Liwa-Saan?: The Lack of Third Places in Metro Manila and its Contribution to the Rise of Digital Socialization among Filipino Gen Z

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between the decline of accessible third places and the increasing reliance on digital platforms for socialization among Filipino Generation Z, aged 16-24, residing in Metro Manila. With the theories of Uses & Gratification and Participation Culture, the paper assessed how socialization and one's wellmake tba-being is affected by online environments and urban geographical barriers. Through qualitative research with a descriptive-exploratory approach, an online survey garnering 111 respondents and a focus group discussion with 6 participants were conducted for data gathering. The participants' perception of physical and virtual spaces, socialization, and motivations were assessed using a thematic analysis. Primary findings in this study note that despite being active on digital platforms, Filipino Gen Z consider face-to-face interactions more emotionally fulfilling. Their reliance on digital platforms is influenced by geographical barriers and challenges in accessing third places, making online communication a convenient and often default mode of interaction. Despite their accessibility and ability to bridge physical distances, heavy reliance on digital platforms may also contribute to experiences of social isolation, loneliness, and FoMO. This study urges the importance of urban planning in prioritizing cost-free, safe, and inclusive public third places to encourage socialization among Filipino Gen Z and improve their well-being. The findings of this study serve as the foundation for a multiplatform advocacy project that utilizes digital media to raise awareness, encourage youth participation, and promote meaningful face-to-face social interaction among Filipino Gen Z.

Keywords: third places, digital socialization, social isolation

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CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

A. Introduction

Social media and digital technology have become a big part of how people, especially young generations, connect with each other today. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and X make it easy to communicate anytime and anywhere, turning online interaction into a regular part of daily life. Young people between the ages of 16 and 24, commonly referred to as Gen Z, are among the heaviest users of these platforms (Sheikh, 2025). Having grown up with the internet and smartphones, this generation is often described as "Tech Innate," meaning they are naturally skilled at communicating through images and creating content, especially in collaborative online spaces (Yadav & Rai, 2017). This constant exposure to digital platforms has made technology not just a convenience but a main way for Gen Z to socialize, build relationships, and express their individuality. Studies even suggest that their heavy use of social media is driven by deeper psychological needs, such as the desire for emotional fulfillment, a stronger sense of identity, and social validation. This reliance on digital platforms grew even stronger during the COVID-19 pandemic, when lockdowns and physical distancing left young people with little choice but to move their social lives online, during a time when real-world connection mattered most.

Spending more time online does not always mean feeling more connected. Face-to-face interaction allows for a kind of closeness and spontaneity that digital communication often lacks

the kind that comes from simply being present with another person (Gruber et al., 2022). When these moments become rare, people can start to feel lonely even while staying active on social media. This is a growing concern among Filipino youth, where studies have linked social isolation to higher rates of depression and other mental health problems in (Puyat et al., 2021). The habit of comparing one's social life to what others post online, known as Fear of Missing Out or FoMO, has also been associated with problematic internet use among Filipinos, which can make feelings of disconnection even worse (Reyes et al., 2018).

Beyond digital habits, the physical spaces where young people gather also shape their social lives. People have always sought out places where they can gather, relax, and socialize outside of their homes, schools, or workplaces. These kinds of places are called "third places," a term introduced by sociologist Ray Oldenburg to describe informal spaces such as parks, plazas, libraries, and cafes, where people gather not out of obligation but simply to spend time together. Third places are known to help people build friendships and feel a sense of belonging (Littman, 2022), making them especially important for young people who need somewhere outside of home and school to form connections, build community, and develop their social identity. Even simple spaces, such as public running areas in Metro Manila, have been found to serve this purpose, giving people a place to bond and feel part of a community (Loreno & Rocha, 2025). This shows that having access to these kinds of spaces matters not just for leisure, but for the broader social well-being of young people.

Despite this need, access to third places remains limited for many young Filipinos. Metro Manila has long suffered from a shortage of quality public spaces, a result of urban growth that outpaced proper city planning over the years (Saloma & Akpedonu, 2021). Many of the public areas that once served this purpose have since been replaced by commercial establishments,

particularly malls. While malls are accessible and provide opportunities for social interaction, their transaction-oriented nature and the expectation of spending money may limit their accessibility to young people seeking free and inclusive environments for gathering. As a result, many young Filipinos struggle to find places where they can connect with others without financial pressure. As a result, many young Filipinos struggle to find places to connect with others outside of school or home. This issue may be even more pressing for Gen Z young adults, who already experienced reduced social interaction during the pandemic meaning the lack of physical spaces to gather could further deepen their sense of isolation. No known study has directly looked at how the absence of third places relates to social isolation among Gen Z Filipinos who grew up during the pandemic. This study aims to fill that gap by examining the connection between limited access to third places and social isolation among Gen Z in the Philippines.

The issues explored in this study are not isolated concerns, but are directly connected to the global goals set by the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Specifically, this study aligns with SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) (United Nations, 2015), which calls for ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages. The documented rise of loneliness, depression, and social isolation among Filipino Gen Z directly undermines this goal. The study also relates to SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) (United Nations, 2015), which includes the target of providing universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible green and public spaces, the very spaces that are declining in Metro Manila and are at the heart of this study's concern.

B. Statement of the Problem

Main Problem

The study aims to examine the limited availability of accessible and inclusive third places in Metro Manila and how this may affect social interaction and community engagement among Filipino Gen Z young adults. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What features and characteristics make a third place attractive, inclusive, and beneficial for Filipino Gen Z young adults?
2. How do Filipino Gen Z perceive the relationship between the lack of third places and their experiences of social connection or social isolation?
3. What factors motivate Filipino Gen Z to prefer digital places over third places for social interaction?

C. Statement of the Research Objective

1. To look into the relationship between the lack of third places and social isolation among Filipino Gen Z;
2. To identify what features make third places attractive, inclusive, and useful for Filipino Gen Z;
3. To understand what motivates Filipino Gen Z to choose digital spaces over physical ones for socializing;

D. Significance of the Study

The study will be significant to the following:

1. **Filipino Gen Z** - This study gives Filipino Gen Z, particularly ages 16-24, a chance to have their experiences and social needs heard and understood. The findings can help shed light on what this generation actually wants and needs when it comes to social spaces, and what changes might help improve their well-being.
2. **Urban Planners and Local Government Units** - The results of this study can give urban planners and local government units a better idea of what kinds of spaces young Filipinos find useful and accessible. This information can help guide future decisions about how public spaces are designed and developed in cities like Manila.
3. **Mental Health Professionals and Educators** - Understanding the social and environmental factors that contribute to loneliness and isolation among Filipino youth can help mental health professionals and educators come up with better programs and support systems for this age group.
4. **Policymakers and Social Development Organizations** - The findings of this study can help policymakers and organizations that work with youth to develop programs and policies that better address the social needs of Filipino Gen Z and promote greater social inclusion and community involvement.
5. **Future Researchers** - This study can also be useful for future researchers who want to continue studying social isolation, third places, or digital behavior among Filipino youth. Since this study has its own limitations, future researchers can build on its findings or look into the areas that were not fully covered.

6. **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) -** This study is aligned with three primary Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) from the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Incorporating these goals into the study reflects the researchers' recognition that the social isolation of Filipino Gen Z is not only a personal or national issue but is part of a broader global challenge that communities and governments worldwide are working to address.
    a. **SDG 3 - Good Health and Well-being.** This goal calls for ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages. This study is directly relevant to SDG 3 because it examines the growing rates of loneliness, depression and social isolation among Filipino Gen Z young adults, outcomes that the existing literature links to the lack of accessible third places and the heavy reliance on digital socialization. By understanding the social and environmental roots of these mental health concerns, this study contributes to efforts to promote the well-being of Filipino youth.
    b. **SDG 10 - Reduced Inequalities.** This goal focuses on reducing inequality within and among countries. This study relates to SDG 10 because the inaccessibility of third places in Metro Manila disproportionately affects lower-income Filipino Gen Z who cannot afford to socialize in commercial establishments such as malls and cafes. The inequality of social space access means that not all young Filipinos have equal opportunities for community engagement and belonging, which this study aims to highlight and address.

c. **SDG 11 - Sustainable Cities and Communities.** This goal aims to make cities safe and sustainable, including through universal access to green and public spaces. SDG 11 is the most directly relevant to this study, as the core concern of this research is the decline of third places in Metro Manila and how this affects the social lives of Filipino Gen Z. The findings of this study can directly support advocacy for better urban planning and the development of more accessible and youth-friendly public spaces in the Philippine cities.

