MELANCHOLIA: SELF-REPRESENTATION IN CYBERCULTURE THROUGH DIGITAL ILLUSTRATION

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Abstract. This article examines the relationship between Generation Z, cyberculture, and the expression of melancholia in the context of digital illustration art. As a member of Generation Z, the researcher experiences the dynamics of identity between the real world and the virtual world, both reflecting contrasting aspects of personality. Using a practice-based research approach, this article explores two digital illustrations that represent melancholy: one depicts the positive and reflective side of the real world, while the other depicts the dark and distorted side of cyberspace. The analysis is conducted through an aesthetic and visual content approach, drawing on color theory, visual semiotics, and the context of cyberculture. The results of the creation and analysis demonstrate that digital illustration functions not only as a medium for visual expression but also as a contemplative space for addressing the psychological and existential realities of Generation Z. This article also emphasizes the importance of understanding the virtual world as an integral part of the identity formation of the digital generation.

1. Introduction

The development of digital technology over the past two decades has created significant transformations in various aspects of human life. One of the groups most affected by these changes is Generation Z, also known as Gen Z. This generation encompasses individuals born between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s, a generation that grew up and developed alongside advances in information technology, the internet, and social media. Gen Z is the first generation to be exposed to digital devices such as computers, gadgets, and the internet from an early age, making their interactions with the digital world natural and integrated into their daily lives.

Gen Z, also known as Gen Z, is a demographic group born between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s. They are the first generation to grow up in a digital environment from an early age, thus developing a strong attachment to technology, social media, and the virtual world. Gen Z is known for its distinctive characteristics, such as high adaptability to technology, the ability to multitask across multiple platforms, and sensitivity to social issues and digital identity.

In the book "Generation Z Character Education in the Digital Era," (Laka et al., 2024), it is stated that Gen Z tends to live in two worlds: the real world and the digital world, each of which demands different character traits and behaviors. They possess a high level of self-awareness in building their image and presence online, but they also often face moral and emotional dilemmas in navigating the fast-paced and stressful digital environment. Therefore, character values such as integrity, empathy, and self-control are crucial in shaping Gen Z's personality to maintain balance in facing the challenges of the times.

The presence of cyberspace as a non-physical yet highly active space for interaction has made digital identity a crucial aspect of Gen Z's lives. Today's digital culture reflects the

phenomenon of convergence culture, which allows individuals to create identities through interactive media (Jenkins H, 2006). The virtual world is not just a place for interaction, but also a space for identity construction, emotional exploration, and even escape from real-world social pressures. Within it, cyberculture is growing, a culture born from human interaction in the digital space that encompasses language, symbols, visual expression, and new ways of communication.

The author, as part of Gen Z, observes that personal identity in everyday life often differs from the image portrayed online. In the real world, the author tends to be calm and reserved, but in the virtual world, he is able to express emotions and anxieties through visuals and personal narratives. This demonstrates that digital space has become a crucial platform for self-representation for individuals living in the era of cyberculture.

Cyberculture is not simply a collection of habits in the virtual world, but a form of digital collectivity formed through human interaction with technology, symbols, and information networks. According to (Lévy, 2001), cyberculture is the result of collective intelligence that transcends geographical, social, and linguistic boundaries. In cyberspace, personal identity becomes fluid and dynamic individuals construct digital personas that do not always align with their real-world identities. Lévy also emphasized that virtuality is not a replica of reality, but rather a new reality that creates a place for social interaction without physical presence, referred to as a "non-there" space (Poster M, 2013).

The relationship between Gen Z, cyberspace, and cyberculture is complex and mutually shaping. Gen Z is not simply a passive user of the digital world, but rather a key actor actively creating, disseminating, and developing digital culture. In their daily lives, they shape identities, build relationships, and express their feelings through social media accounts, uploaded images, videos, and other visual forms that characterize today's digital communication. Their identities aren't limited by their physical bodies, but are mediated by screens, filters, avatars, and specific visual aesthetics. In this sense, cyberspace provides an alternative space for Gen Z to become "other selves" that may differ from their everyday real-world selves.

The author, as part of Generation Z, recognizes a stark contrast between the identities they display in the real world and those they construct online. In physical spaces, authors tend to be reserved and minimal in expressing emotions. However, in cyberspace, authors find the freedom to express various thoughts, anxieties, and feelings that were previously difficult to express verbally. Digital identities become a kind of projection of hidden inner selves. The virtual world becomes a place that is not only emotionally safe but also allows for more honest and imaginative self-exploration.

