprivation" and "time anxiety" have become more pronounced, warranting urgent attention (Zhu et al., 2023).

Social media is a vital part of Generation Z's culture, serving as a primary source of information, self-expression, and social interaction (Emeraldien et al., 2023; Hastiningsih & Sari, 2023; Sitompul

et al., 2023). The ease of internet access has made social media central to their daily lives, with studies reporting that they spend an average of two hours per day on these platforms (Erwin et al., 2023).

The effects of platform-swinging behavior among Generation Z are multifaceted. On the positive side, social media facilitates acculturation, eases culture shock for international students, provides social support, and reduces feelings of loneliness (Yu et al., 2019). Furthermore, exposure to social media can enhance self-relevant emotions and public risk perception, leading to improved preventive behaviors during infectious disease outbreaks (Oh et al., 2021).

However, the extensive use of social media, coupled with technologies such as augmented reality and chatbots, has been linked to negative impacts on Generation Z's body image and self-esteem (Ameen et al., 2022). Additionally, trust in mainstream and social media remains a concern, with issues such as misinformation and the need for critical media literacy being highlighted (Ayu, 2023; Emeraldien et al., 2023).

Research Gap While many studies have addressed internet and social media use among Generation Z, there is a lack of in-depth research on the phenomenon of platform swinging - switching between social media platforms in the context of media time. Most previous studies tend to focus on general social media usage patterns, without specifically examining the characteristics of platform swinging and its impact on Generation Z's perception of time (Yu et al., 2019).

Research Novelty This study offers a unique perspective by highlighting the concept of "time" to understand Generation Z's media interaction behavior in daily life. This approach has not been widely explored in previous research that tends to address social media usage broadly. By analyzing the characteristics of platform swinging and the logic behind this behavior, as well as its impact, this study aims to provide new insights into how Generation Z can find balance amidst the complexity of digital interactions (Yu et al., 2019).

Relevant Previous Research Yu et al., (2019) Found that social media use can support the acculturation process, reduce culture shock in international students, provide a source of social support, and reduce loneliness. Emeraldien et al., (2023) Showed that social media has become one of the main channels of news distribution, especially among Generation Z, who often use these platforms to share and recommend news. Ameen et al., (2022) Revealed that the integration of technologies such as augmented reality and chatbots on social media can negatively impact body image and self-esteem, especially among Generation Z women. Ayu (2023) Identified low political literacy among Generation Z, which requires attention from policymakers, political parties and educational institutions. Research Contribution, By integrating findings from previous studies, this research aims to broaden the understanding of the platform swinging phenomenon among

Generation Z. It will explore how such behavior affects their perception of time and balance in the ever-evolving digital media ecosystem.

Therefore, this study centers on "time" to capture the specific media interaction behaviors of Generation Z in their daily lives. It aims to explore the characteristics and logic of platform swinging among Generation Z, as well as the effects of this behavior. The study hopes to provide insights into how this generation can find balance amidst platform swinging. Specifically, this research addresses the following questions: What are the characteristics of Generation Z's platform swinging behavior within the context of media time? What are the effects of such behavior? While examining the "time siege" in which Generation Z is trapped, the study also investigates the self-construction and social interaction logic of this generation, expanding the current research on temporal perception in the context of human-technology interaction in the media ecosystem.

2. Theoretical Framework

Media Time

The issue of technology and time has evolved alongside human civilization. From the natural time of agricultural societies to the mechanical time of industrial civilization, and now to the media time of the digital era, time as a meta-scale has transformed in its recording methods, presentation forms, and internal structures, reflecting the transitions in human civilization (Boukes, 2021).

Harold A. Innis, often regarded as the father of modern media theory, argued that communication media have a temporal bias, connecting media evolution with knowledge dissemination and the rise and fall of civilizations (Innis, 1999, 2022a, 2022b). John Durham Peters, in The Marvelous Clouds, interpreted media as any material system a society uses to manage time, space, and power, affirming that media time is a recent concept with no clear definition. Early studies have mostly focused on mediated time or media time as a resource (Martin, 2015).

