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From Solid to Liquid Modernity: an Analysis of the Fragility of Social Bonds in the Digital Generation According to Zygmunt Bauman

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Abstract

The development of the digital era has brought significant changes to human social life, particularly in the way people establish and maintain social relationships. Generations living within the environment of social media tend to experience forms of relationships that are more temporary, fragile, and easily dissolved. This reality is what Zygmunt Bauman refers to as Liquid Modernity, a condition in which the stability of relationships and social certainty increasingly weaken. This paper examines the shift in social bonds from a solid society to a liquid one among the digital generation by employing Bauman's theoretical framework of liquid modernity. Using a qualitative approach based on literature review, this study explores how algorithms, validation culture, and virtual communication have transformed relationships that were once deep, stable, and committed into ones that are looser, more flexible, and easily formed as well as abandoned. This transformation not only alters patterns of interaction but also reshapes how individuals understand the meaning of closeness and social attachment. On the one hand, this generation is becoming increasingly technologically connected, reflecting the direction of modern progress; on the other hand, the depth of relationships is becoming more vulnerable, losing its dimension of continuity. Moreover, personal identity itself undergoes fragmentation due to the demands of performativity in digital spaces. Individuals tend to present multiple versions of themselves, adjusted to different social contexts.This paper argues that Bauman's framework remains relevant, and is in fact increasingly important, in interpreting the relational crisis in the digital era.

Keywords

Liquid Modernity, Zygmunt Bauman, Identity, Digital, Relationship

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of *liquid society* or *liquid modernity* describes a social condition characterized by rapid change, uncertainty, fragmentation, and instability.[1] The development and widespread use of digital technologies, such as social media, have transformed the ways people communicate, work, and access information. furthermore, these technologies also play a significant role in shaping patterns of social interaction.

The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman interprets this transformation through a metaphor that has become one of the most influential sociological concepts of this century, *liquid modernity*. For Bauman, contemporary society has moved from a *solid* condition marked by strong, stable, and enduring community structures toward a *liquid* condition in which everything is uncertain, changes rapidly, and social relationships are continuously renegotiated.[2] Within this liquid order, social forms no longer endure for long, as they are constantly dismantled and reconfigured.

This condition becomes increasingly visible in the experience of the digital generation, namely those who have lived from the beginning of their lives within the flow of liquid modernity. In this context, they not only live amid rapid change, but are also required to continuously reconstruct their identities. Identity is no longer something fixed, but rather an ongoing project.[3] This, of course, has significant implications for their social development and their relationships with others.

In addition, an education system that is increasingly oriented toward digitalization also influences how they adapt to changes in future employment. In liquid society, the future can no longer be accurately predicted and is never entirely certain. Individuals are constantly confronted with difficult choices and compromises. Furthermore, those who are accustomed to fluid self-expression and unstable relationships face the possibility of various forms of psychological vulnerability, such as anxiety, social pressure, and increasingly complex identity crises.

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[1] Laura Orsolini et al., "Liquid Youth Generation? The New Psychopathological Trajectories of the Post-Modern Society," *Journal of Psychology and Psychotherapy Research* 10 (2023): 32, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.12974/2313-1047.2023.10.04

[2] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 2.

[3] Matt Dawson, "Optimism and Agency in the Sociology of Zygmunt Bauman," *European Journal of Social Theory* 15, no. 4 (2012): 559, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431012437480

The use of digital technology in this era of liquid society has exposed them to many different challenges. Growing up in a more diverse society makes it easier for them to compare themselves with others. Digital development has also established certain standards that individuals are expected to achieve. Those who fail to meet these standards are more likely to engage in constant self-comparison, and they may never feel satisfied with or adequate about what they have achieved in the present.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Liquid Modernity According to Zygmunt Bauman

Zygmunt Bauman is regarded as one of the greatest sociologists of our time. He carefully understood the contradictory and continuous transformations of the modern age. For him, the present era is no longer simply modern or postmodern, but rather an age of liquid modernity.[4] Bauman's thought is able to illuminate the transformations that shape human life, particularly in relation to the broader organization of social life and public policy.

