Chapter #7

THE SCREENERS PROJECT
The Age of New Communication

Petra Pětiletá
MgA, Charles University, Pedagogical faculty, Art Education Department in Prague, Czech Republic

ABSTRACT
Nowadays, daily-use of a computer, notebook, tablet, and other display is natural. Thanks to the development of new technologies, we are gradually moving from textual-cultural to hypertextual expression. The Internet is a relatively new data medium and requires a new method of reading and working with information. New media, coupled with technical advances (in addition to art), brings about a cultural transformation of mass society through a wealth of easily accessible visual data with different purposes and content. Contemporary life in our global society manifests itself in two ways: everyday life in the real world without a connection and a digital platform through which one is connected via a screen. The rapid development of the Internet and digital technologies is also reflected in art education as well as the creations of students without the use of computers.

Keywords: digital platforms, identity, internet, reshaped reality, generation Z.

1. INTRODUCTION

The present era is marked by the end of traditional communication, manifested by frequent communication via various screens and displays. Mobile technology further allows us to redirect our attention to a different digital environment instantaneously. There is an increasing number of people for whom it is natural to integrate their Self into the digital realm and create digital identity - a virtual profile through which one can communicate and live. I´m working on research, called 'The Screeners Project: The Age of New Communication". This research explores two contemporary life platforms, digital (online) and biological (offline), because today we are constantly switching between these two worlds. The digital sphere influences our cognition towards life itself. It prompts several questions: How is technological acceleration significant in art education, particularly with respect to "Generation Z" (born after the year 2000). Because digital platforms are becoming more and more important, how do they interfere with the life and communication of members of this generation? These are the main research questions I would like to answer.

Figure 1.
Illustrative image for "The Screeners project", 2019.

2. BACKGROUND

I have previously dealt with digital technologies and changes in thinking within a globalized society, for example, in the 'Dialogue' project, in which I became aware of our connection with television screens. Television long-ago replaced the family fireplace, and people have since started to prefer the artificial, simulated lives of fictional characters over their own lives. Screens and displays have, for several generations, been an essential part of everyday life. While I was working on the 'Dialogue' project in 2003 at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague. I longed for love and wanted to appropriate the actor's confession of love, to become a metaphysical part of his love. I edited out the actress to whom the confession was addressed and placed myself there instead. I put myself into her role. I lived my dream, albeit simulated, to compensate for my loneliness.

Figure 2.
Stills from "Dialogue" video, 3.22 by Petra Pětiletá.

When I later started teaching art education, I realized to what extent student artworks could be reflections of society and its various aspects (consumer expansion, consumer trends, transforming communication thanks to information technology, hypertexts, applications, and

games). This is also increasingly projected into student artworks. The computer aesthetic of digital environment 'windows', the navigation of pages, and the sorting of information influences artistic reasoning as well. Digital computer models/artwork is gradually becoming more and more a part of conventional analogue art production (computer-less creations), transforming the cultural archetypes at the same time. *"Because new media is created on computers, distributed via computers, and stored and archived on computers, the logic of a computer can be expected to significantly influence the traditional cultural logic of media; that is, we may expect that the computer layer will affect the cultural layer."* (Manowich, 2017 , p. 60).

2.1. Theoretical base

2.1.1. Digital era, digital possibilities

For digital life we need to be online, and it´s the essential thing today. We need internet. One of the critical study, which completely describes nature of Internet, how is it modificating our thinking. In the book of Nicolas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (2017), Carr pays attention to the Internet as a new hybrid data medium, documenting the crucial importance of Gutenberg's invention of the letterpress in the transformation of human understanding and in spreading and reading the imprints of thoughts through the use of character sets—words. With its arrival and expansion, people learned something completely new and literacy gradually penetrated all households. Today, linear text has been replaced by *hypertext*, which owes its existence to an invention in the development of literacy no less of a breakthrough than was the book at that time: the Internet. Indeed, this has always been the case with images. The only difference being that today, thanks to the digital environment of the Internet, we have many more of them around us than ever before, and thanks to constant acceleration, the time to evaluate all the information viewed or read has been reduced. It is natural for the younger generation to go rapidly through a large amount of internet-based visual information on a daily basis, especially on social networks or in other virtual environments.

