

How to create an art therapy paradigm for Generation Z in the post-epidemic era within contemporary media systems—— Introduction to the design and iterative process of the Cyber Empath - Cyber Confessional project

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Abstract. The main objective of this report is to explore and design an art therapy paradigm within the contemporary media system that is conducive to the mental health development of the Generation Z community in the context of the post-epidemic era, and that is truly applicable to the community and in harmony with its zeitgeist. The project is guided by the integrative methodology of art therapy and Carl Gustav Jung's theory of the psychology of religion. It draws on the religious ritual of "confession to a priest" in form; critically deconstructs the religious power of the ritual in content; injects new connotations that resonate with the zeitgeist of Generation Z in spirit; combines immersive experience design with contemporary media systems in technology; and attempts to create a therapeutic cyberspace guided by the digital avatar for Generation Z. Additionally, the report documents the intervention events and new findings so far during the construction of the project.

Keywords: Art Therapy; Contemporary Media Systems; Generation Z; Post-Epidemic Era.

1. Mental Health & Behavioral Preferences of Gen Z in the Post-Epidemic Era

Generation Z, commonly referred to as the generation born between 1995 and 2010. This generation has been seamlessly connected to the internet age since they were born, and can be regarded as the first generation of natives of the internet age, who are more influenced by digital information technology, instant communication devices, smartphone products, etc. Looking at the external environment, a 2018 study by the Pew Research Center found that up to 95% of Gen Z teens say they own a smartphone, and 45% say they are online almost all the time[1]. In terms of the risks and rewards of smart technology use for Gen Z, a high frequency of smartphone, social media and internet use has been shown to be associated with a higher incidence of mental health problems such as loneliness, depression and anxiety. The community is also more dependent on digital devices for interpersonal interactions and more likely to use digital avatars for self-expression. Empirical studies of attitudes towards smart technologies reveal a complex and contradictory relationship between Gen Z and technology, where technology can be seen both as the source of many of Gen Z's problems and as a way to solve them.

Although some of the "technological alienators" have a pessimistic view of this phenomenon, believing that the development of technology inevitably leads to the loss and alienation of certain human functions, the author, who is also a member of Gen Z, believes that this is a state similar to the Buddhist concept of "non-regression". It is a fact of human nature that there is a tendency to crave convenience and freedom from work, and therefore the most people cannot escape the technologised life that the internet age has created. As designers in the early stages of the smart era, what we should be doing is following the trend of the times and constantly thinking about what new aesthetic possibilities technology can bring to design, and how and to what extent technology will change design and thus affect people's lives, rather than blindly resisting the wave.

According to a McKinsey & Company 2022 study[2], during the prolonged COVID-19 epidemic, Gen Z reported more mental health problems than any other age group, so much so that on 7 December 2021, US Health and Human Services Secretary Vivek Murthy issued a public health

advisory to address the "adolescent mental health crisis". This is because the epidemic is occurring at a critical time in adolescents' psychological development, when the likelihood of mental health episodes skyrockets when the normal order of life is disrupted. And, based on the characteristics of Gen Z consumers in the healthcare ecosystem, another driver of Gen Z's decline in seeking traditional mental health services is the cost of mental health services. A quarter of Gen Z respondents say they cannot afford mental health services. This is due to the fact that many Gen Zs currently rely on their parents for financial support, and most find it burdensome to interact with their parents about mental health issues. As a result, they are relying more on social media and digital tools for mental health support: seeking advice from other young people on TikTok or Weibo, following therapists on Instagram, or downloading mental health apps. With these existing telehealth options, Gen Z also cited some dissatisfactions, such as the difficulty of establishing a trusting relationship with the therapist. When it comes to apps, Gen Z respondents noted that existing apps lack personalization and variety. Therefore, when creating and improving behavioral health tools, it is important to adopt a user-centred design approach to develop the features and experiences that Gen Z really wants. Markets and Markets predicts that the global emotional AI industry will double from \$19.5 billion in 2020 to \$37.1 billion in 2026, growing at a compound annual growth rate of 11.3%, due to teleworking as a result of the COVID-19 epidemic[3].

Therefore, as Gen Z is about to become the largest working population in the "post-epidemic era" in an environment full of uncertainty, how to find a clever connection between technology, art and mental health for this population, and how to establish an art therapy paradigm that meets the spiritual needs of this generation within the context of contemporary media systems, has aroused the authors' research interest.