E. Scope and Limitations

This study focuses on examining the role of third places in relation to social interaction and experiences of social isolation among Filipino Gen Z. Specifically, the researchers aim to identify the characteristics of third places that are perceived as attractive, inclusive, and beneficial; the barriers that limit access to third places; and the factors that encourage the use of digital spaces over third places among Filipino Gen Z individuals.

The study uses an online survey and a focus group discussion to gather insights into the social needs and preferences of Filipino Gen Z regarding digital and physical third places. These data collection methods provided information about participants' experiences, perceptions, and preferences concerning social interaction and access to third places. The researchers aim to provide a discussion on the development of accessible and inclusive spaces and their relation to the social well-being and sense of community of this generation.

The study will focus on Filipino Gen Z aged 16 to 24 years old who are located in Metro Manila, Philippines. This age group was selected because it represents a transitional period between adolescence and adulthood, during which social interaction and identity formation play significant roles in development. In addition, this generation was chosen because they are likely to have experiences with both digital and physical spaces as forms of social interaction, having grown up during the widespread use of digital technologies.

This study is limited to Filipino Gen Z aged 16 to 24 years old in Metro Manila who have access to both physical and digital social environments. It does not include the perspectives of other generations such as Millennials, Generation X, or older adults.

Respondents will be selected through non-probability sampling, primarily using convenience and purposive sampling methods. Participants may be recruited through online platforms as well as physical locations such as school environments and areas along Taft Avenue, Manila, provided that they meet the age and inclusion criteria. Participation may also be influenced by the respondents' availability and willingness to participate. Since there is no official dataset identifying all Filipino Gen Z individuals aged 16 to 24, the sample may not fully represent the entire population of Filipino Gen Z.

The limited time frame of the study may also affect the data collection process.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A. Third Places

Concept

Third places are public settings that offer opportunities for sociability and connection outside of home (the first place) and work or school (the second place) (Littman, 2022). As modern societies become increasingly urbanized, third places continue to play an important role in an individual's social life and well-being. Existing literature from Saloma & Akpedonu (2021), Loreno & Rocha (2025), and Littman (2022) suggests that effective third places help foster a sense of community and social capital that allows individuals to develop trusting relationships, to feel like they belong, and to receive social support.

In the Philippines, public green spaces are rare but have always served as modern third places that support community and interaction. According to Saloma and Akpedonu (2021), Metro Manila's remaining green spaces such as Rizal Park and the University of the Philippines Academic Oval continues to function as the main public spaces where people from diverse backgrounds (e.g. age, gender, employment, social class) engage in various park usage or activities like exercise, relaxation, and social interaction. Their study found that 60% of their research participants in Rizal Park identified that meeting people and friends fulfill the human and primary need of building a sense of community and strengthening social relationships, which help improve physical and mental well-being. The authors also emphasized that while public parks remain accessible to Filipinos, it is important that these livable environments should also foster inclusivity where different social groups feel equally welcome and comfortable interacting with one another.

Similarly, Lorena and Rocha (2025) conducted an online survey administered to Metro Manila's running community to examine whether Metro Manila's running spaces function as third places that promote psychological well-being. Their study found that after the pandemic, Filipinos increasingly searched for open public environments for exercise, socialization, and stress relief. They gathered that Metro Manila's urban parks exhibited the strongest third-place qualities because of their accessibility and psychological benefits, while commercial mixed-use commercial areas scored the lowest. This may be because mixed-use commercial spaces prioritize commercial activities with fewer dedicated spaces for relaxation and are often located in busy streets with distractions like heavy traffic and noise. The authors concluded that environmental qualities such as accessibility, openness, and natural surroundings significantly influence whether a place is better fit for psychological restoration. This highlights that it is important to prioritize or give high consideration to comfort, accessibility, and opportunities for meaningful interaction, especially for young people seeking places to socialize or relieve stress when it comes to designing public environments and third places.

These findings are consistent with the goals of SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), which specifically calls for governments to provide universal access to safe, and accessible green and public spaces by 2030. The limited availability of such spaces in Metro Manila, as documented by Saloma & Akpedonu (2021) and Loreno & Rocha (2025), reflects a direct gap in the Philippines' progress toward this goal.

B. The Decline of Physical Spaces and the Rise of Digital Spaces

For many Filipino Gen Z, finding a place to simply hang out with their peers is as easy as it sounds. Parks are not always nearby, community centers are not always available, and the most

common “social” spaces in cities are malls, coffee shops, and fast food restaurants, which require money to use. Saloma & Akpedonu (2021) highlight that public gathering spaces in the Philippines have become increasingly limited, with commercialization playing a huge role in pushing out the kinds of free, open, and accessible spaces where young people could previously socialize without any pressure to spend. This matters because when physical spaces become exclusive or inaccessible, young people do not simply stop looking for connection. They look for it somewhere else.

For a lot of Filipino Gen Z, that somewhere else is online. Ray (2025) observes that digital platforms have started functioning as alternative third places, offering the kind of casual and low-pressure social interaction that physical spaces used to provide. The appeal is pretty understandable since the internet does not cost extra to enter, it is available anytime, and it does not require commuting or spending money just to be part of a conversation. In this sense, digital spaces may function as alternative third places that the physical environment is no longer filling for many young Filipinos.

But what is happening in these digital spaces goes beyond just casual interaction. Li, Liu, and Zheng (2025) found that young people are not only socializing online but also actively forming their identities and building meaningful communities through digital platforms. This is an important distinction because it means digital spaces are not just a temporary substitute. They have become environments where something genuinely significant is happening for young people socially and personally. It is not just about killing time online. It is about finding people, finding community, and figuring out who you are.

This connects to a broader shift in how young people relate to the community in general. Rychłowska-Niesporek (2023) discusses the concept of networked individualism, which describes how young people today tend to build flexible personal networks across multiple online communities rather than belonging deeply to just one group or place. Unlike older generations who might have been rooted in one neighborhood or one social circle, Gen Z can simultaneously belong to several communities online, each serving a different social or personal need. This flexibility is part of what makes digital spaces so appealing since they allow young people to curate their social lives in ways that physical spaces simply cannot.

What these studies collectively suggest is that the move toward digital spaces among Filipino Gen Z is not just a trend. It is a response to real structural gaps in the physical environment, and it is shaping how this generation socializes, builds identity, and understands community. However, while the studies explain what is happening and point to the conditions that drive young people online, they stop short of exploring the personal motivations behind this preference. Why do Filipino Gen Z actively choose digital spaces, not just as a fallback but sometimes as a first choice? What factors motivate Filipino Gen Z to prefer digital spaces over third places for social interaction?

The commercialization of public spaces and the resulting exclusion of lower-income young Filipinos from affordable social environments is also a concern for SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). When the only social spaces available require spending money, access to community becomes a privilege rather than a right. This study examines through the perspective of Filipino Gen Z's social experience in Metro Manila.

C. Factors Influencing Filipino Gen Z's Preference for Digital Spaces

Primary internet usage is categorized into research, social networking, online shopping, content creation, entertainment, and gaming. This year, 83.8% of the country's population are internet users with 81.9% being active on social media platforms (Howe, 2026). Filipinos utilize social media for an average of 33 hours and 50 minutes weekly. Throughout the years, mankind has transitioned to heavy reliance on digital socialization, significantly affecting the nature of human interaction. Digital socialization has been perceived as positive by internet users in terms of advocacy communication, risk management and emergency response, along with connection with friends and family. Younger generations are particularly more inclined to utilizing digital spaces for social engagement and community building. Moreso, Filipino Gen Z make use of short-form content and memes as a form of stenography that allows them to maintain connectivity. They also make use of platforms such as Discord, wherein groups from specifically curated communities, such as fandoms, gaming, etc., may hang-out, work, or engage in activities simultaneously in a virtual space. One of the biggest reasons why Filipino Gen Z tends to choose digital spaces over physical third places is because social media has basically become part of their everyday routine already. Reyes et al. (2018) found that Filipino youth don't just use social media for fun, but also as a main way to keep up with their friends, express themselves, and stay updated on what's happening around them. Since checking social media has become something they do almost automatically throughout the day, it slowly eats up the time that used to be spent meeting up with people in person. This doesn't necessarily mean young people don't like hanging out physically anymore, but more that social media just became an easier habit to fall into.

