

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the Problem

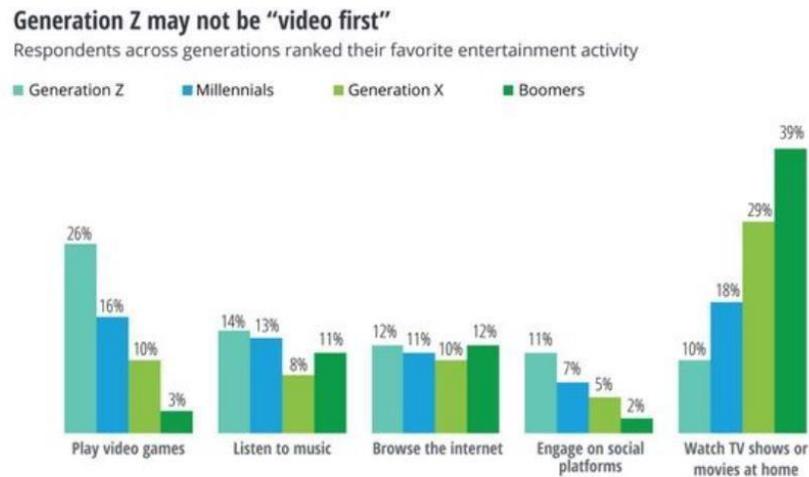
When talking about the rise of civilizations, it is hard to not acknowledge the ways in which technology has changed lives over the last few decades. Transforming people into what Marc Prensky (2001) in *Flew* (2014, p. 2) called “digital natives”, people are born and bred alongside technology that intertwines itself with our daily activities; with some taking the form of instant messaging apps, cell phones, the Internet and computer games (Prensky, 2001). As a result, countless people can virtually connect with one another and interact without seeing each other physically.

Being a digital native enables a person to exhibit their virtual selves; this is accomplished by creating an online identity in order to experience and interact with the world through many forms of technology like the Internet and their own electronic devices (Agger, 2004). One way to gain this experience and interact with the world digitally is to engage in activities in the cyberspace or virtual reality. Cyberspaces, usually referring to computer games or other available game platforms, are referred to by Slater (2002) in *Flew* (2014, p. 21) as social settings that are located entirely

online. In addition to seeking entertainment by playing said games, people can build communities and are given the freedom to present themselves however they want through the creation of avatars that are easily customizable (Flew, 2014, p. 22) or a selection of characters they can choose to play. With many available features, cyberspaces and the overall gaming world have gained popularity that rivalled and even outshone other forms of entertainment and leisure activities. Fagandini (2021) reported the results of a survey conducted by Deloitte on the habits of Generation Z, millennials and older age groups when consuming media, especially in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Of 2,009 respondents, twenty-six percent (26%) of Generation Z were revealed to prefer “playing video games” compared to other activities such as “listening to music” with fourteen percent (14%) of respondents preferring said activity, “browsing the Internet” chosen by twelve percent (12%) of respondents, eleven percent (11%) preferring to “engage on social platforms” and only ten percent (10%) prefer to “watch television shows or movies at home”.

In comparison, sixteen percent (16%) of Deloitte’s millennial respondents chose “playing video games” as their favorite entertainment activity (Fagandini, 2021). However, eighteen percent (18%) enjoyed watching “television shows and movies at home”, a number slightly higher than those who preferred video games. Older groups in turn, such as Generation X and Boomers preferred watching television shows and movies

by far, with both statistics measuring up to twenty-nine percent (29%) and thirty-nine percent (39%) respectively.



Source: Digital media trends, 15th edition.

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Figure 1.1 Media Consumption Habits of Different Age Groups  
 Source: Deloitte, in Fagandini (2021)

Based on the given data, entertaining one’s self with games, combined with aforementioned socializing opportunities to build connections have appealed greatly to the youngest social group among all others. Hence, Generation Z becomes an interesting and significant group to examine. As of August 2021, a report by Newzoo Consumer Insights investigated the way Generation Z worldwide interact with games. After interviewing over 72,000 people in thirty-three countries including Indonesia, results showed that eighty-one percent (81%) of Generation Z are gamers and have played games in the past six months for an average time of seven hours and twenty minutes per week. (Weustink, 2021). In the

same time frame of the past six months, Generation Z have also shown great interest in playing in multiple platforms, which include personal computer (PC), console and mobile games (Weustink, 2021).