2. New Direction for Art Therapy in Contemporary Media Systems

Art therapy is a form of psychotherapy. In contrast to the most common form of psychotherapy, which primarily uses language as its medium, art therapy utilizes non-verbal forms of art as its medium. This allows the patient to express emotions that cannot be articulated in words in a more intuitive and emotional manner, potentially leading to more optimistic outcomes. Traditional art therapy can be broadly classified into four categories based on its forms: painting therapy, music therapy, dance therapy, and drama therapy. Therapists will adopt different therapeutic methods according to different illnesses. In the current era, with the flourishing of various new media technologies and the impact of several years of isolation due to the epidemic, online communication has become more commonplace. Art therapy should adapt to the changing times by exploring new avenues within the contemporary media system. It should consider integrating various forms of communication and media platforms to achieve the maximum therapeutic effect.

Although it may appear that the art therapy profession has only recently become involved in discussions about contemporary media systems, it has, in fact, been actively engaged in evaluating the risks and potential of digital technologies in art therapy practice for over thirty years. In 1999, the Journal of Art Therapy dedicated a special issue to the relationship between computer technology and art therapy, and revisited the topic a decade later. In 2019, the Wall Street Journal asked therapists and researchers to consider how professional practices could be updated, modernized, or reconstructed to meet contemporary needs. The lack of in-depth research into digital art-making was cited as the main obstacle for practitioners seeking to introduce new media into the therapeutic process.

This report posits that the contemporary media system, with its integration of traditional and emerging media driven by cutting-edge technologies like big data, the Internet, artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and digital twin, serves as a transformative bridge between the virtual and physical realms. It creates a digital space that transcends the constraints of real life, offering boundless opportunities for interaction and expression. When integrated with the contemporary media system, art therapy can extend beyond the confines of physical space and enrich the value dimension of art

therapy in a more expansive manner[4]. Art therapy projects tailored to enhance the mental well-being of Generation Z are poised to deliver substantial social and economic advantages in the future. The intergenerational approaches embedded within these projects foster therapeutic interactions and artistic elements that evolve in synchrony, fostering a symbolic interplay where suppressed and unrestrained energies converge in a delicate equilibrium. This amalgamation redefines the process of art therapy, transforming it into a co-creative fusion of aesthetics and psychology. In light of the growing prevalence of dataism, it becomes imperative to explore how designers can adeptly leverage the emotional facets of design, the artistry inherent in technology, and the intricate nuances of virtual experiences. This ongoing self-examination will be pivotal in navigating the ever-evolving landscape of design and technology, ensuring that art therapy remains relevant and impactful within the contemporary media system.

3. The Process of Project Design in the Cyber Empath - Cyber Confessional

3.1 Project Design Process

As the stakeholders selected for this project are a relatively large target group, and the sample size of individual questionnaires is not sufficient to support objective analyses of them in this report, the authors decided to use a mixed research method. For the quantitative research, relevant data was collected from the databases of professional consulting firms such as McKinsey & Company and the Pew Research Centre, and then qualitative analysis was conducted in conjunction with this data. This included, but was not limited to, a series of structured and unstructured interviews, focus groups, action research and literature reviews. The report focuses on documenting selected interventions and stakeholder feedback that led to a turning point in the design and construction of the project.

More detailed project build process can be viewed in the author's project journal.

<https://plumeplumelet.blogspot.com/>

3.1.1 Focus Group Action Research

The authors, drawing on the extensive literature on art therapy and narrative therapy, designed the first intervention event as a focus group interview involving 10 culturally diverse Gen Z individuals. The intervention took place in a relaxed environment, with the following sequence of events: First, focus groups were organized to openly discuss the negative emotions experienced during the epidemic's quarantine period and potential ways to resolve them. To create a lively atmosphere, participants were given the freedom to choose any art tools they wanted to use in creating two pieces of artwork. One piece focused on the theme of "Negative events I have created," while the other centered on the theme of "Negative events I have encountered." All creations were anonymous and kept private during the creation process. Upon completion, the facilitator collected the works for display. Using a game familiar to Generation Z called 'You Draw, I Guess', group members were asked to guess the type of negative event depicted in each other's works. The guesser whose result was closest to the original prototype was rewarded with a prize.

After collecting feedback from the focus group, the majority of participants expressed that the intervening event provided them with an opportunity to express long-buried negative emotions they lacked the courage to confront, resulting in a sense of relief they had not experienced before. However, one participant mentioned that while the intervention was therapeutic, she chose to describe the negative events to a lesser extent due to concerns about how it might affect her social image in the eyes of other participants. This feedback prompted the authors to establish a new design direction for the project - a private and secure digitized environment that is independent of social relationships, a cyber-virtual space that encourages genuine courage to explore the shadows and let go.