A study by Liu and Zheng (2025) explores how social media is not only a space for socialization but also a platform that influences its users identity creation through emotional

labor, creative input, and peer validation. In addition, intensive social media usage has affected how individuals maintain relationships (Reyes et al., 2018). With digital spaces acting as hyperconnectivity platforms, interactions became constant and highly immersive, which converts online spaces into a default for regular social life. Despite the accessibility digital platforms offer, the increasing amount of research in this field emphasizes the psychological and interpersonal consequences that come with replacing in-person interactions.

In the study of Reyes et al. (2018) it is noted that the advancement of mobile technology and the rise of Social media take part in exposing individuals to a variety of opportunities that would give a sense that one should never miss any kind of experience. Fear of Missing Out or FoMO, which began as an internet slang, is defined as a pervasive fear or a form of social anxiety that peers, friends, or family may be having rewarding or fulfilling experiences from which an individual is absent. Furthermore, FoMO has been characterized as a primary psychological driver of social media dependence as it promotes increased consumption and problematic usage, particularly among Filipino users. The relationship of FoMO with social media dependence fosters an anxiety-driven attachment to digital devices that creates a cycle of individuals emotionally turning to online spaces to experience a sense of connection and belonging, which intensifies reliance that prompts a compulsive behavior. Sheela and Murthy (2021) explained that a lot of young people feel anxious or left out whenever they're not aware of what their friends or online circles are doing, which then pushes them to keep checking their phones and social media just so they don't feel excluded. Because of this fear, physical spaces might feel less appealing sometimes, since staying offline for too long could mean missing something important that happened online. This somehow explains why a lot of Gen Z would

rather stay connected digitally, since it feels like the safer choice compared to possibly being left out socially.

Internet dependence or the preference for digital spaces as a mode of communication is also reinforced by its convenience and accessibility alongside behavioral and psychological factors. Liu (2024) found that a lot of young people have already gotten so used to being online that it just feels like a normal part of their everyday life now. This kind of dependence doesn't always come from not wanting to interact with people in person, but more from how convenient and constant their access to the internet has become. Social networking provides a platform that lowers interaction barriers by completely avoiding geographical constraints (Liu, 2024). Individuals that belong in the Gen Z category consider the internet as a streamlined alternative for navigating urban environments, frequently defined by extreme traffic congestion, limited safe public places, and the increasing costs in commercial spaces in the country. Digital spaces permit immediate access to socialization from homes, reducing effort and costs of traveling to specific locations. Because of this, digital spaces naturally end up being the default option whenever they want to socialize, simply because it's quicker and easier than planning to actually meet up with someone physically. A study by Li, Liu, and Zheng (2025) states that contemporary digital spaces are designed to be extremely convenient, employing user-friendly interfaces and algorithmic curation that matches Gen Z's internet usage habits, such as multitasking and fast-paced use. The seamless incorporation of user-centric and accessible design imposes efficiency into digital spaces, which guarantee its better performance compared to physical spaces when it comes to availability and time consumption.

D. Face-to-Face Communication, Social Connection, and Community Engagement

Even with how convenient digital communication has become, a lot of studies still point out that face-face-to-face interaction plays a huge role in building and lasting social connections. Grube, Hargittai and Nguyen (2022) found that in-person communication allows people to pick up on things that text or online chats usually can't capture, like tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language, which all help make conversations feel more genuine and easier to understand. Because of this, when people rely too much on digital communications, some of that depth and clarity in conversations tends to get lost, even if the actual message being sent is still the same. This shows that while digital spaces are convenient, they might not always fully replace the quality of the connection that comes from talking to someone in person.

Building on this, Kumar (2025) looked into how community participation has been affected as more people, especially younger ones, shift toward digital interaction instead of showing up to actual community activities or gatherings. The study found that when people spend more time interacting online they tend to become less involved in physical community spaces, which can weaken a sense of unity and support within a community. This is important because community engagement isn't just about attending events, but also building trust and familiarity with the people around you, something that's harder to develop when most interactions happen through a screen instead of face-to-face.

Adding another layer to this, Littman (2022) discussed how the decline of in-person communication has started to affect people's emotional connection with others over time. The study explained that emotional bonds tend to grow stronger through shared physical presence, like simply being in the same room as someone or doing activities together, since these moments

create memories and experiences that digital interaction usually can't fully replicate. Without these in-person moments happening as often, relationships might still exist, but they could end up feeling more distant surface-level compared to before, since a lot of the emotional depth that comes from physical presence is missing.

E. Social Isolation and Mental Well-being among Filipino Gen Z

One of the most alarming trends in the Philippines today is the growing number of young people who are experiencing loneliness, social isolation, and mental health problems. Several studies have looked into this issue, and their findings consistently show that Filipino Gen Z is among the most affected. This study aims to examine how the decline of third places and the increase in digital interaction are related to the mental health and social well-being of Filipino young adults.

A study by Puyat et al. (2021) looked at the level of depressive symptoms among in the Philippines through a nationwide survey of 19,017 respondents aged 15 to 24. The results showed that close to 9 out of every 100 young Filipinos, or about 8.9%, experience moderate to severe depressive symptoms. The study also found that the most commonly reported symptom among those with severe depression was loneliness. This is an important finding because it suggests that loneliness is not just a side effect of depression but is actually one of the key experiences that young Filipinos are dealing with. The study also noted that the prevalence of depressive symptoms was higher among those living in the urban areas, which is relevant to this research since the focus is on Filipino Gen Z in highly urbanized settings like Metro Manila.

Building on this, Regencia, Marteja Jr., and Baja (2025) conducted a more recent study that used spatial analysis to map out where depression, anxiety, and stress are most concentrated

among Filipino emerging adults aged 18 to 29. The study surveyed 2,729 respondents and found that areas in and around Metro Manila, including provinces like Bulacan, Rizal, Cavite, Laguna, and Pampanga, are considered hotspots for severe and extreme levels of depression, anxiety, and stress. The fact that these are all highly urbanized or rapidly urbanizing areas is significant. It suggests that there may be something about living in dense, fast-moving urban environments that contributes to poorer mental health outcomes. One possible contributing factor explored in this study is that these areas also tend to have fewer accessible public third places, which means young people have fewer opportunities for meaningful face-to-face social interaction.

On a broader level, Chia and Promchertchoo (2024) reported that Filipino Gen Z is among the loneliest youth populations in Southeast Asia. Their report found that around 6 to 10 Filipinos said they feel lonely, which is more than double the global average. Data from the Global School-based Student Health Survey also showed that the percentage of Filipino teenagers aged 13 to 17 who frequently felt lonely increased from 19.4% in 2015 to 24.2% in 2019, and this was even before the pandemic. This is a notable finding because it shows that the loneliness problem among Filipino youth was already growing long before COVID-19 made things worse. The report pointed to the three main reasons for this: the long periods of lockdown during the pandemic, heavy social media use that does not really lead to genuine connection, and the widespread absence of parental support because of overseas or internal work migration. These factors all point to a situation where young Filipinos are increasingly lacking the kinds of real, in-person social support and community that are essential for good mental health.

Munira and Herman (2025) added another important layer to this discussion by studying the factors associated with loneliness among adolescents in several Southeast Asian countries, including the Philippines. Using data from the Global School-based Student Health Survey, their

study found that the Philippines had the highest rate of extreme loneliness among the countries examined. They also found that loneliness was significantly linked to factors like food insecurity, physical inactivity, and having fewer close friends. On the other hand, having a good relationship with parents and having more close friends were found to lower the chances of feeling lonely. Interestingly, having good peer relationships in general was not found to be a significant protective factor. This suggests that it is not just about having people around, but about the quality and closeness of those relationships. Their recommendation that governments should invest in accessible green spaces and promote physical activity is also directly related to the concept of third places, since parks and other outdoor spaces can serve as venues for social interaction and physical activity at the same time.

Taken together, these studies show a clear and concerning picture of social isolation and mental health struggles among Filipino Gen Z. Loneliness is not just a feeling–it is closely tied to depression, poor mental health, and even suicidal ideation, as shown by Puyat et al. (2021). The fact that these problems are most concentrated in urban areas, as found by Regencia et al. (2025), Promchertchoo (2024) and Munira and Herman (2025), suggests that the social and physical environment plays a major role in how young Filipinos experience connection and belonging. For this study, these findings support the idea that the lack of accessible third places in urban areas may be one of the contributing factors to the growing social isolation of Filipino Gen Z. If young people do not have real, comfortable, and accessible places to gather and connect with others, their feelings of loneliness and isolation are likely to continue growing, even if they are constantly online.