Weustink (2021), through Newzoo Consumer Insights also reported the ways in which gamers prefer to socialize and interact within the games they play. Playing games itself serves as a way to spend quality time with their friends, unchained by mannerisms of socializing offline such like in restaurants or other public spaces. Online games provide opportunities for people to get together; when verbal conversations die, playing games together can revive it and help establish deeper connections between gamers (Stuart, 2013). When away from keyboard, gamers find themselves reading, watching and listening to the latest news about the gaming industry itself in other platforms. Gamers also like to discuss game-related content with the people around them, whether it be family or friends and actively contribute ideas and opinions to virtual discussions on platforms predominantly filled with other gamers such as Reddit, Discord, and ResetEra (Weustink, 2021). Such socializing methods are reportedly implemented by forty percent (40%) of Generation Z gamers. Thus, exposing how gamers are increasingly interacting within cyberspaces that connect them to fellow gamers and communities.

With total freedom given to create online identities, the possibilities are endless for gamers to portray themselves however they want using their

avatars or choosing from a selection of playable characters. Furthermore, in order to socialize and be accepted into their respective game communities, an individual would be concerned with ensuring that they are personable enough for other gamers to accept them. To achieve this objective, individuals engage in the act of self-presentation, defined by Leary, Tangney & Schlenker (2012) as “the study of examining how individuals attempt to shape others’ attitudes and behaviors towards the individual themselves by conveying a certain intended image of themselves to others”. Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman stated that regardless of the objective, an individual will strive to control the conduct of those around them, especially how they treat the individual themselves. The individual conducts their self-presentation through what Goffman (1959) called a “performance” to influence other people, who act as their audience, observers, or co-participants. In a performance, the individual intentionally acts and expresses themselves in certain ways in an attempt to receive the impressions and responses they want from their audience (Goffman, 1959, p. 6). Be that as it may, Leary et al. (2012) remarked that self-presentation is manipulative and deceptive. It is centered on showing people a more polished version of themselves so that they may receive validation from others without doubting the kind of person they really are.

## 1.2 Identification of the Problem

As gamers do not have to interact with each other physically, altering their online identities to differ from their real ones becomes a much simpler task. Such activities are frequent in the gaming community, with gamers having various goals and motives to achieve from their performances. For example, some gamers may feel as though they have to prove themselves competent enough to play with others (Weatherbed, 2021), which frequently occurs in game genres like “multiplayer online battle arena” (MOBA) or “battle royale” where players rely heavily on teamwork to win (Puteri, 2021). Weatherbed (2021) recalled having “noob anxiety”, which pressured her to excel at a game even as a beginner to avoid facing hostility from other players. She quoted that in the gaming community, there is a “bizarre expectation for new players to willingly subject themselves to abuse from other players in order to master the game’s mechanics, skills and ultimately feel welcome” (Weatherbed, 2021). The struggle doubled as she had to deal with being harassed for being a female gamer, a common discriminative behavior in the male-dominated community. As of May 2021, Sinclair (2021) reported that seventy-seven percent (77%) of 900 female gamers in China, Germany and the United States face in-game discrimination for their gender. The actions ranged from harmful comments, flirting, unwanted messages and photos, to being intrusively asked about their personal relationships. Consequently, fifty-

nine percent (59%) of the surveyed women hid their genders to avoid being targets of such behavior from other gamers (Sinclair, 2021).

Self-presentation is not the only concern both male and female gamers face. After choosing a certain polished image to portray of one's self, the individual has to maintain their performance to 'stay in character' online, otherwise known as negotiating both their altered online identity and their real ones. According to Ting-Toomey (2015), to negotiate one's identities is to "maintain, uplift or threaten their socio-cultural and personal identities" through both verbal and nonverbal communication. Identity negotiation is an equally important process to implement because if a person fails to 'stay in character', they would appear untrustworthy and insincere to others around them as the person is obliged to keep "being what they say they are" or risk being disliked after conducting their self-presentation (Leary, Tangney & Schlenker, 2012).