Due to multitasking, it is common today to have several windows (tables) running simultaneously and switch between them. The biggest problem Carr (2017) and Spitzer (2014) see is that switching attention in the digital environment shatters attention and concentration, which contributes to less conscious action. In my research ´m looking for internet aspects in students' artworks, how these influences from digital platform is appearing in non-digital picture. Internet navigation obviously influences students' artworks. I collect these artworks, mainly those that acknowledge the significant fact that we are living in a world where we are naturally switching between the two platforms of digital (online) and biological (offline).

The key to memory consolidation is attentiveness. Storing explicit memories and, equally important, forming connections between them requires strong mental concentration, amplified by repetition or by intense intellectual or emotional engagement. The sharper the attention, the shaper the memory. 'For a memory to persist . . . the incoming information must be thoroughly and deeply processed. This is accomplished by attending to the information and associating it meaningfully and systematically with knowledge already well established in memory.' If we're unable to attend to the information in our working memory, the information lasts only as long as the neurons that hold it maintain their electric charge—a few seconds at best. Then it's gone, leaving little or no trace in the mind. (Kandell, 2007, p. 210).

Various neuroscience studies warn of an emerging ‘digital dementia’ in connection with digitization in general. For example, studies and research by Manfred Spitzer point to visible changes in brain function (changes in the quality of cognitive function, effects on long-term and short-term memory). On the other hand, such changes could represent an evolutionary shift, characterized by a species adapting its capabilities in response to changes in its environment. However, given the aforementioned new development in the human brain and psyche, these development trends can in any case be expected to project into our social and cultural functioning and will undoubtedly be reflected in interpersonal communication strategies as well. What changes they will bring and what impact they will have, we can only assume. In the postindustrial phase, the development of society is, in short, accelerating more and more thanks to the technologies, to which the youngest always adapt best. The Internet can, of course, also be perceived as a powerful manipulation tool which is gradually replacing traditional print media. Its effect on the recipient of information is, in comparison to printing, much more variable, multiplying its influence on users with its incomparably higher speed of information dissemination and transmission. The internet contains a large amount of hidden software, most of which use personalisation to make choices without us. In this way it is actually artificial intelligence, that is shaping our choices in a smart way. “*For example, it used to recommend photos, videos, music and other media. and it also used to suggest people what to follow…*”(Manowich, 2017, p. 8).

We - users don´t have to necessarily know about existence of AI (artificial intelligence, but it is there. We are becoming algorithmic. For “Generation Z”, this means that algorithms are, in some part, educating them from early childhood.

Other current philosophical studies devoted to a critique of the Internet as a data medium for political use of strategies in various forms of internet communication. Nowadays almost everyone is an internet user.

“In many situations, users do not deliberately ponder over whether or not they should engage in media use. Instead, media exposure is initiated unconsciously through media habits More specifically, habits are characterized by automatic, impulse-driven initiation of behavior. Thus the more habitually a medium is used, the more likely the medium is selected automatically and impulsively.” (Gilroy-Ware, 2017, p. 33)

Studies point to the notion of neoliberalism in connection with the digital internet sphere having become a huge haven for the free market and broadcast without admission. There is also talk of the Internet as a tool to accelerate shifts in the frame of capitalism, power, and control (Bown, 2018; Zizek, 2018). The ‘Big Data’ theory speaks of collecting digital data by the largest servers, such as Google, which offer its data backup services for free, but the collected data then becomes a source of user information (metadata). Digital information represents a modern nonmaterial business commodity. In today’s age, personalization and the possibility to comment on almost anything thanks to social networking means that every user is creating their own ‘identity footprint’ or, if you like, a data trail in the online internet environment. Nowadays, quite often, people, regardless of their age, experience almost pathological dependence on constant internet access. With little exaggeration, the Internet could be seen as external human memory or as the ‘central hard-drive of digital version of humanity’, filled with migrating data ‘unbound’ from its original context, full of copies of copies.

“Technology is not only a helper for human activity, but also a powerful force that transforms these activities and their meaning.” (Winner in Carr, 2017, p. 54).

The digital (online) and biological (offline) platforms of are reflected in human life by switching between these two positions, often automatically. This has increasingly become second nature. Our digital life is part of our biological one – today the two are inseparable.