The mental health outcomes documented in this cluster such as, rising depression, anxiety and loneliness among Filipino Gen Z are directly relevant to SDG 3 (Good Health and

Well-being), which aims to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all. The findings of Puyat et. al. (2021), Regencia et al. (2025), and Chia and Promchertchoo (2024) underscore that the Philippines still has significant ground to cover in meeting this goal among its youth population. Addressing the structural causes of social isolation, including the lack of accessible third places is a part of what achieving the SDG 3 would look like in the Philippine context.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the research design, data collection methods, and analysis procedures that the study employed in its exploration of the experiences, perceptions, and social behaviors of Filipino Gen Z in Metro Manila regarding the decline of third places and their shift toward digital socialization.

The study is conducted in alignment with SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), recognizing that the social and spatial experiences of Filipino Gen Z are part of a broader challenge that requires evidence-based understanding. The ethical design of this study also reflects the principles of SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by ensuring that the participation is open and accessible regardless of socioeconomic background of the respondents.

A. Theoretical Framework

Uses and Gratifications Theory

The use of social media has long been linked with how people satisfy their personal, social, and psychological needs. Besides the consumption of different kinds of media, such as films, literary pieces, and music, individuals have been interacting with other people and building niche communities with ease through digital spaces. From information delivery platforms, the digital scene has evolved into virtual spaces for users to socialize, have discussions, and form meaningful connections. A study by Yüksel et al. (2022) cites Fuch (2016), indicating that media is used by individuals to ease tension or conflict and pay attention to relevant social situations. The theory of Uses and Gratification (U&G) investigates the

motives and methods by which social media users utilize and consume media (Ungvarsky, 2020). Compared to other communication theories that perceive audiences as passive receivers of content, this theory assumes that people have control over what kind of media they consume, disproving the idea that people are easily influenced and merely take what is given to them. While initially associated with traditional forms of media such as print, theatre, etc., U&G naturally transitioned to assessing the use of internet-mediated media such as YouTube videos and social media posts. In this study, the researchers aim to explore socialization preferences of Filipino Gen Z, specifically, whether they prefer connecting with peers and communities online or in-person, which involves navigating third places, commonly characterized by highly commercialized, costly, and limited social establishments. Given this, the researchers may apply U&G in this study, examining how the lack of third places in Metro Manila factors the likelihood of Filipino Gen Z to shift to digital platforms, using them as an alternative environment for socialization. With U&G, there is an assumption that Filipino Gen Z who actively navigate the digital realm for socialization are highly self-aware and capable of recognizing and managing their needs and choices.

In addition, the study also aims to address whether social isolation is caused by Gen Z's preference for online socialization and whether online socialization contributes to reduction of face-to-face interactions and influences their experiences of belongingness. The U&G theory recognizes that Filipino Gen Z individuals may intentionally use online platforms like social media to maintain friendships and seek companionship through online communities because of the convenience that it would require less effort, time, and money compared to meeting in person. While online socialization can help reduce feelings of isolation, heavily relying upon

online platforms as the main source of socialization may lessen the opportunities to develop a sense of belonging and community found in shared experiences that physical third places uniquely provide.

Participatory Culture Theory

Social media consists of not only those who consume content but also those who produce and publish them. The internet can be viewed as a system that works as a communication channel wherein there are senders and receivers present, coexisting in a digital space exchanging information. In the theory of Participatory Culture, it is described that members of an environment are not mere fans consuming a particular form of media but are also active contributors that keep communities thriving (Ungvarsky, 2021). These contributions may vary from written works, photography, art pieces, and any other form of material that can be made available to and enjoyed by other people. Once creators put out their content where communities may access them, it essentially creates an opportunity for these people to participate in a communal activity and engage with other users alike. This research observes the behaviors of social media users and the factors that possibly encourage them to further engage in online communities, spending more time in digital spaces. With the Participatory Culture theory, it is assumed that people who spend time online are more likely to be involved in niche communities of their interests, wherein they consume content shared by other members of the community as well as socialize with them. This theory helps pinpoint the idea that shared interests are one of the reasons why Filipino Gen Z may prefer digital socialization, especially since media created by people in a community may be easily published and accessed online. In addition, while community activities such as cultural festivals, art exhibitions, and fan-organized celebrations,

are also exceptional environments for socialization, the digital scene is far more accessible and able to accommodate a larger number of audiences, making it a "go-to" socialization platform.

B. Research Method

This study will use a qualitative research design with a descriptive-exploratory approach. This means the study has two connected goals: first, to describe the current social situation of Filipino Gen Z in Metro Manila when it comes to third places and digital socialization, and second, to explore the reasons, motivations, and the meanings behind their experiences and preferences. These two goals go hand in hand because simply describing what is happening is not enough – it is also important to understand why it is happening and what it means for Filipino Gen Z.

A descriptive component is necessary because the study wants to get a clear and accurate picture of the current state of third place availability in Metro Manila and how Filipino Gen Z is currently socializing. At the same time, an exploratory component is needed because the research questions in this study – such as what motivates Filipino Gen Z to choose digital spaces, what barriers stop them from accessing physical ones, and what social anxieties they experience – all require going deeper than just describing surface-level behavior. These are questions about motivations, feelings and lived experiences, which means the study needs to explore and dig into personal perspectives of the participants.

A descriptive-exploratory approach also fits well with this study because, as discussed in the research gap in Chapter 1, there is currently limited research that specifically looks at the

connection between the lack of third places and the social isolation of Filipino Gen Z in Metro Manila. When a topic has not been studied much yet in a specific context, an exploratory approach is the most appropriate way to start building an understanding of it. This approach also aligns naturally with the Uses and Gratifications Theory, which is fundamentally about exploring and understanding the motivations behind why people choose to use certain kinds of media or social spaces over others. By combining description and exploration, this study will be able to produce findings that are both grounded in the actual experiences of Filipino Gen Z and meaningful in the broader context of the existing literature.

Research Instruments

The primary unit of analysis designated for this study is an individual Filipino that falls under the Generation Z category. Particularly, the respondents will consist of active social media users aged 16-24 years old, residing within the National Capital Region. The age bracket of 16-24 years old is specified as it represents the core developmental bracket of the Gen Z population undergoing a transition from adolescence to adulthood, especially through strict lockdowns causing a lack of physical socialization during the pandemic. Moreso, this age bracket specification is essential as individuals go through identity formation and peer socialization within this developmental stage. In addition, this study approaches the local scene to address a contextual gap of Metro Manila being primarily composed of heavily commercialized public spaces, private establishments, and further characterized by a lack of appropriate third places for Filipino Gen Z individuals to carry out social activities. Lastly, the study specifically focuses on individuals who actively navigate the digital social scene to explore reliable comparisons with how socialization is in third places.

C. Data gathering procedure

A focused group discussion will be conducted as the primary data collection procedure. The session will follow a structured questionnaire focusing on three areas explored in this research, particularly social media usage, third places in Metro Manila, and the comparison between digital and in-person socialization. The session will be conducted online via Google Meet/Zoom, consisting of 5-6 participants and along with the researchers.

A structured online survey will also be conducted as a supplementary data collection procedure. The questionnaire will also be divided into multiple sections following the themes explored via the Focus Group Discussion. Specifically, the questions are structured into statements to which respondents will be answering based on their level of agreement or disagreement utilizing the layout of a likert scale. The data collected through this procedure will assist in confirming or disproving information collected in the Focus Group Discussion. This will assure consistency and accuracy of data collected. The survey will be created via *Google Forms* and distributed through social media channels, particularly *Messenger, Instagram,* etc. to optimize compatibility with various mobile devices.

D. Data Analysis

The data gathered from the survey will be analyzed using thematic analysis. This method was chosen because it fits well with the descriptive-exploratory nature of this study and its goal of understanding the personal experiences, motivations, and perceptions of Filipino Gen Z when it comes to third places and digital socialization. Thematic analysis is not just about counting how many people said a certain thing – it is about identifying the recurring ideas, patterns, and

meanings that run across all the responses, which is exactly what this study needs in order to answer the research questions in a meaningful way.