In China, Shao Peiren and Bian Donglei are among the first scholars to explore "media time." Shao Peiren reviewed the theoretical roots of media and time studies, summarizing the historical transition from natural time to clock time to media time (Liang & Zhang, 2021). Bian Donglei argued that communication media in the information society assume a new role in shaping temporal perceptions, suggesting that new media construct daily time as instantaneous, fragmented, and chaotic, with profound effects on social development and human life.

Platform Swinging Behavior

Platform swinging refers to users navigating multiple social media platforms, maintaining their presence across different platforms without abandoning older ones (Vaynman, 2024). This concept describes how users rotate between various platforms to overcome structural, social, and normative barriers, continuously satisfying their self-presentation and relationship management

needs. Before the platform swinging theory, there were already studies exploring the "swinging" behavior related to switching between media based on user needs (Wang et al., 2024).

Lakshmanan et al., (2017) and Schröder et al., (2011) proposed that media selection is inherently cross-media. With an increasing number of choices, cross-platform consumption has become a typical behavior in daily life. Users no longer stick to a single medium but use a combination of platforms. Madianou & Miller (2013) polymedia theory treats the social interaction environment as a holistic configuration, explaining how users roam through different media to manage their social, emotional, and moral relationships. Webster (2014) found that due to limited attention, users do not have the capacity to try all media products, meaning that media diversity does not necessarily translate into diverse user behavior.

Wibowo (2020), analyzing new media users' consumption patterns, noted that individuals construct "channel combinations" based on their needs, satisfying their diverse information consumption. Yan (2018) studied the distributive use of social media among Chinese international students, finding that self-identity significantly influences their use of both domestic and international platforms, which in turn affects their cultural integration. Etta (2023) using in-depth interviews and virtual ethnography, explored three types of platform swinging—across platforms, within a single platform, and across networks—summarizing four key motivations behind such behaviors.

Temporal Perception in Platform Swinging

During media engagement, individuals develop unique time experiences, forming subjective perceptions of media time and new temporal concepts. Bian Donglei pointed out that media time creates an immediate sense of temporal discipline, leading to tendencies toward fragmented cognition, short-term memory, and arbitrary actions. Jia Xiuxiu explored temporal and spatial perceptions in media interaction, finding that absence has become mainstream, causing temporal perceptions of immediacy, uncertainty, and tension (Wang et al., 2024).

Current studies on platform swinging mostly focus on the motivations and characteristics of the behavior, overlooking how differences in users perceptions of media time are also subjective factors influencing platform swinging. As real-time information flow applications proliferate, making scrolling a daily routine, time becomes the organizing principle of media. To understand the temporal logic behind Generation Z's platform swinging and their constructed time concepts, it is crucial to contextualize these perceptions within the broader social environment and link them to contemporary time concepts (Tandoc et al., 2019).

3. Method

This study employs in-depth interviews and virtual ethnography to gather experiential data. The interview phase seeks to collect qualitative stories from Generation Z youth on their platform swinging behavior, identifying the conditions, contexts, and outcomes of these behaviors. A purposive sampling strategy was used, resulting in 15 interviewees selected based on high information intensity and variability. The interviews cover motivations, frequency, and experiences of platform swinging. To complement interview data, virtual ethnography was employed, allowing the researcher to observe participants' social media activities with minimal interference, helping capture real-time platform swinging behaviors.

The research focuses on university students due to their characteristics as digital natives, heavy internet users, and flexible time management. The sample includes individuals from a wide range of disciplines, with interviewees aged 18-30, encompassing both undergraduate and graduate students. Data were analyzed using Nvivo 12 qualitative analysis software, with themes and concepts extracted through rigorous analysis. The study adheres to the "information saturation principle," ensuring data completeness when saturation was reached. The research aims to uncover the underlying characteristics and logic of platform swinging among Generation Z, with a focus on their time perceptions and how they navigate the media environment.