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Today, it is to a certain extent possible to evaluate how, in a relatively short time, our society has changed thanks to mobile displays, and how much the generation gap has increased. Screens entered our society with the expansion of television broadcasting. For older generations, computer monitors and the Internet are used more for passive entertainment—for watching videos or, alternatively, for finding information. These digital technologies are important for them as additional tools. The middle generation uses digital technology and the Internet knowing the interactive possibilities with which one can work, if possible. However, for Generation Z (people born after the turn of the millennium), the digital world is a natural and inseparable part of their lives in a much deeper way than for previous generations. A connection and a wifi symbol are so important to much of our globalized society that the inability to connect to the Internet can be a source of great stress.

Since children often have mobile phones from an early age, it is logical that content from the digital environment plays an important role in their upbringing. In fact, children learn based on what they are experiencing in the moment, regardless of whether it is in a virtual world or a real world. Digital tools and media, according to current neuroscientists (Spitzer, 2014; Carr,2017; Gilroy-Ware, 2017), additionally shape how children think in a way that is increasingly creating a communication gap between people of different ages.

Alfie Bown describes the current pervasive internet culture as a 'distraction culture': *'We enjoy hundreds of essentially mindless things which fill up our time—not just mobile games or online spreadsheets, but also social network notifications and YouTube videos'* (Bown, 2018, p. 35).

It is as though we were living in a discourse in which we prefer 'insignificant', immaterial things on the Internet, whilst we have much less time for matters of importance (building actual relationships, developing patience) which we need to acquire our own life experiences from the biological (offline) world. At this point, however, we are diverging from Generation Z, for which 'digital issues' (online world) seems that are often more important than experiences in the biological world. Can it be true? It is, of course, also necessary to consider the specific developmental stage of childhood—it is typical and natural for children not to distinguish what is essential and what is not.

However, it is indisputable that the use of modern technologies will influence Generation Z in an educational and cognitive way in the future. Moreover, youth are the most easily influenced target group for a variety of purposes, from politics to marketing. When a person spends a lot of time in the digital sphere, they are essentially running from their own reality, which, according to social psychology, has an impact on their personality. The user-person automatically switches between two worlds and two self-representations (two different identities), transcending their physical Self in the digital version.

Figure 3.
Illustration image by Petra Pětiletá 2019.

2.2. Instant experience

In today's technologically accelerated society, we have the opportunity to indulge whenever we desire in a variety of easily accessible (*la jouissance*), nice, pleasant, appealing experiences or entertainment and humor. Digital platforms offer us an infinite number of possibilities to instantly satisfy our needs and desires in a variety of ways. Every user can indulge in a variety of simulative platforms on their mobile phones, and much faster and more efficiently than before. Everyday something new and funny arises which simplifies our lives. The digital sphere also serves an escape from the biological present or satisfies our need for its 'modification'. This phenomenon was addressed, for example, by Gilles Lipovetsky in his book *Hypermodern Times* (2013).

‚Enjoyment' ('la jouissance' in the original) as a phenomenological term was first dealt with by Jacques Lacan. But another phenomenon of postmodern society is 'personalization', which gives us the opportunity to tune into the services we receive as well as many other matters according to our discretion and needs. Our limitations have decreased to the point where we, additionally, no longer need to (needlessly) wait to share anything. Gilles Lipovetsky (2008) calls this state a 'culture of right now'. For this culture, it is typical to have changed its perception and conception of time. Today's post-industrial society is focused on 'now' with less regard for the future. The studies of these authors show that the aspect of 'instant action' is also manifested in the sphere of "offline" communication, where it may seem difficult to wait.

Of course, it should be noted that all of the above-described phenomena developed independently outside the digital environment, is only accelerating. (Lipowetsky 2008) Lev Manovich xamines in his works the nature of new media, which has gradually become digital, in detail. Of interest is the way new media and technology reflect a certain human character. For Marshall McLuhan (1991), all media technologies were extensions of humans. Computer is extension of human thinking with all new automating algorithms

3. RESEARCH PROBE

I conducted a research probe. I focused in classes with students of lower gymnasium, age 11-16 year, later on I made an interviews with students in several schools, to have more valid spectrum. For a visual part of research, I assigned students the task of developing a mind map on the topic of digital (online) and biological (offline) worlds. There was no specific explanation about my expectations from participants. I was looking for an answer to the question of how students actually perceive the world around them in relation to the two mentioned platforms and how their perception reflects the impact of the Internet, social networks, or online games.