The thematic analysis process will follow a series of steps. First, the researchers will read through all the survey responses multiple times to get the general feel for what the participants are saying. This step, called familiarization, is important because it helps the researchers get comfortable with the data before they start breaking it down. Second, the researchers will go through the responses carefully and assign short labels or codes to important words, phrases, or ideas that stand out. For example, if a participant mentions that they avoid going out because there are no nearby parks or free public spaces, that response might be coded as something like "lack of accessible spaces." This step is called initial coding. Third, similar codes will be grouped together to form broader themes. For example, codes like "no parks nearby," "malls are too expensive," and "no community centers in my area" might all be grouped under one theme such as "barriers to accessing third places." Fourth, the themes will be reviewed and checked to make sure they actually reflect what the data is saying and that they are distinct enough from each other to be useful. Finally, the themes will be given clear names and descriptions, and specific quotes or responses from participants will be selected to illustrate each theme.

All responses collected through the Google Forms survey will be compiled and organized first before the analysis begins, so the researchers have a clear and complete view of all the data. The researchers will go through the coding and theme-building process together as a group to make sure that everyone agrees on how the data is being interpreted. If there are any disagreements about how a response should be coded or which theme it belongs to, the researchers will discuss it and come to a consensus. This group approach to analysis helps reduce the risk of any one person's personal bias affecting the results.

Once the themes are finalized, they will be connected back to the research questions and to the existing literature discussed in Chapter 2. This step is important because it allows the researchers to explain not just what the participants said, but also what it means in the broader context of the study. Since this research is exploratory in part, the themes that come out of the analysis are not meant to be the final word on the topic. Rather, they are meant to provide an initial and meaningful understanding of how Filipino Gen Z in Metro Manila experience social connection, third places, and digital socialization.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents, analyzes, and interprets the data gathered from the online survey administered to 111 Filipino Gen Z residing in Metro Manila, as well as the focus group discussion conducted with six participants from the same demographic. The findings are organized according to the research questions of this study, covering the participants' social media usage patterns, their experiences with and perceptions of third places in Metro Manila, their motivations for preferring digital spaces over physical ones, and the social anxieties and feelings of isolation that throughout this chapter provide a more complete and grounded picture of social realities of Filipino Gen Z in Metro Manila. Relevant literature from Chapter 2 is also referenced where applicable to situate the findings within the broader context of existing research on third place, digital socialization, and social isolation among Filipino youth.

I. Characteristics of third places for Filipino Gen Z Young Adults

Convenience Cleanliness, and Environmental Comfort of Third Places

The findings from the survey and FGD consistently identified cleanliness as the primary requirement in creating a welcoming and comfortable third place. Beyond a clean environment, participants also emphasized the importance of accessibility and convenience in influencing their preferences for these spaces. Environmental features such as minimal crowding that provides adequate seating, shaded areas, privacy, courteous staff, reliable internet connectivity, and accessible electrical outlets contribute to the participants overall experience.

Participant 3 explained that commercial establishments become welcoming when they are *"malinis and friendly yung staff tapos maayos yung upuan,"* while public third places such as UP Diliman become attractive when they have *"maraming puno, maayos yung sidewalk, at walang nakaharang."* Similarly, Participant 5 stated that a comfortable place should be clean, odor-free, and occupied by respectful people, adding that she also values having privacy even in busy environments.

Convenience was also considered essential. Participant 6 emphasized the need for reliable internet connection, electrical outlets, welcoming staff, affordable cafés, and spaces that are not overcrowded because these features support both academic work and social interaction. Participant 2 added that it is important that *"maraming seats at maraming pag pwestuhan lalo na pag big friend group niyo na pupunta.",* while Participant 1 highlighted the importance of shaded areas, comfortable temperatures, and spaces where people can simply sit and relax.

Overall, participants viewed attractive third places as environments that prioritize users' comfort through cleanliness, accessibility, and practical amenities, making them suitable for both leisure and productivity.

Affordability of Third Places

Participants from the FGD repeatedly mentioned that socializing in Metro Manila often requires spending money because available gathering places are primarily malls, cafés, and restaurants. As a result, financial limitations discourage frequent visits and reduce opportunities for face-to-face interaction.

Participant 3 mentioned that she only goes out around twice a month because *"wala naman tayong third places na free"* and *"magastos"*. She further explained that even public non-commercial spaces require transportation expenses, making them less accessible for students and on a budget. Participant 5 also shared that while green spaces such as UP Diliman exist, reaching them still requires transportation expenses. Her exact words were *"gagastos ka pa rin sa pamasahe"*.

Several participants also pointed out that many spaces require visitors to purchase food or pay entrance fees. Participant 2 explained that rising prices make it increasingly difficult to find affordable places to gather, while Participant 6 emphasized that renting collaborative spaces near school is often too expensive for students despite their convenience. Participant 4 also observed that many establishments require customers to buy something before staying, limiting access to those with limited financial resources.

These findings indicate that affordability significantly influences the attractiveness and accessibility of third places. Participants preferred places that are free or affordable, allowing them to socialize without financial pressure.

Safety and Security in Third Places

Safety was consistently identified as another defining characteristic of beneficial third places from our FGD. Participants explained that even when public spaces are available,

concerns regarding transportation, crime, and security discourage them from visiting, particularly during the evening. Safety was viewed from the journey to and from the location.

Participant 2 explained that although there are a few non-commercial spaces in Metro Manila, concerns regarding security make public spaces less appealing. During the FGD, the respondent acknowledged being hesitant to visit these areas because of safety concerns. Similarly, Participant 5 identified transportation, cost, and safety as the primary barriers to visiting places such as UP Diliman, mentioning concerns about commuting and possible criminal incidents while traveling.

Other participants shared similar experiences. Participant 3 described difficulties commuting during rush hour and expressed concerns about robbery incidents in public transportation, especially as a woman traveling at night. Participant 4 likewise emphasized that unsafe roads near their community often force them to use more expensive ride-hailing services instead of walking or using public transportation. Participant 1 also stated that safety is one of his biggest concerns, particularly when accompanying female friends during late-night gatherings.

Overall, the findings suggest that third places become more beneficial when users feel secure throughout their entire experience. Safe public transportation, secure surroundings, and well-maintained public areas encourage Filipino Gen Z to use third places more frequently and confidently.

II. Filipino Gen Z Navigating the Absence of Third Places

Digital Spaces as Alternative for Lack of Third Places in Metro Manila

Filipino Gen Z perceive digital spaces as the default option for social interactions due to the lack of accessible, non-commercial third places in Metro Manila. The most common platforms that the FGD participants use are *Messenger, Instagram, and Discord*, for the purpose of communication, lifestyle, updates, and gaming with friends, family, as well as for academic and work purposes. The inaccessibility and/or absence of third places, to which navigation is often characterized with a lack of sidewalks and unsafe surroundings, urges them to rely on online environments to maintain interactions. Despite the convenience and accessibility, participants highlighted that relying on digital spaces for connection may enforce emotional vulnerabilities. These often come with instances wherein their messages are not "seen" or replied to right away. Participant 2 highlighted a comparison between physical and digital interactions stating, "*Kasi pag face-to-face 'di ka naman masi-seen, diba? Magrerespond naman yung taong kausap mo. Pero pag sa social media kasi, iba. Pwede mo lang i-leave on deliver or i-seen.*" Unlike face-to-face interactions, where individuals have shared presence, communicating online can leave individuals with no response, being left on "seen" or "delivered," and taking a long time to receive a reply, which could be misinterpreted and introduce obscure tones. Similarly, while digital spaces are effective in bridging geographical distance, social isolation can still be triggered when there is unresponsiveness among people in close proximity. Participant 5 shares a personal experience; *"Yung unang instance is sa work during vacant time kasi yung mga kasabay ko na may vacant naka-cellphone sila. May iba't ibang kausap sila. So ako parang nasa*

gilid lang. Wala rin naman akong kausap online. So parang nalulungkot ako na wala akong makausap. Pero naintindihan ko naman kasi buhay nila yun."