The urgency of conducting this study stems from the very nature of self-presentation being deceptive and driven by one's personal goals, sometimes to put others at a disadvantage. Real-life stories recount many who have fallen victim to ill intentions of those who altered their online identities. One viral incident involved two high school male students in Jakarta, Indonesia, with one posing as a charming female player named "Adelia" to woo male players so that they would help increase 'her' rank in MOBA game *Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB)* (Kartikawati, 2018).

The victim, a fellow player named Alan, fell for “Adelia”’s flattery and repeatedly asked to interact with ‘her’ via in-game voice calls and voice notes on WhatsApp. The incident climaxed when Alan asked to meet in person, resulting in “Adelia” running out of reasons to stall and eventually confessing his crime of pretending to be a female player searching for skilled players to help him increase his rank. Cases of higher stakes did not stop at altering one’s identity, but have robbed gamers of their money by posing as other people in the gaming community, namely public figures with many followers to appear credible. Professional gamer, streamer and content creator Kimi Hime fell victim to gamers posing as herself claiming to sell in-game currencies in both *MLBB* and battle royale game *PlayerUnknown’s Battlegrounds (PUBG)*, robbing many players of their money (Aji, 2020). As a result, many players framed Hime for scamming them and prompted her to post a clarification on her Instagram account saying that she had never opened top-up services for in-game currencies. Hime then gave her followers a wake-up call telling them to not be fooled by manipulators who pose as other people in games to rob their money (Aji, 2020).

On the other hand, identity negotiation in gaming communities is also an equally significant aspect to examine as it has proved to help people who struggled with identifying themselves, especially considering Generation Z who emphasize exploring their identities in more than one

way (Francis and Hoefel, 2018). A unique example is how identity negotiation has helped a transgender player named Hannah build and strengthen her identity to become her desired gender in the online game platform *Roblox*. Born as a male, reality made it impossible for Hannah to dress and behave as a female. But in *Roblox*, she was free to become one thanks to the platform allowing her to decide her identity and design a female avatar in any fashion to her heart's content (Faber, 2021). Other players within the game welcomed her with open arms when she confided in them about being confused of her gender and overall identity. Eventually, Hannah's female avatar came to real life as she slowly transitioned to behaving like her desired identity and embracing it. Faber (2021) commented that the freedom players have in designing their online identities allowed them to also understand said identities, giving players a chance to learn how to behave the same way in real life and allowing themselves to slowly become their own avatars.

Hence, with such urgency, the researcher is prompted to conduct a phenomenological study on self-presentation and identity negotiation among members of the gaming community to provide a more detailed understanding of the phenomenon by looking into the perspective of Generation Z gamers.

### **1.3 Statement of the Problem**

To conduct this research thoroughly with the given background and identified problem, the researcher formulates the following research question: “How do gamers present themselves in the games they play and negotiate their identities online and away from keyboard?”

### **1.4 Statement of the Problem**

This study aims to first, gain an in-depth understanding of how gamers make sense of their respective virtual realities, namely the games they play. The study also aims to describe the self-presentation process that gamers go through to convey a particular image of themselves to others within their respective games. To do this, the researcher will conduct a phenomenological study into the gaming community focusing on its members' experiences through in-depth interviews. Following their self-presentation process, the study also aims to discover the ways in which gamers negotiate their identities online and away from keyboard.

After obtaining data with selected informants, the researcher aims to describe the overall essence of the experience through the eyes of members of the gaming community using the interpretive phenomenological analysis. In doing so, the researcher hopes to thoroughly answer the aforementioned research question and achieve the stated

purposes.