Table 1. BASIC INFORMATION OF THE INTERVIEWEES

Number	Gender	Age	Number of platforms	Major	Interview methods
S1	female	22	4	Electronic Commerce	offline
S2	female	24	5	Journalism	online
S3	male	20	5	Computer	online
S4	female	23	4	Food Quality and Safety	online
S5	male	20	4	Engineering Management	offline
S6	female	23	3	Literature	online
S7	female	23	5	Broadcasting and hosting	online
S8	female	21	5	Political Sciences	offline
S9	male	19	6	Computer	online
S10	female	22	4	Accounting	online
S11	male	23	5	Environmental Engineering	offline
S12	male	25	4	Communication	online
S13	female	21	6	Journalism	online
S14	female	23	3	Environmental Design	offline
S15	female	22	4	Management Science	offline

SOURCE: IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW, 2024

4. Result and Discussion

The Realistic Landscape of Generation Z Youth Trapped in the "City of Time"

From the perspective of time structure, the existential crisis of individuals emerges from two forms of temporal change: time compression leading to time juxtaposition and time acceleration triggering time stacking. Time juxtaposition refers to the remeasurement and restructuring of time through specific metrics, resulting in the loss of a stable order. Time stacking primarily leads to the fragmentation of an individual's past, present, and future, resulting in scattered, disjointed experiences. The following sections explore the realistic landscape of Generation Z youth "trapped in the city of time" through these two temporal structures.

Time Juxtaposition and the Triggering of a Sense of Time Deprivation

The A key manifestation of Generation Z youth being "trapped in the city of time" is their entrapment in a socially induced attention deprivation. Scholar Lan Jiang discusses this phenomenon in the context of platform-based attention economies, defining it as "distraction." He points out that "distraction has become the fundamental mode of the era of big data and the internet." Attention, which was once drawn from the outside in, has now shifted to a distraction mode operating from the inside out on digital platforms. Whether using computers, smartphones, or other smart devices, Generation Z habitually opens multiple, sometimes even dozens of applications simultaneously, frequently switching between them (Aquinia et al., 2023). The countless external stimuli and ubiquitous devices pull individuals into a state of constant distraction, allocating their focus across various devices and sceneries. Ultimately, Generation Z youth, consistently projecting their attention onto the other side of the screen, find themselves ensnared in the mire of distraction. As one interviewee (S11) remarked: In this era of information overload, every time I try to focus, a notification, a new social media post, or a sudden advertisement can easily disrupt my attention.

Time Stacking and the Intensification of Temporal Detachment

Another manifestation of Generation Z youth being "trapped in the city of time" is the dizzying social landscape they navigate. Platform-switching behavior can fill gaps in time but also induces an accelerated sense of time, which heightens anxiety and fear, intensifying the sensation of temporal detachment. In psychology, this is referred to as a "flow state," where an individual's subjective perception of time becomes distorted when they are deeply immersed in an activity. Take TikTok as an example: what was initially intended to be just a few minutes of short video consumption can quickly devolve into two hours of mindlessly scrolling through content. During interviews, this phenomenon emerged across a wide range of participants and was not an isolated case. As interviewee S3 described: "I find myself constantly switching between different apps and

websites, trying to grasp some information that might not even matter. Time just slips away, and yet I feel like I've accomplished nothing."

In-Depth Analysis of the "City of Time" Phenomenon Among Generation Z Youth

The formation process of Generation Z youth's "City of Time" is not a linear, unidirectional relationship in which "platform swinging" directly leads to the entrapment in the "City of Time." Rather, it is an interactive relationship between "platform swinging" and the "City of Time." In reality, individuals experience time anxiety brought by the "accelerated society" and attempt to regain control over their time through social media, only to find that this exacerbates their entrapment in the "City of Time."