From this experience, an awareness emerged of the dominance of melancholia in the digital expressions presented by Gen Z, including in the visual works spread across various platforms. Melancholia can be defined as a complex emotional state, encompassing deep sadness, feelings of emptiness, nostalgia, or reflection on difficult-to-interpret life experiences. In psychology, melancholia is often associated with mild forms of depression or feelings of loss that cannot be fully explained. However, in the context of art and culture, melancholia can be a powerful source of creative inspiration. He gave birth to visual forms that are contemplative, full of symbolism, and touch the inner dimensions of humankind deeply.The author, as part of Generation Z, recognizes a stark contrast between the identities they display in the real world and those they construct online. In physical spaces, authors tend to be reserved and minimal in expressing emotions. However, in cyberspace, authors find the freedom to express various thoughts, anxieties, and feelings that were previously difficult to express verbally. Digital identities become a kind of projection of hidden inner selves. The virtual world becomes a place that is not only emotionally safe but also allows for more honest and imaginative self-exploration.

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In the context of classical psychology, Freud (1917) distinguished melancholia from ordinary grief. While grief is a healthy response to loss, melancholia tends to internalize that loss and direct the pain toward oneself. In contemporary visual art, melancholia becomes a medium for philosophical and reflective inner expression. Darestani (2016) reveals that artists often utilize melancholy as a way to explore depths of emotion, idealism, and personal meaning that are often beyond words. Through visual symbols, muted colors, and expressive elements, melancholia presents itself not as a burden, but as a creative force.

Melancholia in digital culture manifests itself in various aesthetic forms. Dull colors, glitches, visual distortions, flat expressions, and even a sense of solitude in illustrations are all part of the melancholic aesthetic that has developed organically in cyberculture. Gen Z uses this aesthetic to express emotional experiences that cannot always be expressed in words. Anxiety about the future, loneliness despite being connected, and identity crises are themes that frequently appear in digital visual works spread across social media and digital art platforms.

In an effort to understand this phenomenon, the author chose digital illustration as the primary medium for discussion. Digital illustration is a form of visual art created digitally through software and hardware such as tablets, styluses, and design applications.

This medium allows artists to combine visual elements such as color, line, texture, and symbolism flexibly and precisely. Digital illustration also offers advantages in terms of production speed, technical experimentation, and distribution of works through digital platforms. In the context of cyberculture, digital illustration has become one of the most popular and accessible forms of expression for Gen Z.

The author utilizes digital illustration as a means to represent the emotional dynamics experienced by Gen Z amidst the clash between the real world and the virtual world. Digital media creates a new visual language that relies heavily on the aesthetics of software and interfaces (Manovich, 2001). Through digital works focused on the theme of melancholia, the author attempts to construct a visual narrative depicting the emotional transition from hope and optimism to feelings of solitude and reflection. Illustration is used as a medium to convey a universal personal experience: emotional anxiety in the digital space.

In practice, the author's approach is within the framework of modern art. Modern art is known as a movement that emphasizes individual freedom of expression, a rejection of conventional realism, and the courage to explore new mediums and forms. This approach allows artists to authentically express subjectivity, emotions, and inner experiences. In the context of this article, modern art provides a conceptual foundation that allows digital illustration to function not only as an aesthetic medium but also as a vehicle for psychological and cultural representation.

With this background, this article aims to analyze how digital illustration can represent the melancholia experienced by Generation Z in cyberculture. Through a practice-based research approach and visual analysis of two digital illustration works, the author examines how visual elements such as color, shape, symbolism, and composition can reflect emotional states arising from the interaction between self-identity, cyberspace, and digital culture. This study uses a practice-based research approach, where the process of creating artworks is an integral part of the artistic research process (Sullivan G, 2005).

2. Results and Discussion

2.1 Method of Work

2.1.1 Media Works

In the process of creating the work in this article, several media were used as tools. These media encompass various essential elements, such as tools, materials, and techniques used in the creative process. The following are some of the media the author will use in creating the work in this article, including various components that support its implementation.

2.1.1.1 Tool

1. Tablet Computer (iPad)

In designing the artwork in this article, an iPad Air 4 tablet was used to support the illustration creation process. The iPad Air 4 was chosen because it has specifications that optimally support digital design needs.

2. Apple Pencil Gen 2

In designing the work in this article, the Apple Pencil Gen 2 was used as the primary tool for drawing, sketching, marking, and note-taking on the iPad. This tool is highly responsive and supports the creative process efficiently.

3. Procreate

Procreate is a graphic design software specifically developed for the iPad, designed for digital artists to create illustrations, paintings, and digital artwork with a variety of tools. In this article, Procreate is the primary application for drawing and coloring illustrations, due to its comprehensive features that facilitate the process of digitally creating visual works, from initial sketches to final details. Procreate also supports various file formats, making it easy to edit and print the final work.

2.1.1.2 Material
1. Printed Canvas

In the process of producing the work, the author specifically chose printed canvas as the printing medium. Printed canvas is known as a high-quality printing medium with a thick, smooth surface and a glossy finish.