In this era of liquid society, there exists a reality in which life places greater value on temporary things than on permanent ones. Solidity and liquidity are the defining characteristics of two different eras. These are not merely terms, but ways of understanding how the world changes over time. In the phase described as solid, namely the modern period, human life was marked by order and stability. Social structures such as family, work, religion, and state institutions had clear forms and endured over time. In such circumstances, a person's life direction was often shaped from the beginning. Identity was not something to be searched for, because it had already been formed through the social environment in which one lived. This era possessed a strong foundation that was not easily shaken.

However, this condition gradually began to shift. Entering the contemporary period, the world became more dynamic and difficult to predict. This is what Bauman described as a liquid condition. In this situation, almost nothing remains truly permanent. Jobs may change at any time, social relationships become looser, and individuals no longer possess fixed identities. Those who grow up in a "liquid" family or social environment may experience individual alienation, making it difficult for them to adapt to others and to understand who they truly are.

[4] Emma Palese, "Zygmunt Bauman. Individual and Society in the Liquid Modernity," *SpringerPlus* 2, no. 1 (2013): 191, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1186/2193-1801-2-191

Identity as on Ongoing Projecet

The shift from a solid to a liquid era also affects the formation of individual identity. In the context of liquid modernity, identity is no longer understood as something fixed and inherited from the social environment. Instead, it becomes a personal construction that must constantly be rebuilt, renegotiated, and consciously managed in a continuous manner, as the world is filled with instability and rapid change. Individuals no longer simply receive identity from their surrounding environment, but are required to create it for themselves.[5] They are expected to possess the ability to redefine their identities flexibly in order to remain relevant amid rapid social transformation. Zygmunt Bauman emphasized that identity in this era must be "created, not inherited," and there is no guarantee that this process of creation will ever reach an end.[6]

The transition toward a liquid society also influences the way individuals understand themselves. Bauman distinguishes between individuality de jure (the condition in which, within liquid modernity, all people are expected to be choosers) and individuality de facto (the actual freedom to act, in which some people possess greater opportunities to realize their desires than others).[7] Within the legal framework, every person is regarded as an individual de jure, namely a subject who possesses freedom as well as full responsibility for life choices and all their consequences. However, in reality, many individuals fail to become individuals de facto because limited resources prevent them from fully directing and controlling their life paths in highly uncertain circumstances. This condition often gives rise to feelings of powerlessness, anxiety, and a desire to turn to collective authority in search of security.

Identitty as Performance in the Digital Generation

The rapid development of digital technology has further strengthened the fluid nature of identity. For the digital generation, identity often becomes a form of performance in which individuals tend to present an "edited" version of themselves in order to gain validation and social recognition. Individuals act like performers on a

[5] Covin Andreas Lumban Gaol et al., "Aku Yang Tak Pernah Tetap: Krisis Identitas Generasi Digital Dalam Perspektif Liquid Modernity Zygmunt Bauman," *Seri Filsafat Teologi* 35, no. 34 (2025): 247, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.35312/serifilsafat.v35i34.276

[6] Zygmunt Bauman, *Identity: Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 76.

[7] Dawson, "Optimism and Agency in the Sociology of Zygmunt Bauman," 561.

social stage, constructing their identities through various appearances that align with societal expectations. This demonstrates that identity is never fixed or complete, but remains in a continuous process of formation, dependent upon the repetition of actions that are recognized and evaluated within social life.[8]

The digital generation, having grown up amid technological advancement, uses social media as the primary means of constructing and displaying a desired self-image. Social media users modify, edit, and curate their identities before presenting them to others. Identity is no longer primarily about fully being, but rather about showing the most attractive and relevant version of oneself to an audience.[9] This condition often causes the identity displayed in digital spaces to diverge from the realities of everyday life. Such inconsistency may eventually trigger deeper identity crises and psychological exhaustion. As Zygmunt Bauman stated, "it is easier to shape patterns of identity than to keep them in shape. Keeping liquids in shape requires great attention, constant vigilance, and endless effort."[10]

Social media algorithms function as a normative force that directs individuals to adjust their self-presentation according to what is considered popular. This creates a new form of social control in which the individual freedom to shape one's identity becomes illusory, as people are compelled to follow patterns determined by digital systems in order to gain likes or followers.