Of interest to me were the values the students would display through their work with the thematic mind maps. Mind maps have proven to me a better way of showing individuals' natural thinking. The principle of mind maps and work with them supports associative thinking and its gradual layering. The system for processing ideas on a given topic is not limited beforehand, which offers room for freer expression. Almost always, something rather unexpected appears in the processing of the mind map results.

Figure 4.
Ongoing evaluation from research probe of 60 mind-maps, 30 for "Bio" life and 30 for "digital life", made by 11 - 13 years old students, samples of mind maps.

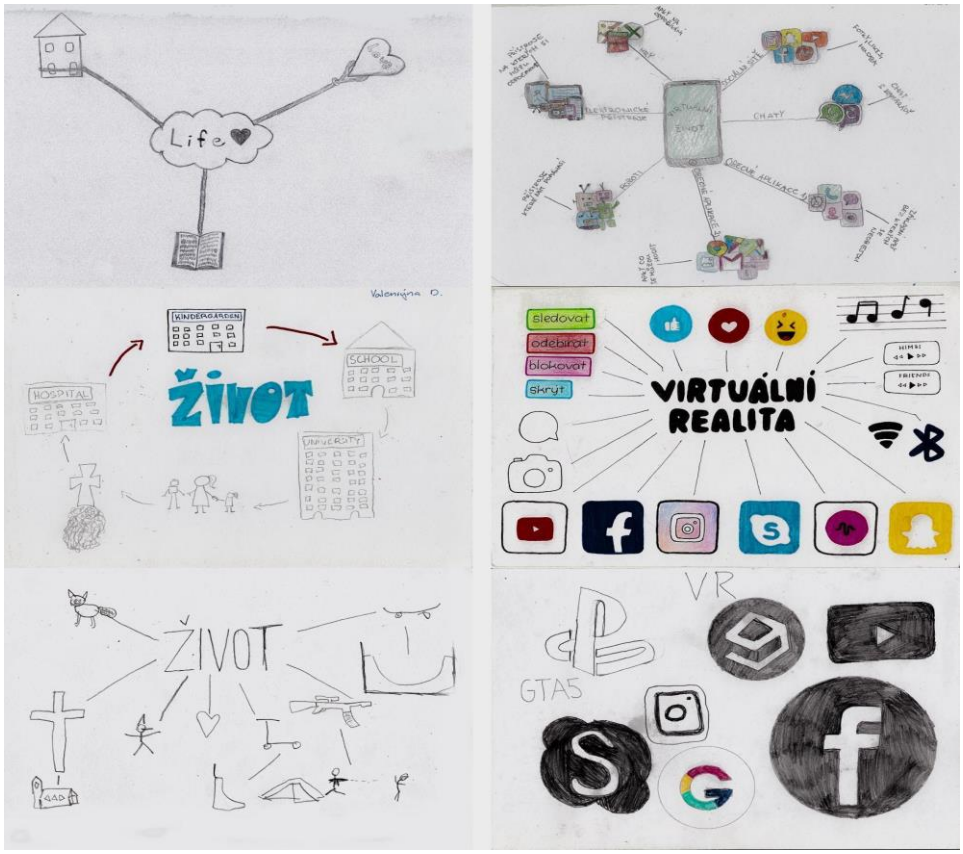
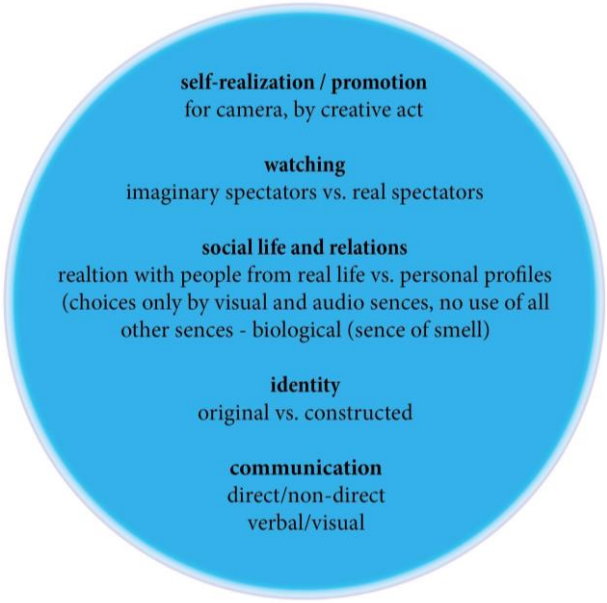


Figure 5.
Targeting the main aspects of my qualitative research inquiry, 2019.