3.1.2 Structured Interviews with Clergy

The feedback received from the focus group during the first intervention event reminded the authors of the Western religious culture where people confess their sins to a priest, and the phenomenon of confessors being able to honestly express their shadows before the priests, and the deeper reasons for this, are worth exploring. In a follow-up qualitative study, the authors conducted structured interviews with two clergy, Nicholls and Faustine, at All Saints' Church in Westham, London, and Hope Church in Stratford, London, in order to understand the clergy's perceptions of the relationship between the religious ritual of 'confession to a priest' and mental health, and their own feelings as emotionally receptive subjects.

The new turning point in the project's design came with the interview question: "When you are exposed to various forms of negativity as a trusted confidant and as a representative of 'God's will,' do you sometimes experience emotional strain or exhaustion?" The clergyman's affirmative response to this question prompted the authors to reconsider the project's significance from a different perspective. The traditional model of psychotherapy - whether ancient way: confession to a clergyman or modern way: counselling to a psychiatrist - takes into account only the feelings of the confider and ignores the side of the listener - does it create emotional overload by taking in too much negativity? Is empathy sometimes making the listener exhausting? This structured interview made the authors realize that if the already increasingly powerful ChatGPT functionality was incorporated into the paradigm in conjunction with an avatar, it would not only be more in line with the behavioral preferences of Generation Z, but would also serve as an aid to alleviate some of the emotional pressure on therapists in the future. And therapists needn't worry about being put out of work, because AIs will never have a deeper understanding of psychological issues than humans.

3.1.3 Reflections on Avatar Image Design and the Construction of Virtual Safe Spaces

Driven by industrialization, globalization and informatization, human society has come to the doorstep of the next era, and the close connection between Generation Z and technology has brought new opportunities and challenges to the field.

On the one hand, many theorists see the virtual world from a post-structural perspective as the realm of the symbolic, and Baudrillard introduced the concept of simulacra, directly pointing out that the simulacra that abound in postmodern culture can obscure the real and heterogeneous to its origin, so that the real can be reduced to nothing, and that the development of a society of simulacra will result in a society full of copies without origin, with no exact correspondence to the so-called real. On the other hand, however, the author believes that the virtual world will not bring about a total disintegration of meaning, but also the establishment of new meanings under new humanistic goals such as "absolute equality", "reinventing faith", "algorithmic democracy", and so on. The meaning of life and dignity may be reshaped by these new technological practices.

Roblox is one of the world's most popular online gaming platforms, and the gaming company has seen its popularity soar over the past few years, largely "benefiting" from the "stay-at-home dividend" triggered by the prolonged COVID-19 epidemic. In July 2020, the company introduced a new "Party Space" feature in one of its games, increasing the company's social attributes and user stickiness, allowing the entire business model to form a true ecosystem. And the eight elements proposed in the company's prospectus, published in 2021, regarding the construction of virtual spaces in the metaverse, provided some reference for the authors in framing the Cyber Empath - Cyber Confessions project: 1. Identity: All users have unique identities in the form of avatars, which allow them to build themselves into the person or object they want to be, and these identities are portable across experiences. 2. Friend: Since the metaverse is a virtual society, it is as much centered on social interaction as the real world; people are the sum of all social relationships, and friends are one of the most important social relationships. Users interact with friends, both those they know in the real world and those they know in the virtual world. 3. Immersive: The experience is immersive, and to achieve this it is essential to leverage the power of VR/AR technology, and

perhaps in the future introduce brain-computer interconnectivity, which will become increasingly indistinguishable from the real world as the platform evolves. 4. Anywhere: Users and creators can access and experience virtual worlds from anywhere in the world and on any device. 5. Low friction: It's very easy for users to reap the benefits of their experiences within the platform, and it's easy for creators to create digitally. 6. Variety: Diverse content and rich virtual experiences in virtual worlds. 7. Economy: The existence of tokens that serve as symbols of value, which can be paid for by users to gain access to experiences, which can be sold by creators to gain income from their creations, and which can ultimately be converted into real-world monetary assets with ease. 8. Civility: In the distant future, the metaverse should develop into an all-encompassing civilization with its own set of rules, and even become the mainstream of human civilization. Thousands of years from now, human beings may classify the "Meta-Cosmic Era" as a historical concept comparable to the "Stone Age", "Iron Age" and "Industrial Age". "Industrial Age". It is therefore important to have systems in place within the platform to ensure the safety of users and to promote civilization in order to enforce the laws and regulations required in the real world[5].