As a result, young people easily experience fatigue because they must continuously rewrite their personal narratives in order to remain relevant within a liquid society characterized by rapid change. The inability to find a stable foundation of identity ultimately gives rise to existential anxiety and self-alienation. Bauman described this phenomenon as "a crowd of lonely people who are never alone," because they remain constantly connected digitally while losing meaningful social relationships.[11]

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[8] Bob Cannon, "Towards a Theory of Counter-Modernity: Rethinking Zygmunt Bauman's Holocaust Writings," *Critical Sociology* 42, no. 1 (2016): 4, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920513516023

[9] Gaol et al., "Aku Yang Tak Pernah Tetap: Krisis Identitas Generasi Digital Dalam Perspektif Liquid Modernity Zygmunt Bauman," 251.

[10] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 8.

[11] Slavko Splichal, "The (Re) Production of Publicness and Privateness in the Liquid Modern Society," *Medijska Istraživanja: Znanstveno-Stručni Časopis Za Novinarstvo i Medije* 23, no. 2 (2017): 45. https://doi.org/10.22572/MI.23.2.2

This performative identity makes social relationships lighter yet more fragile, since interactions are based more on projected images than on personal authenticity. Therefore, the identity crisis experienced by young people in the digital era can be understood as a concrete manifestation of the dynamics of liquid society as described by Zygmunt Bauman.

Phatic Comuunication: Maintaining Connection amid Narrative Fragility

Within the ecosystem of liquid society, the ways individuals maintain social relationships have undergone significant transformation. Forms of interaction that were once grounded in deep conversation, described by Christian Licoppe as the *conversational mode*, have gradually shifted toward the connected mode.[12] In the former pattern, relationships were built through long, open, and meaningful conversations, allowing for the formation of shared experiences, emotional closeness, and collective memory. By contrast, in the connected mode, what matters most is no longer the content of communication, but how frequently contact is maintained. The intensity of communication becomes more important than the quality of conversation itself. This shift has given rise to the dominance of what is known as *phatic communication* in digital relationships.

Phatic communication refers to the exchange of brief messages whose primary purpose is not to discuss profound issues or convey complex life stories, but merely to maintain the sense that a relationship remains active.[13] In the use of mobile phones, social media, and instant messaging, simple expressions such as "good morning," "take care," "what are you doing?", or "I'm thinking of you" have become common forms of communication. Such messages often contain little important information, yet they function as signs that someone is still present and remains connected to another person. In other words, what matters most is not the content of the message, but the signal of presence that is continuously transmitted.

Licoppe explains that this pattern of communication creates a feeling of *connected presence*, namely the sensation that someone is always present in our lives despite physical distance. Digital technology allows individuals to feel close without being limited by space and time. However, behind this convenience lies a

[12] Christian Licoppe, "'Connected'Presence: The Emergence of a New Repertoire for Managing Social Relationships in a Changing Communication Technoscape," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 22, no. 1 (2004): 135.https://doi.org/10.1068/d323t

[13] Licoppe, 146.

consequence consistent with Zygmunt Bauman's analysis of liquid society. Human relationships become lighter, more flexible, and easier to maintain, yet at the same time they also become fragile and unstable.[14]

Because interactions are increasingly built through fragmented short messages, quick responses, emojis, or fleeting signs of attention, individuals often lose the opportunity to develop deeper conversations that could strengthen long-term commitment. Relationships become easy to initiate, but also easy to weaken when the intensity of communicative signals declines. As a result, many people appear constantly connected to numerous others, yet still feel lonely and emotionally alienated.[15]

Ultimately, phatic communication reveals the paradox of digital life: human beings live within highly active communication networks, yet do not always possess genuine closeness. A person may exchange messages every day and still feel empty because the relationship lacks meaning. This is the image of liquid society according to Zygmunt Bauman: connections multiply, while the depth of relationships steadily diminishes

Shifting Boundaries of Relationship: From Privacy to Publicy

In liquid society, the traditional boundaries between what should remain private and what is appropriate to display publicly have collapsed. The development of the internet has enabled an interdependent relationship between the public and private spheres to exist within the same technological space. Whereas the home was once regarded as a "fortress" that protected individuals from public scrutiny, digital technology now brings the outside world into the most private spaces, connecting the two without clear limits. This illustrates a new situation in which individuals invite others into their private lives through online platforms. Here, privacy is no longer a naturally given condition, but something that must be reclaimed amid the growing tide of publicity that has become the new norm.