## **1.5 Significance of the Study**

Understanding the urgency of the self-presentation and identity negotiation phenomenon within the gaming community helps establish the significance of this study in two ways. This research bears both the academic and practical significance as follows:

### **1.5.1 Academic Significance**

This study bears significance to the academic field as it can help provide an in-depth understanding of the ways self-presentation may impact computer-mediated communication between two or more individuals. Furthermore, the study may also provide insights on how identity negotiation works within cyberspaces without the access to see other people physically. Academicians can then use this study to not only gain an understanding on how individuals negotiate both online and offline identities, but also learn how individuals construct their identities within the cyberspace for others to see and away from it, hence prompting further research.

### **1.5.2 Practical Significance**

Through this study, the researcher hopes to emphasize how crucial it is for gamers to mind their self-presentation within cyberspaces. Gamers

can first learn, through this research, to identify self-presentation at work with themselves and identify others', especially when they are acting "out of character" so that they are aware that there may be a hidden objective that the player want to achieve by acting a certain way. The researcher also hopes to provide members of the gaming community the perspectives and motives that lead to people presenting themselves a certain way, even when it's an inauthentic version of themselves so that gamers can first understand the reason behind their actions; then, when necessary, take precautionary action should they encounter forms of self-presentation in their environment that might endanger other players. Doing this would also help gamers to be more careful when interacting with fellow players online, and hopefully minimize dangers in the cyberspace.

Finally, the researcher also hopes that this study provides a practical significance that can assist Generation Z gamers in understanding the identity negotiation process they go through when attempting to shape and experiment with their own identities. The study may provide an understanding to how the identity negotiation process helps to identify how the interaction between and their gaming environments within the cyberspace contribute to shaping a person's identity. This study may also appeal to other age groups, especially those either raising Generation Z gamers in their homes or working in industries appealing to Generation Z to further understand how the generation behaves and interacts with

technology, specifically the cyberspace.

## **1.6 Scope of the Study**

Previous researches have looked into hostile behaviors in the gaming community and the overall game experience for players. A study conducted by the Journal of Athlete Development and Experience found that female gamers experience more discrimination for their gender while male gamers face hostility when playing such as insults, heavy criticism and trash talk from other players (Darvis, Vooris & Mahoney, 2020). Additionally, researchers have examined self-presentation and identity negotiation in gaming communities, though examined separately. Researches looking into each of them are elaborated in the literature review and act as a reference and guidance to this study.

However, there is limited research looking into both the self-presentation and identity negotiation process of gamers that ultimately lead to the alteration of one's identity in virtual gaming environments. Thus, this research will not focus on the various behaviors identified within the virtual gaming environment, but on the gamers' individual experiences with the self-presentation process and the way they interact with their respective gaming environments through identity negotiation.

## **1.7 Organization of the Study**

### **CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION**

The first chapter of this research consists of the background and main problem identified that propels and becomes the main focus of this research. The aim of this research is then established through the statement of the problem and purpose of the study. Finally, the chapter elaborates on the significance of the study and ends with a brief explanation of the organization of the study.

### **CHAPTER II: RESEARCH OBJECT**

Chapter Two introduces the research's subject and object. In this case, the research subject are members of the gaming community, both male and female. It will also determine the games that the researcher aim to examine. There are two objects of research in this study; the researcher will examine the players' self-presentation process and their identity negotiation process as according to the works of Barry R. Schlenker, Erving Goffman, and Stella Ting-Toomey.

### **CHAPTER III: LITERATURE REVIEW**

Chapter Three consists of all concepts and theories relevant to this research. This includes explanations on new media and the cyberspace, an introduction to the gaming world, including platforms and genres. These concepts are followed by explanations about the 'self', including self-presentation and impression management, along with the theory used in the

research: identity negotiation theory under the intercultural communication tradition.

#### **CHAPTER IV: METHODOLOGY**

In this chapter, the researcher elaborates on the research approach and method. It will describe the data collection techniques, data verification and data analysis method that the research will implement.

#### **CHAPTER V: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This chapter presents the research's findings after collecting data using the established methods in the previous chapter. What is presented in this chapter also helps to answer the established research question in Chapter One and achieve the purposes of the study.

#### **CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS**

The final chapter concludes the research and its findings, along with suggestions on how this topic can be further explored in future researches for those who wish to study the gaming community or explore self-presentation and identity negotiation.