3.2 Theoretical Guidance for the Projects

Carl Gustav Jung's theory of the psychology of religion states that the essence of religion is the religious experience, that the focus should be on the religious experience rather than on the belief itself, and that religious rituals actually have a protective effect on the mind because it is possible to be free from the effects of "direct experience". The society in which he lived at that time was in the phase of booming industrial technology, a time when the conflict between rational and irrational antagonisms was intensifying, and the importance and emphasis on rational consciousness also stimulated Jung's reconsideration of the irrationality at the bottom of the human mind. The author argues that Jung's era, the Industrial Revolution, has some echoes of the current state of society, which is once again being swept up by the wave of information technology. Although there is a general disparaging attitude towards religion in modern times, from the point of view of the psychology of religion, human beings have a natural religious attribute, and mental health and spiritual equilibrium depend on the correct expression of this religious attribute. Rituals such as confession, which the Catholic Church possesses, have always played a role in absorbing the more negative instinctual forces of the psyche into religious symbols and integrating them into the hierarchy of spiritual ordinances, and have been able to transform the frequent problem of empathy into something impersonal. In fact, Jung seldom mentions God, but rather focuses on "God-imagery" because "God-archetypes" manifest themselves differently depending on the content of individuals, societies, and cultures. However, after a series of clinical observations, Jung concluded that all these "God-imagery" did not adequately express the infinity of the "God-archetypes". He wrote: "I felt compelled to give the archetype a psychological name: Self[6]."

And according to a 2018 study by McKinsey & Company[7], Gen Z's approach to faith is mixed with a high regard for personal identity and pragmatism. This data is further corroborated by feedback from a further unstructured interview organized by the authors. When asked about their thoughts on the idea of the Cyber Empath - Cyber Confessional project, most of the Gen Z respondents told the authors that they thought it would be a cool thing to do, as they often see similar scenarios in films, and that they would be willing to try it out. When it came to attitudes towards religion, most said they were not religious and felt that technological advances in the information age had "demystified" the symbols of power in religious stories. These theoretical studies and data collection helped the authors to further define the main concepts of the Cyber Empath - Cyber Confessional project.

3.3 Introduction of the Cyber Empath - Cyber Confessional Project Concept

The authors set out to create a digital healing space called the Cyber Confessional, which draws on the religious ritual of confession, critically deconstructs the religious power of the ritual in terms of its content, infuses it with a new spirit in line with the zeitgeist of Gen Z, and technologically

combines it with the immersive sensory experience of contemporary media. Experiences can engage in self-relaxation, meditation, reflection, painting, singing and other behaviors conducive to mental health. The avatar as the leading image in the Cyber Confessional is deconstructed from the image of the priest, which implies religious power, to a visual effect called the Cyber Empath, designed as a floating particle-like de-sexualized humanoid—represents the self incarnation of each experiencer who enters the Cyber Confessional, and the "self" that Jung believed best represented the infinity of God's archetypes in his Psychology of Religion(Fig2).