Financial and Logistic Barriers when Traveling to Third Places

Upon conducting the focused group discussion, it was revealed that gathering in-person is perceived as an expensive and strenuous activity. Genuine non-commercial third places such as *Quezon Memorial Circle* and *UP Diliman* are difficult to visit with commutes requiring multiple modal transfers and difficulties catching rides. With this, Filipino Gen Z are often forced into gathering at privatized and commercialized establishments such as malls and cafes. In addition, participants often stress over straining their personal budget over staying socially active. Participant 4 shares "*Meron namang masasakyang mga jeep at tricycle. Yun nga lang dahil sa mga price hike ng gasolina tumataas yung singil nila. So let's say for everyday commute hindi siya sustainable kasi ang laki nung gastos,"* highlighting that increased transportation fees add hindrance to social gatherings. Overall, in addition to expenses, severe logistical burdens such as traffic, unreliable public transportation, and safety concerns, are the most common challenges faced by Filipino Gen Z when traveling to physical locations to meet up with peers. Conversely, these individuals are able to adapt to these transportation and financial constraints by hanging out in private dormitories or limiting their meet-up schedules to at least once or twice a month. This is supported by a response given by Participant 6; "*When it comes to college friends, minsan nagtatambayan kami sa dorms of my college friends, the ones that are near the campus."*

How Physical Isolation Reinforces Social Isolation Online

Due to spatial constraints, Filipino Gen Z are often prevented from in-person social gatherings. Although digital spaces help individuals stay connected, participants believe that the lack of third places limit face to face interactions, resulting in weaker emotional connections, feelings of isolation, loneliness, and fear of missing out (FoMO). For them, social media becomes a space to observe their peers' social activity, often with online posts, stories, and comments. Participant 5 shares, *"Naranasan ko na rin pong makaramdam ng loneliness. Lalo kapag nakikita ko friends na nagtutugma yung schedules nila, tapos nakakalabas sila–nagcacafe sila and everything. So, 'di ko maiwasang makaramdam ng FoMO. Kasi ako, nandito lang ako sa work, 'di ako makaka-alis, tapos sila free time nila."* This kind of situation modifies digital spaces from a platform for improved communication and connection to a form of psychological strain. With constant online visibility, individuals become susceptible to comparing their experiences of physical isolation with others' active social lives. Furthermore, being physically isolated from a group an individual has previously formed a connection with, excludes them from organic group dynamics. The social isolation that they experience can be intensified by social media constantly displaying social gatherings that they are not part of. This frequent occurrence can turn digital visibility into an emotionally demanding experience for most Filipino Gen Z. Ultimately, it becomes a cycle wherein individuals are reminded of their physical isolation upon switching to digital platforms, as passive consumption of digital media further deepens emotional isolation.

III. Factors Influencing Filipino Gen Z Young Adult's Preference for Digital Spaces over third places for Social Interaction

Convenience and Accessibility of Digital Spaces

The results from the FGD revealed that Filipino Gen Z prefer digital spaces because of its convenience and accessibility. Participants consistently described digital platforms as the simplest and most efficient means of maintaining relationships, allowing them to communicate regardless of time and location. They emphasized that digital platforms such as social media eliminate the inconvenience of coordinating schedules and commuting to meet in person, making them preferable amidst busy schedules and personal commitments.

Participant 1 highlighted how digital communication bridges geographical distance, particularly in maintaining relationships with loved ones living abroad, stating, *"Especially as a person with relatives who are overseas, it helps breach that gap... Kasi syempre, paano ko sila kakausapin kung wala sila sa harap ko."* Similarly, Participant 2 emphasized the convenience of instant communication, explaining, *"Hindi mo na kailangan i-meet yung person face to face, virtually nalang, pwede mo siya i-chat anytime. Makaka receive ka rin ng message sa kanya anytime."* These responses demonstrate how digital platforms provide continuous access to social interaction without the constraints associated with physical meetings.

Participants also emphasized the ease of accessing communication through social media. Participant 3 described online interaction as highly accessible, stating, *"Yes, it's easy to access, and talking or communicating with people is one click away."* Likewise, Participant 5 explained

that social media allows communication to be within immediate reach, saying, “Nakakatulong ang social media to stay connected, kasi aside sa sobrang dali niya lang i-navigate, literally nasa kamay mo na ‘yung way niyo ng pag communicate. Ita-type mo nalang yung sasabihin mo, if you don’t want to type, pwede kayo mag-call.” Participant 6 further reinforced this idea by noting that “Social media really helps us connect with other people. Especially talaga pag inconvenient.”

Barriers to Accessible Third Places

Participants specified that limited accessibility to physical third places is a major factor that influences their preference for digital spaces. Accessibility barriers such as transportation costs, traffic congestion, safety concerns, the lack of free public spaces, and the commercialization of leisure environments have discouraged participants from engaging in face-to-face socialization. As a result, digital spaces become more practical alternatives for maintaining social connections.

Participant 3 explained that financial constraints limited the frequency of visiting third places, stating, *“Hindi masyado lalo na pag lumalabas since wala naman tayong third spaces na free. Lumalabas lang ako mga twice a month kasi magastos.”* They further emphasized, *“Hindi sapat lalo na as someone na on a budget, lagi nalang kailangang gumastos pag gusto mo tumambay.”* Similarly, Participant 5 shared the scarcity of third places, combined with transportation expenses, discouraged them, stating, *“Hindi kasi wala ka naman na halos makikitang na third spaces dito sa Metro Manila... gagastos ka pa rin sa pamasahe.”*

Participants also highlighted the lack of accessible public spaces in Metro Manila. Participant 1 mentioned that there were not enough non-commercial spots to casually hang out, while Participants 2 and 4 said there were limited green and public spaces available in their respective cities: "*Hindi enough yung non-commercial hangout spots dito sa Metro Manila... Very bilang lang sa daliri yung mga specific green spots or non commercial hang out spots dito sa Metro Manila."* Participant 6 associates this issue to the dominance of commercialized areas, suggesting that public third places have become less of a priority: *"Puro kasi malls, restaurants, and cafes — lalo na talaga na nauuso yung cafe culture. So, I think hindi masyadong nagiging priority yung mga ganyang third spaces."*

Digital Convenience and Face-to-Face Fulfillment

Although participants frequently rely on digital platforms for communication, they consistently expressed that face-to-face interaction remains more meaningful and fulfilling. While digital spaces help maintain relationships, they cannot fully replicate the emotional presence, social cues, and sense of belonging experienced in third places.

Participant 3 emphasized the value of physical presence, stating, *"However, I do think na it's better to connect with people personally, to really get to be in the moment and mas ramdam mo yung presence ng taong kausap."* They further added, *"For me mas may fulfillment if nag-sosocialize ka in person."* Similarly, Participant 1 shared that face-to-face interaction allowed for richer communication, explaining, *"Socializing in person fulfills me more kasi I can see the way people react to what I say... the presence of another person beside you would always be more fulfilling than a phone or laptop."*

Participants also highlighted the quality of interactions made possible through communicating in-person. Participant 5 explained, *"I find personal interactions much more fulfilling because makakakuha ka agad ng response,"* while Participant 2 described face-to-face interactions as more engaging: *"Nakakaramdam ako ng fulfillment kapag face to face or in person kasi mas continuous yung discussion or yung banters compared sa online."* Similarly, Participant 6 noted that digital spaces lacked the feeling created by physical presence, saying, "Compared to digital spaces, di ko masyado nakukuha yung ganong feeling... hindi ko kasi nakukuha talaga yung physical presence nila." This sentiment was further supported by Participant 4, who expressed, *"Mas nakakaramdam ako ng fulfillment when I'm interacting with people in person."*

IV. Conclusion and Findings

This study set out to examine the relationship between the decline of third places in Metro Manila and the growing preference of Filipino Gen Z for digital spaces as their primary environment for socialization. Based on the data gathered from 111 survey respondents and 6 focus group discussion group participants, the study draws the following conclusions.

First, Filipino Gen Z in Metro Manila is a generation that is heavily and consistently active on social media, but this digital activity does not reflect a genuine preference for online socialization. The data clearly shows that the majority of respondents prefer in-person interaction and find it more emotionally fulfilling than digital communication. Their reliance on digital spaces is driven by various factors, particularly the poor public transportation system, the high

cost of commuting and spending in commercial areas, safety concerns in public spaces, and the fundamental scarcity of free, accessible, and welcoming non-commercial spaces in Metro Manila.

Second, the third places that do exist in Metro Manila do not meet the needs of Filipino Gen Z. The spaces they frequently utilize, such as malls, cafes, and restaurants, do not constitute authentic third places as originally conceptualized by Oldenburg (1989) described them. These environments demand financial payment and are guided by commercial priorities instead of fostering communal values. The few genuinely non-commercial public spaces that exist, such as UP Diliman and certain city parks, are either inaccessible to most young people due to distance and transportation challenges, or are underdeveloped, unsafe, and uncomfortable. This structural gap between what is available and what Filipino Gen Z genuinely desires is one of the key drivers of their continued reliance on digital platforms.