Emotional Traps: Endless Mental Fatigue

Social media browsing under platform swinging behavior keeps Generation Z youth constantly trapped in a cycle of comparison and information overload. This not only leads to emotional instability, increased anxiety, and self-doubt among young users but also imposes cognitive overload, impairing their ability to process information. Ultimately, this emotional trap and information overload result in what can be termed "social media-induced mental fatigue". As one interviewee, S5, stated: When browsing social media, I often subconsciously compare myself to others, which makes me anxious and doubt myself. The overwhelming information leaves me feeling utterly exhausted, as if social media has drained all my energy.

This "social media-induced mental fatigue" affects not only the psychological health of Generation Z youth but also their daily lives. They may easily feel drained, unable to fully engage in their studies, work, or social activities. Over time, this state of mental fatigue deepens their anxiety and stress, pushing them further into a cycle of distress.

Digital Mirage: The Inextinguishable Psychological Craving

The overwhelming array of information products offered by social media platforms, wrapped in enticing and enjoyable forms, acts like a hallucinogen in the guise of spectacles, continually drawing users to scroll through screens (Granheim et al., 2020). As a result, some youth develop a digital psychological craving characterized by eternal pursuit without satisfaction, with their motivation shifting from relieving time anxiety to seeking ever more excitement and stimulation. As described by interviewees S1, S3, and S6, this just makes me feel more empty and anxious, and it's as if I'm trapped in an endless cycle. In this state, they unconsciously spend excessive amounts of time on social media platforms, chasing novel content, unable to break free from the vicious cycle, and losing self-control.

Finding Balance in the "City of Time" for Generation Z Youth

Faced with the aforementioned phenomena, more and more Generation Z youth are exploring various methods to reconnect with everyday time and rebuild an authentic sense of temporal

experience. Through practices such as media disconnection, temporal-spatial synchronization, and temporal contemplation, they strive to break free from the shackles of social media and return to the real world. This new temporal awareness and coping strategies not only help them better manage their time and alleviate time anxiety but also improve their quality of life and psychological well-being. At the same time, they offer a path for finding balance in a digital age.

Media Disconnection: Reconnecting with Everyday Time

The time structure created by media is "fragmented and disordered," preventing the formation of a coherent experience of time. In contemporary society, platform swinging has greatly intensified the fragmentation and ephemerality of time perception for the younger generation, a phenomenon primarily driven by the pervasive use of social media platforms. These platforms, with their immediacy, foster a life filled with momentary events and fleeting attention. Although time may appear to be entirely under the individual's control in this environment, in reality, we have deviated significantly from an authentic sense of time.

In response, many Generation Z youth exercise their agency by practicing media disconnection, either temporarily or permanently, as a means of resisting media engagement. For instance, interviewee S11 remarked: "I now regularly practice media disconnection because I noticed that I was becoming increasingly addicted to social media apps. I was spending an enormous amount of time scrolling through my phone, jumping between platforms, which made me anxious and started affecting my mental health and quality of life. I realized it was time to make a change." By disconnecting from media, users can once again experience the deep, enduring passage of time, restore their perception of everyday time and natural rhythms, and better cope with the time crisis of modern society. As Byung-Chul Han observed, today's time crisis is not a result of acceleration; rather, what we perceive as acceleration is merely one of the symptoms of time's dissipation.

Temporal-Spatial Synchronization: The Secondary Construction of the Subjective World

The advancement of modern technology has liberated time from spatial constraints, enabling our everyday interactions to transcend the physical limitations of time and space. As a result, individuals can exist in two temporal frameworks simultaneously—both real-time and virtual time. However, this has also distanced people from the real world and true time. Specifically, as mobile phone screens become smaller, their resolution improves, and users' screen time significantly increases, people tend to overlook the screen as a physical medium, creating the illusion that the digital virtual environment presented on the screen is a real-world reflection.

To mitigate time anxiety and return to the real world, many Generation Z youth explore the world and perceive time through multi-sensory embodied experiences, constructing their actual temporal-spatial structures. Interviewee S9 stated: "I began to realize that long periods of

immersion in digital devices, especially on social media, made me feel that time was both passing quickly and unreal. This caused me great anxiety. I realized that this method was disconnecting me from the real world, and my sense of time became increasingly blurred. As a result, I started seeking a more direct and meaningful way to experience the world and perceive time. Eventually, I found that through City walks, I was able to alleviate the time anxiety caused by platform swinging."