This shift is especially visible among the digital generation, who use social media as a kind of "showcase" of life. Various aspects once considered personal and private are now displayed and even symbolically commodified in order to gain public

[14] Zygmunt Bauman, "Living in the Era of Liquid Modernity," *Cambridge Anthropology*, 2000, 14.

[15] Gaol et al., "Aku Yang Tak Pernah Tetap: Krisis Identitas Generasi Digital Dalam Perspektif Liquid Modernity Zygmunt Bauman," 255.

recognition and validation. Social relationships are no longer built upon the depth of interaction, but rather upon carefully constructed identities designed to attract attention. In such circumstances, the search for meaning and personal connection is gradually displaced by the desire to gain recognition from the public sphere.

Zygmunt Bauman also highlighted how shared public spaces (*agora*) should function as places where people gather to discuss personal problems that are in fact experienced collectively, and to seek common solutions together. The Agora is an intermediary space connecting the public and private spheres, where personal matters develop into issues of broader public concern.[16] However, the function of the *agora* has gradually diminished. Instead, these spaces are increasingly filled with the personal concerns of each individual. People express complaints or anxieties merely as forms of confession and self-expression. At the same time, social problems or pressures are often interpreted as individual failures. In liquid society, this marks a shift in relationships from the pursuit of collective solutions toward the handling of problems on an individual basis. As a result, society becomes less aware of shared structural causes and less willing to act collectively to improve conditions. The public sphere ultimately ceases to be a place for seeking common solutions and instead becomes merely a space for displaying private problems without meaningful change.[17]

Social Withdrawl of Young People in Liquid Society

In the context of liquid society as explained by Zygmunt Bauman, the phenomenon of social withdrawal can be understood as one of the consequences of fragile social bonds among the digital generation. Social withdrawal refers to a condition in which individuals, especially young people, gradually distance themselves from social life by reducing interaction with others and losing involvement in their surrounding environment. The most extreme form of this condition is known as Hikikomori,[18] in which a person isolates themselves at home for a prolonged period of time. This phenomenon indicates that when social relationships become increasingly unstable, competitive, and pressure-filled, some

[16] Dawson, "Optimism and Agency in the Sociology of Zygmunt Bauman," 565.

[17] Splichal, "The (Re) Production of Publicness and Privateness in the Liquid Modern Society," 45.

[18] Orsolini et al., "Liquid Youth Generation? The New Psychopathological Trajectories of the Post-Modern Society," 36.

young people choose withdrawal rather than adaptation.[19] In liquid society, individuals are expected to be flexible, productive, and capable of adjusting to rapid change. However, not everyone possesses sufficient psychological resources to cope with these demands, making withdrawal a form of escape from social pressure.

The generation raised in the digital era faces a clear contradiction. Although they are technically connected at all times to the online world, many of them still experience loneliness and alienation. Relationships in virtual spaces often replace the depth of face-to-face communication. As a result, many young people feel more comfortable isolating themselves, interacting through smartphone screens, or even severing social relationships entirely. This phenomenon is consistent with Bauman's concept of liquid modernity, in which interpersonal bonds can be formed quickly, yet are simultaneously fragile and easily broken.

From a psychological perspective, social withdrawal carries serious consequences for mental well-being. Individuals who experience this condition are vulnerable to anxiety, mood instability, emotional isolation, and a decline in their ability to perform everyday roles in education, employment, and social life.[20] If left unresolved, this condition only widens the distance between individuals and the society around them.