3.1. Digital self (online) versus biological self (offline)

The concept of self-presentation in an online and offline platform environment varies. An interesting finding in this context is the investigation into the concept of an 'avatar' and virtual identity types, adjustable by the users themselves. The tools to realize a 'new type of self-presentation', or, alternatively, self-realization, are also constantly evolving, but in principle it is personalization. We choose what and how we modify when creating a profile even though it is always our reflection, a reflection of our original Self. Biological reality can sometimes seem—unlike an image for the digital sphere, which can be customized and corrected—imperfect. Most of the visual information on the Internet becomes a design, which, in some way, is moving away from reality.

The biological (original/actual) identity is overlayed by a digital identity (a profile or avatar). It appears that in users who live 'interactively' and always have one foot in the digital world- These identities cannot be completely separated. What photo or image a user chooses as their representation can act as evidence of many things, but it does not say much about reality; most of the time this image shows an idealized demo version of a user's personality. In addition, younger generations lack perspective, take their online presentation extremely seriously, and place significant meaning in their profile. I had the opportunity to verify this fact many times in art education classes.

The analysis of the manually coded mind maps (qualitative analysis) consisted of sixty mind maps in total, and took into account the age of the interviewed students, which ranged between eleven and sixteen years. From the first look is significant, how important the icons of applications are for students. In many cases, the pupils needed to capture the icons carefully, leaving no time for anything else.

Students have a fondness for indirect internet chat communication because they admit they can hide behind it. Anonymity is not a barrier to communication; rather, on the contrary,

it makes it possible to communicate in a way we would not dare to if our identity were revealed. At the same time, on the other hand, they have the opportunity to communicate immediately and to exclude from their communication their own personality barriers: bad mood, appearance, or a psychiatric condition, which would be evident in real life. In the online world, they always have a choice of multiple possibilities, positions, and settings. However, students are well aware that physical movement and the experiences connected with it cannot be replaced by anything available in the online world yet, and that virtual pizza has no taste. Some children find the biological world less interesting and boring, due to which there is a growing habit of making this 'ordinary' world somehow special, refining and upgrading it. This habit then becomes second nature. In the context of time perception, pupils in the digital world appreciate that it simplifies their lives by never getting bored in it, and that they immediately have some audiovisual data available to entertain them. Whereas, the biological (offline) world itself does not have this ability to spontaneously entertain oneself.

4. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

In my investigation, I confirmed that children switch automatically between the two platforms (digital and biological). They often find the digital world more interesting (most children chose to work first on the digital world). They are well aware that they are expected to keep their screen time under control and maintain a distance from the online world, but it is difficult for them. It is a world which they can control to some extent, be it the use of social networks, something slightly more widespread among girls; playing interactive online games, which boys spend more time on; or identifying with influencers on channels like YouTube. In the lives of Generation Z, the online world plays a much more important role than we like to admit. In what way? My research also includes interview transcripts with students of different schools, and which will be used for further qualitative and quantitative study. I have coded these mind maps in the MAXQDA software as part of the ongoing qualitative investigation using the "in vivo method". I'm searching for new expressions and connections and preparing case studies that hope to prove that acceleration in digital living the redefinition of the concept of art education.

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AUTHOR INFORMATION

Full name: Petra Pětiletá
Institutional affiliation: Charles University- Pedagogical Faculty- Art education department
Institutional address: Magdalény Rettigové 4, Praha 1, 110 00
Short biographical sketch: I studied Academy of Fine Arts in Prague, graduated in 2005. After studies I started to work as a lector in public sphere to give lessons about Art making in various forms. Later on I became a teacher of an Art Education in secondary and high school. Aside from Art, my focus is examination of changes in society, especially younger generation, impact of new digital technologies. As a teacher I'm bringing questions of values to my students.