Third, the reliance on digital socialization is associated with certain experiences in relation to the social and emotional well-being of Filipino Gen Z. Despite being constantly connected online, a significant proportion of respondents reported experiencing loneliness and social isolation. The feelings of disconnection including being left on seen, witnessing others socializing on social media while they are confined at home, and experiencing anxiety from unmet communication expectations, underscore the limitations of digital spaces as substitutes for genuine in-person community. Digital platforms can maintain existing relationships and bridge distances, but they cannot fully replicate the depth of social connection that comes from physical presence and shared experience.

Fourth, social anxiety and ‘Fear of Missing Out’ play a role in both pushing Filipino Gen Z toward digital spaces and reinforcing their sense of isolation. The convenience and low-barrier

nature of online platforms makes them an easy first choice for social interaction. However, the same features that make them convenient, including the ability to ignore messages, online self-presentation, and the pressure of constant availability, also create new forms of anxiety and loneliness. These factors further complicate the social lives of Filipino Gen Z.

Overall, this study concludes that the decline of third places in Metro Manila is not just an urban planning issue, but a social and mental health issue with direct consequences for the well-being of Filipino Gen Z. The findings support the study's main problem statement: the limited availability of accessible and inclusive third places in the Philippines contributes to reduced opportunities for meaningful social interaction and community engagement among Filipino Gen Z young adults, and this in turn increases their experiences of social isolation. The digital spaces they turn to in the absence of accessible physical gathering places help them maintain relationships and bridge geographical distances. However, these platforms cannot fully replace the emotional fulfillment and shared experiences associated with face-to-face interactions in physical third places.

This study recommends that urban planners, local government units, and policymakers take seriously the need to invest in more accessible, safe, free, and genuinely welcoming third places across Metro Manila. Beyond infrastructure, there is also a need to improve public transportation to reduce the barriers to reaching existing third places to promote awareness of available non-commercial spaces. Furthermore, to involve young people in the planning and design of spaces meant to serve them. Filipino Gen Z is not asking for anything unreasonable, they simply want a place where they exist and belong without being required to spend money or risk their safety to do so. Addressing this need is not just about making cities more livable, it is about supporting the mental health, and social development of an entire generation.

CHAPTER 5: PROJECT BRIEF

Project Description

This multiplatform project uses a video podcast series, infographic videos, a website, and Third Place Pins to advocate for accessible and cost-free third places in Metro Manila while addressing Gen Z's growing reliance on digital spaces for socialization.

Rationale

Filipino Gen Z's growing dependence on digital platforms for socializing reflects the lack of accessible third places in Metro Manila, which limits opportunities for face-to-face interaction and can contribute to social isolation. This project aims to address this issue by promoting the importance of accessible, inclusive, and cost-free third places where young people can meet, interact, and build connections. Instead of treating digital platforms as the problem, the project will use the platforms that Gen Z already uses to share information, encourage discussions, and promote the importance of physical spaces for social interaction. The project will use a video podcast series, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, infographic videos, and a website to share the study's findings and experiences of Filipino Gen Z. The website will also include an online forum where Gen Z can share their experiences, concerns, and recommendations about third places in Metro Manila. A petition will also be provided to allow them to collectively express their concerns and call for action from relevant LGUs. Through these platforms, the project aims to make Gen Z active participants in the advocacy instead of only receiving information about the issue. To bring the advocacy beyond online platforms, the project will also introduce Third Place Pins, which will be free and accessible to

everyone, especially Gen Z. Each pin will contain a question, statement, or conversation prompt about third places and social interaction. These prompts are meant to encourage people wearing the pins and those around them to start conversations and interact with each other. Through this physical medium, the project can bring the advocacy into everyday spaces and create opportunities for face-to-face interaction. The Third Place Pins therefore help connect the project's online advocacy with its goal of encouraging more physical and social interaction among Gen Z.

Project Objectives

This project seeks to:

1. To strengthen Filipino Gen Z's understanding of the importance of accessible third places in supporting face-to-face social interaction by presenting the study's findings, Gen Z experiences, and professional perspectives through a non-fiction video podcast series and infographic videos.
2. To facilitate Filipino Gen Z's participation in the advocacy for accessible and cost-free third places by providing a website and online forum where they can share their experiences, concerns, and recommendations, and a petition that consolidates their collective support for submission to relevant local government units.
3. To translate the project's digital advocacy into physical social interaction by introducing free Third Place Pins with conversation prompts that encourage Filipino Gen Z to initiate conversations and engage with others in everyday physical settings.

Key Messages

For Project Objective 1: Understand Why Third Places Matter.

- Many Filipino Gen Z feel socially isolated even though they are constantly online, and the disappearance of free, accessible physical spaces to hang out is one of the key reasons why. This project helps them understand what third places are, why they matter, and why Metro Manila's lack of them is a problem worth talking about.

For Project Objective 2: Your Experiences Matter.

- When the relationship between urban spaces, digital habits, and mental health is explained in a way that is relatable and easy to understand, Filipino Gen Z can begin to see their own experience, of loneliness, of defaulting to social media, of not having anywhere to go, as part of a larger pattern that has a name and a cause, not just a personal failing.

For Project Objective 3: Make Your Voice Part of the Change.

- Advocating for better third places doesn't have to be complicated. Filipino Gen Z can start by talking about what their needs are from their city, supporting local initiatives that create third places, and choosing to spend time in existing non-commercial spaces when they can. This project takes it further by partnering with organizations, LGUs, and community groups already working on this issue, giving Filipino Gen Z a direct channel to turn their voice into real advocacy. Small actions, when shared, amplified, and backed by the right partnerships, can build into something bigger.

Target User, Beneficiaries, and Potential Partners

The target users for this project are Filipino Gen Z aged 18 to 24, particularly those living in Metro Manila who rely on both digital and physical forms of social interactions. While the research covered Filipino Gen Z aged 16-24, the project will primarily focus on young adults aged 18 to 24 who experience limited access to inclusive third places and increasingly rely on digital platforms to build and maintain social connections.

The project may also benefit urban planners, local government units (LGUs), educators, mental health professionals, youth organizations, and community groups. The findings can help these stakeholders better understand the importance of third places in supporting the social well-being of Filipino Gen Z and guide the development of accessible and inclusive public places, youth centered programs, and community initiatives that encourage meaningful face-to-face interaction alongside digital socialization.

User Profiles

Jordan is a 20-year-old student from Quezon City taking up Communications. He commutes to school every day and usually spends his free time scrolling through Facebook and Instagram at home because going out feels like too much effort and expensive. He knows he has been feeling more socially disconnected lately, but he chalks it up to being busy. He does not have a word for what he is missing, he just knows that hanging out with friends in person feels rare and that the group chats and social media interactions that fill his day leave him feeling a little empty. He would be the kind of person to stop and engage with social media posts that put words to something he has been quietly feeling for a while.

Rochelle is a 19-year-old working student from Caloocan who juggles a part-time job and online classes. Most of her socializing happens through Messenger and TikTok because getting to her friends requires a long and expensive commute across the city.. She is not the type to go to a coffee shop alone, and she does not feel like she has many options for places to go that do not cost money. She would benefit from a resource that clearly explained why her situation is not unusual, that the city's lack of free and accessible communal spaces is a structural problem, not a personal failure, and that gave her something concrete to say or share about it.

Dennis is a 24-year-old fresh graduate from Pasay who is now working full-time and living independently. He used to hang out with friends regularly during college but has found that maintaining those friendships has become much harder now that everyone has different schedules and no common campus to gather in. He spends most of his downtime at home on his phone and occasionally feels a vague sense that something is off about his social life, but is not sure how to address it. He would engage with content that spoke to the experience of post-college social disconnection and offered practical ways to reconnect with the community as a young adult in the city.

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APPENDICES

I. Data Gathering Questions

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

Social Media

1. How often do you use social media to communicate with family/friends?

   Gaano ka kadalas gumamit ng social media para makipag-usap sa pamilya o kaibigan?

2. Which platform(s) do you use most for socializing? Why?

   Ano ang mga social media platform/s ang madalas mong ginagamit? Bakit?

3. Do you feel social media helps you stay connected? Why or why not?

   Sa tingin mo ba nakakatulong ang social media para manatiling konektado sa mga tao? Bakit o bakit hindi?

4. Have you felt lonely even while active on social media? Describe it.

   Naranasan mo na bang makaramdam ng pag-iisa kahit aktibo ka sa social media? Maaari mo bang ilarawan ang karanasang iyon?

Third Space in Metro Manila

1. How often do you go out to spend time with friends or attend social events?

   Gaano kadalas ka lumalabas upang makipagkita sa mga kaibigan o dumalo sa isang social event?