Thus, practices of social withdrawal and *hikikomori* may be understood as manifestations of fractured social relations in liquid society. When social structures fail to provide security, solidarity, and meaningful relationships, some young people ultimately choose to retreat from the public sphere. This once again reinforces Bauman's thesis that the transition from a solid society to a liquid society not only transforms social structures, but also generates new psychological vulnerabilities attached to the digital generation.

Moral Agency in Liquid Modernity

Bauman emphasizes that modern human beings live in a world filled with choices. Therefore, every everyday decision always contains a moral dimension.

[19] Andrea Pozza, Anna Coluccia, and Takahiro Kato, "The 'Hikikomori' Syndrome: Worldwide Prevalence and Co-Occurring Major Psychiatric Disorders: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis Protocol," *BMJ Open* 9, no. 9 (2019): 1, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2018-025213

[20] Patrick k.F. Lin and Andrew, "The Relationship between Hikikomori Risk Factors and Social Withdrawal Tendencies among Emerging Adults—An Exploratory Study of Hikikomori in Singapore," *Front Psychiatry* 13 (December 2022), https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2022.1065304

When a person decides to help others or reject social indifference, they are exercising their moral agency.[21] Conversely, when individuals become absorbed solely in personal interests, their moral potential is marginalized. Today, people tend to view others merely as objects rather than as fellow human beings worthy of respect. This is the main challenge to morality in liquid modernity.

Although liquid modernity creates conditions that make social bonds fragile, Zygmunt Bauman was not entirely pessimistic. He emphasized the individual's capacity to act, grounded in morality, namely an ethical responsibility that emerges prior to being regulated by institutions or formal social rules. In circumstances where various social institutions have weakened, moral responsibility is no longer fully supported by the system, but instead returns to the individual as a subject who possesses the freedom to make choices and to act ethically.[22] He believed that individuals still possess the ability to say "no" to inhumane social pressures.[23] The capacity to reject injustice, foster solidarity, and cultivate concern for others constitutes a concrete form of moral agency. From this point, social hope can emerge. Change does not always have to come from large institutions, but can begin through the ethical actions of individuals in everyday life. Thus, moral agency in liquid modernity shows that amid a fluid and uncertain world, human beings still have the possibility of creating a more just, humane, and responsible social life.

CONCLUSION

Zygmunt Bauman's concept of Liquid Modernity remains highly relevant for understanding the social changes experienced by the digital generation today. The development of technology and social media has brought many benefits, such as faster communication, broader social networks, and new opportunities in various aspects of life. However, these advancements have not always been accompanied by deeper and more stable human relationships. Instead, social bonds have become increasingly temporary, easy to form, yet just as easy to dissolve when they are no longer considered useful or meaningful.

Within this fluid social condition, personal identity is no longer fixed, but continuously constructed, reshaped, and adjusted according to social expectations.

[21] Dawson, "Optimism and Agency in the Sociology of Zygmunt Bauman," 558.
[22] Dawson, 559.
[23] Dawson, 562.

Many individuals, especially young people, feel pressured to present idealized versions of themselves in digital spaces in order to gain recognition and validation from others. As a result, a gap often emerges between real life and online self-image, which can lead to psychological exhaustion, anxiety, and identity crises. At the same time, communication through technology, although constant and immediate, often functions merely as a sign of presence rather than a path toward genuine emotional closeness. Consequently, people may appear socially connected while still experiencing loneliness and emotional alienation.

Moreover, the boundary between private and public life has become increasingly blurred. Matters once considered personal are now frequently displayed in public spaces for attention and approval, while the public sphere itself gradually loses its role as a place for collective discussion and common solutions. This demonstrates that liquid modernity not only transforms patterns of interaction, but also reshapes how people understand intimacy, belonging, and social responsibility.

Nevertheless, Bauman's perspective is not entirely pessimistic. Amid weakening institutions and growing uncertainty, individuals still possess the capacity to act morally. Through empathy, solidarity, and the courage to resist injustice, people can create more sincere and meaningful relationships. Therefore, this paper concludes that even in a fluid and unstable world, the possibility of a more humane social life remains open when ethical responsibility becomes the foundation of human relations.

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