Fig 1. Poster for the intervention event



Fig 2. Manifesto for Cyber Empath

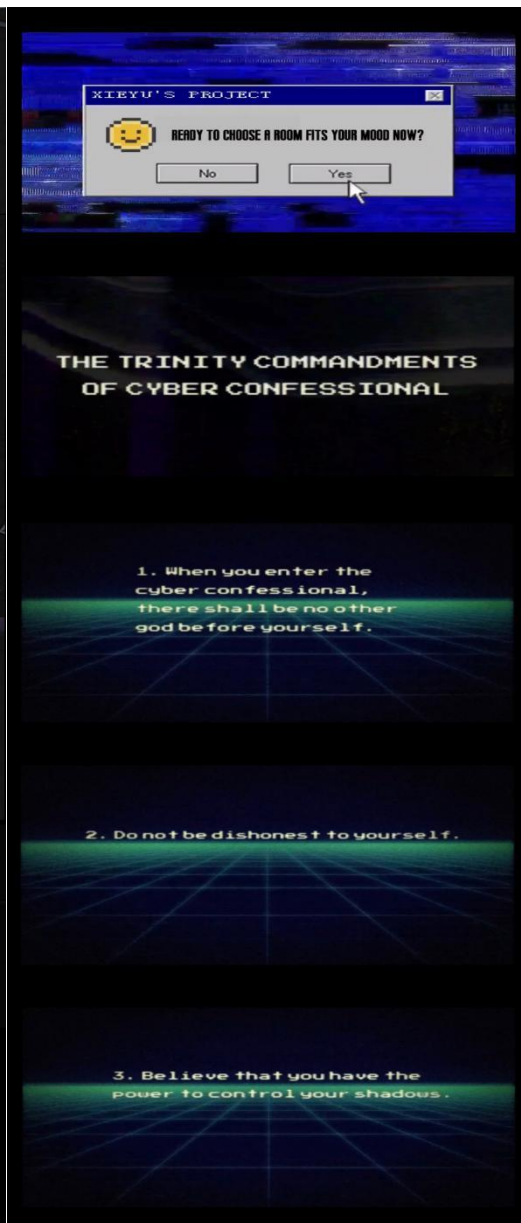


Fig 3. Cyber Confessional Code

When users click through to the home page they will hear the Cyber Empath chanting a declaration full of individualism - "I am everywhere in your world, confide in me, confess to me, I am representative of God, God is yourself." The author's current idea for the presentation of the Cyber Confessional is that the site will offer a number of different styles of room options to choose from, and the user will be able to select one of them to click into, according to the mood of the day. When the user selects a confessional that matches the mood of the day and clicks in, that user in turn hears the "Cyber Empath" recite a code of confessional that mimics the form and structures the content of the Ten Commandments from the Bible: "1. When you enter the Cyber Confessional, there shall be no other gods before yourself. 2. Do not be dishonest to yourself. 3. Believe that you have the power to control your shadows(Fig3)." Again reinforcing the sense of ritual in line with Gen Z's psycho-behavioral preferences, It is also similar to a theatre theory called "Theatre of Cruelty" , the reference to the "Theatre of Cruelty" theory by Antonin Artaud in relation to Gen Z's psycho-behavioral preferences underscores a desire for experiences that go beyond the mundane and conventional. Artaud's theory, developed in the 1930s, challenged the prevailing norms of theatre at the time, which he felt had become too predictable and lacked the power to truly impact its audience. Instead, Artaud advocated for a form of theatre that transcended mere entertainment, aiming to evoke profound emotional and spiritual responses akin to participating in a deeply

meaningful ritual or mythological ceremony. This notion aligns with the contemporary inclination among Gen Z to seek out experiences that are immersive, emotionally resonant, and capable of sparking profound introspection and connection. By drawing parallels between Artaud's vision and the preferences of Gen Z, the idea of ritualistic and transformative experiences is reinforced, highlighting a shared yearning for engagements that transcend the ordinary and resonate on a deeper, more meaningful level[8].

The current outcome of the project is an introductory concept website and an interactive video within it, designed to visually present the concept of the project and what it will look like in the future when it is actually on the ground. In the interactive video, the author creates examples of three different room styles - an intergalactic observatory with pink skies, a natural cave after a rainy day, and a wizard's house with a campfire - and when clicked, each confessional is equipped with ASMR white noise that matches the ambience of that room, which scientific research has shown to have a soothing effect on negative emotions.

The full interactive video can be viewed at the following URL or by scanning the QR code.

<https://sites.google.com/view/cyber-empath>



4. Feedback from Experts in Relevant Fields and Outlook for Future Iterations

The main limitation of this project at the moment is the technology, the author's idealized presentation of the project is an immersive cyber experience space, where the user needs to wear a headset and VR glasses to experience the landscapes and soundscapes and heal under the guidance of the Cyber Empath, however, at the moment the author is not able to build such a structure alone, so when asking for feedback from stakeholders and experts in the field, I chose a quiet and dark space to present the project concept in order to be relatively immersive. Feedback so far has mostly been that, despite the current technical limitations, the website concept and interactive video have given them a clear understanding of the design aims of the project and that the project is certainly forward thinking. And with the majority of Gen Z respondents believing that the popularity of VR glasses and related technology will happen within the next five years, they can't wait to mentally unwind in the Cyber-Confessional with Cyber-Empath.

The experts' suggestions also gave the authors new ideas for future iterations of the project: 1. Add more methodological guidance to the future pages of the Cyber Confession Room to help users who don't have a background in art therapy and don't know which art techniques to use for self-healing. 2. Develop the project into a mental health platform, inviting therapists to join the website and holding regular mental health lectures to spread mental health knowledge. 3. Establish the project's social platform and online community in social media and develop the corresponding community culture. 4. Develop an ethical code of conduct and confidentiality statement in relation to psychotherapy.

5. Summary

This report argues that art therapy projects aimed at enhancing the mental well-being of Generation Z through tailored intergenerational approaches are undeniably valuable and will yield significant social and economic benefits in the future. The therapeutic interactions and artistic elements of these projects evolve in tandem, creating a symbolic interplay in which suppressed and unrestrained energies harmonize in a delicate equilibrium. This fusion transforms the process of art therapy into a co-creative fusion of aesthetics and psychology. Given the current and future prevalence of dataism, it is essential to consider how designers can effectively harness the emotional aspects of design, the artistry of technology, and the complexities of virtual experiences. This ongoing self-examination will be crucial in navigating the evolving landscape of design and technology.

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