Temporal Contemplation: Self-Awareness in the Field of Breathing

Byung-Chul Han believes that contemplation is necessary because, on the one hand, through contemplative dwelling, the beauty of many things in the world is revealed. "Only in contemplative dwelling, even in an ascetic state of restraint, do things reveal their beauty and exude their fragrant nature". On the other hand, "the tension of time releases the present from its unstructured, directionless continuation, imbuing it with importance. Only within a directed temporal tension can true time or genuine moments emerge."

"Only in the moment of life restored through contemplation can the time crisis be overcome". In addressing the time challenges posed by platform swinging, Generation Z youth can manage time more effectively through temporal contemplation and self-awareness. Specifically, practices such as meditation, mindfulness exercises, and time reflection can help alleviate time anxiety, emphasizing the integration of time perception with self-awareness and the harmony of psychological balance. This leads to deeper time management and enhances the sense of fulfillment and satisfaction in daily life. As interviewee S1 noted: "Meditation has become a powerful tool for me. It helps me calm my mind, withdraw my attention from external distractions, and return to my inner world. Through meditation, I've learned to observe my thought patterns, and this self-awareness enables me to arrange my time more consciously, rather than being swayed by external disturbances.

5. Conclusion

Admittedly, this study also has the following limitations. Firstly, this study focuses on Generation Z youth as interview subjects, and the conclusions drawn are primarily applicable within this group. At present, no specific conclusions can be made regarding the temporal perception characteristics of other specific groups in the context of platform swinging. If the temporal perception characteristics of different demographic groups during platform swinging were analyzed and compared, a more comprehensive and complete picture of temporal perception characteristics could be obtained. Secondly, although this study follows the principle of maximum variation and data saturation for qualitative sampling, there is still the issue of a small sample size. The findings need broader validation and analysis to enhance their generalizability and reliability. Additionally, to reflect sample diversity, this study collected interview cases from various regions and

professions. However, this approach did not allow for in-depth analysis of the social and cultural factors specific to certain regions or professions. Consequently, an in-depth exploration of the temporal perception characteristics of individuals in particular regions or professions becomes a limitation of this research. Lastly, the grounded theory approach used in this study for data analysis shows some deficiencies in the coding and conceptualization stages, lacking depth in refinement and generalization. Future research could further deepen reflections and discussions on real-world issues like internet addiction and social media fatigue, building on the overall framework. These four limitations point to new directions and focal points for future research in this field, offering important areas for subsequent exploration.

Future research could utilize multidisciplinary approaches, such as psychology, sociology, and communication technology, to deepen the understanding of the impact of swinging platforms on various aspects of Generation Z's life, including mental health, productivity, and social relationships. Future studies could use longitudinal methods to observe changes in platform swinging behavior over time, particularly in the context of evolving social media dynamics. Then Diversifying the Sample, This research can be expanded by involving other age groups, such as the Alpha Generation or Millennials, to compare platform swinging patterns between generations. and finally, Quantitative Approach: In addition to the qualitative approach, future research could use quantitative data-based surveys to measure the scale and intensity of platform swinging more representatively across a larger population.

While in this study researchers have limitations in conducting research which include: Geographical Coverage: This research is focused on the context of Generation Z in China, so the results may not be fully applicable to the same generation in other countries with different digital cultures. Focus on Generation Z: This study only addresses Generation Z, so it does not include comparisons between generations that might provide a more holistic perspective. Then Temporal Limitations, This study was conducted in a specific period that may not reflect the changing behavior patterns of Generation Z in the future, especially with the emergence of new technologies. Finally, in terms of Technological Aspects, this research focuses more on the impact of platform swinging behavior on time and social interactions, thus less on the role of algorithm design and platform features in driving this behavior.

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