2. What places in Metro Manila do you go to for relaxation, hanging out, or meeting friends?

   Anong mga lugar sa Metro Manila ang madalas mong puntahan para mag-relax, tumambay, o makipagkita sa mga kaibigan?

3. What features make a place feel welcoming and comfortable?

   Anong mga katangian ng isang lugar ang nagpaparamdam sa iyo na komportable at welcome ka?

4. Are there enough public/non-commercial hangout spots for young people in your area? Why or why not?

   Sa tingin mo ba sapat ang mga pampublikong lugar o tambayan (maliban sa mga komersyal na establisyimento tulad ng mga mall, cafe, o restaurant) para sa kabataan sa inyong lugar? Bakit o bakit hindi?

5. What challenges make it difficult to spend time in physical third spaces? e.g., distance, transportation, cost, safety, lack of spaces.

   Ano ang mga hadlang na nagpapahirap sa iyo na magpunta o magtagal sa mga pisikal na third space? (hal. layo, transportasyon, gastos, kaligtasan, kakulangan ng lugar)

Digital Vs In Person

1. Tell us about your typical day, how would you interact with people? Why?

   Paano ka nakikipag-ugnayan sa mga tao at bakit? (sa social media man o sa personal/pisikal na lugar?

2. In what environment do you feel more fulfillment socializing online or in-person? Elaborate.

   Saan ka mas nakakaramdam ng fulfillment kapag nakikipag-ugnayan sa mga kapwa online o in-person? At bakit?

3. In your opinion, what are the advantages of communicating with people online versus face-to-face, or the other way around?

   Sa tingin mo ano ang mga pakinabang ng pakikipag-usap sa mga tao online kumpara sa harapan (face-to-face), o kabaliktaran nito?

4. Can you describe a recent time you felt disconnected from others? (Please specify situations or times when isolation feels stronger)

   Pwede mo bang ikwento ang isang bago pangyayari na nararamdaman mong nadidiskonekta ka sa iba? (tukuyin ang mga sitwasyon o oras kung kailan mas matindi ang pakiramdam ng pag-iisa)

5. What do you do when you're feeling isolated or disconnected?

   Ano ang ginagawa mo kapag ikaw ay nakakaramdam ng pag-iisa?

6. How do digital spaces and physical third spaces affect your sense of belonging or connection with others?

   Paano naaapektuhan ng digital spaces at pisikal na third spaces ang iyong pakiramdam ng pakikipag ugnayan o koneksyon sa iba?

7. Overall, do you prefer socializing online or in-person? Why?

   Sa pangkalahatan, mas gusto mo bang makipag-socialize online o in-person? Bakit?

GOOGLE FORM SURVEY

Personal Information

Full Name [LAST, FIRST NAME]:

Email Address:

City of Residency (Metro Manila only):

Age:

16-24

What personality type would you consider yourself?:

- Introvert
- Ambivert
- Extrovert

Social Media

1. How often do you use social media to communicate with your family and peers?

   Gaano ka kadalas gumamit ng social media para makipag-usap sa pamilya o kaibigan?

   - Always (7 days a week)
   - Often (4-6 days a week)
   - Sometimes (1-3 days a week)
   - Never (0 days a week)

2. Which social media platform/s do you use most for socializing?

   Ano ang mga social media platform/s ang madalas mong ginagamit?

   - Facebook
   - Messenger
   - X (FKA Twitter)
   - Instagram
   - Tiktok
   - Reddit
   - Youtube
   - LinkedIn
   - Discord
   - Others (Type)

3. Social media helps me stay connected with people.

   Nakakatulong ang social media sa akin na manatiling konektado sa ibang tao.

   - Strongly Agree
   - Agree
   - Neutral
   - Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

4. I often feel lonely despite being active on social media.

Madalas akong nakakaramdam ng lungkot kahit aktibo ako sa social media.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Third Places in Metro Manila

1. How often do you go out to spend time with friends or attend social events?

   Gaano ka kadalas lumalabas para makasama ang iyong mga kaibigan o dumalo sa mga social na pagtitipon?

   - Always (7 days a week)
   - Often (4-6 days a week)
   - Sometimes (1-3 days a week)
   - Never (0 days a week)

2. What kind of places in Metro Manila do you usually go to for relaxation, hanging out, or meeting friends? (Select all that applies)

   Anong mga lugar sa Metro Manila ang karaniwan mong pinupuntahan para mag-relax, tumambay, o makipagkita sa mga kaibigan? (Piliin ang lahat ng naaangkop.)

   - Malls / Commercial Establishments
   - Cafe / Restaurant / Bar

- Public Parks / Open green spaces
- Museum / Exhibit / Cultural Establishments

3. What features make a place feel welcoming and comfortable for you? (Select all that applies)

Anong mga katangian ang nagpaparamdam sa iyo na komportable at kaaya-aya ang isang lugar? (Piliin ang lahat ng naaangkop.)

- Spacious / Availability of seats
- Lighting, Music, Overall ambiance
- Accessibility
- Cleanliness

4. There are enough public spaces or hangout spots (excluding commercial establishments such as malls, and food establishments) for young people in my local area.

May sapat na mga pampublikong espasyo o tambayan (hindi kabilang ang mga komersyal na establisyimento tulad ng mga mall at mga kainan) para sa mga kabataan sa aking komunidad.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

5. Physical distance to third spaces hinders me from going out often.

   Ang layo ng mga pampublikong tambayan ang nagiging hadlang para madalas akong makalabas.

   - Strongly Agree
   - Agree
   - Neutral
   - Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

6. The current public transportation system and heavy traffic hinders me from going out often.

   Ang kasalukuyang pampublikong transportasyon at matinding trapiko ang nagiging hadlang para madalas akong makalabas.

   - Strongly Agree
   - Agree
   - Neutral
   - Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

7. Spending time in third spaces is outside of my current budget.

   Hindi pasok sa aking kasalukuyang badyet ang paggugol ng oras sa mga pampublikong tambayan.

   - Strongly Agree
   - Agree
   - Neutral
   - Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

8. I worry about safety and security when hanging out in public spaces.

   Nag-aalala ako tungkol sa aking kaligtasan at seguridad kapag tumatambay sa mga pampublikong lugar.

   - Strongly Agree
   - Agree
   - Neutral
   - Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

Digital Vs. In Person

1. Most of my social interactions are digital rather than in-person.

   Karamihan sa aking pakikipag-ugnayan sa ibang tao ay nangyayari sa digital na paraan kaysa sa harapang pakikisalamuha.

   - Strongly Agree

- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

2. I feel personal fulfillment and emotional connection when socializing digitally compared to face-to face.

   Mas nakakaramdam ako ng personal na kasiyahan at emosyonal na koneksyon kapag nakikisalamuha sa digital na paraan kaysa sa harapang pakikisalamuha.

   - Strongly Agree
   - Agree
   - Neutral
   - Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

3. It is easier to convey my thoughts and emotions through online communication rather than face-to-face conversations.

   Mas madali para sa akin na ipahayag ang aking mga saloobin at damdamin sa pamamagitan ng online na komunikasyon kaysa sa harapang pag-uusap.

   - Strongly Agree
   - Agree
   - Neutral
   - Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

4. I experience stronger feelings of isolation during certain situations or times (e.g., when I'm at home, stressed, or using digital spaces for a period of time.)

   Mas matindi ang nararamdaman kong pag-iisa sa ilang sitwasyon o pagkakataon (hal., kapag nasa bahay ako, nakararanas ng stress, o matagal na gumagamit ng mga digital na espasyo).

   - Strongly Agree
   - Agree
   - Neutral
   - Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

5. It is easier to connect and socialize with random people through online platforms.

   Mas madali para sa akin na makipagkilala at makihalubilo sa mga taong hindi ko kilala sa pamamagitan ng mga online na plataporma.

   - Strongly Agree
   - Agree
   - Neutral
   - Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

6. Overall, I prefer socializing digitally than meeting with people in-person.

   Sa kabuuan, mas gusto kong makihalubilo sa digital na paraan kaysa makipagkita sa mga tao nang harapan.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

7. What do you think is the biggest challenge that prevents young people from spending more time in physical third spaces?
   Sa iyong palagay, ano ang pinakamalaking hamon na pumipigil sa mga kabataan na gumugol ng mas maraming oras sa mga pisikal na third spaces?

8. If you could improve one thing about third spaces in Metro Manila, what would it be?
   Kung maaari mong baguhin o pagandahin ang isang bagay tungkol sa mga third spaces sa Metro Manila, ano ito?