2. Frame

In the process of producing the work, the author uses a frame with a thickness of 2 cm to give the impression of neatness in the appearance of the work.

2.2 Creative Procedure

The stages of creating the work in this article include the following activities:

Table 1. Stages of Creation

No	Process	Objective
1	Pre-Production	Contemplation Stimulation Idea Processing Literature Study
2	Production	Determining the Technique and Medium of Creation Preparing Tools and Materials Creating Sketches, Layout Ideas, and Conceptual Outlines Coloring Process Editing Artwork Consultation Finishing
3	Post Production	Documentation Presentation Preparation

Source: Author, 2025

2.2.1 Pre-Production

2.2.1.1 Contemplation

The initial stage of the creative process begins with a contemplative phase. The author reflects on his personal emotional state as a Gen Z individual living in two realities: the real world and the virtual world. This contemplation leads to an awareness of the differences in ways of expression and identity in these two spaces. The search for identity and the tendency to hide emotions in real life fuel the exploration of the theme of melancholia, a common thread running through the work.

2.2.1.2 Stimulation

To stimulate visual ideas and sensibilities, the author explores the works of contemporary artists who use a digital illustration approach, particularly those that touch on themes of emotion, identity, and internet culture. Platforms such as Instagram, Behance, and Pinterest are used to absorb various visual references that display expressive, experimental, and symbolic styles. Several artists who inspired the creation of the work also support the stimulation for the author. Here are some artists and works that inspired the author in creating this work:

Figure 1. @alodiayap's work
Source: Instagram, 2023

Figure 2. Work by @gadingsaurus
Source: Instagram, 2023

Figure 3. Work by @dessyrachms
Source: Instagram, 2025

Figure 4. Work by @hibatullahsukma
Source: Instagram, 2025

Figure 5. Work by @dhutap
Source: Instagram, 2025

Contemporary illustration works now prioritize not only technique, but also social and emotional contexts examined within the framework of visual culture (Evan J & Thomas S, 2013). The author also reflects by playing music with a melancholic tone as an emotional stimulus that strengthens the nuances in the conceptualization process of the work.

2.2.1.3 Idea Processing

The results of the contemplation and stimulation were then translated into a coherent central idea, namely the representation of melancholia. This idea is visualized as two facial portraits with opposing yet interconnected expressions, colors, and symbolic elements. The author developed this idea into a non-linear yet emotional visual narrative, representing the dynamics of digital identity.

2.2.1.4 Literature Review

The author conducted a literature review covering theories on Gen Z, digital culture, expressions of melancholia, and color theory and symbolism in fine art.

2.2.2 Production

2.2.2.1 Determining the Technique and Medium of Creation

Based on artistic and conceptual considerations, the author chose digital illustration using the visual collage technique. This technique is considered capable of combining various visual elements, including texture, shape, and symbolism, into a unified, expressive composition. Digital collage also allows for the exploration of emotional narratives through flexible layering and color manipulation. Digital collage has become a popular technique in contemporary illustration practice due to its ability to convey complex narratives (Zeegen L, 2012).

2.2.2.2 Preparation of Tools and Materials

The work was produced using an iPad Air 4 paired with an Apple Pencil Gen 2. The Procreate application was chosen as the primary software due to its professional features that support high-resolution illustrations and precise brush control. The author also prepared digital visual references to guide the production stage.

2.2.2.3 Creating Sketches, Layout Ideas, and Conceptual Outlines

The first work began with a digital sketch using a fine pencil brush. The author chose a central composition of a human face with a peaceful expression, surrounded by natural elements such as lilies, a spiraling sun, clouds, and warm colors. The second work, meanwhile, features a more intense version of the same face, with an open expression, glitch elements, a magenta brain, and a dark background. (Candy L & Elmonds E, 2018) emphasize the importance of integrating artistic practice and theoretical reflection in arts-based research practices.

2.2.2.4 Coloring Process

Coloring is a crucial aspect in establishing the emotional atmosphere of both works. The first work uses an analogous color palette of green, yellow, orange, and pink to create a warm and harmonious impression. Color blocking techniques are followed by blending to create smooth color transitions. In contrast, the second work uses high contrast between black, blue-cyan, and magenta. Visual effects such as neon glow, glitch, and pixel highlights are applied to emphasize the cyberpunk feel and digital unease.

2.2.2.5 Editing

After the coloring stage is complete, the process of smoothing lines, adjusting color tones, and adding digital effects such as noise, grain, and distortion is carried out. The purpose of this editing was to enhance the work's atmosphere to align with the intended emotional message. In the second work, the brain visual effect and digital visual elements such as spiral stars and pixelated cat screens symbolize the mental state of Gen Z in the technological era.

2.2.2.6 Artwork Consultation

The author conducted open consultations with several colleagues and art mentors to obtain technical and conceptual input. The feedback received served as the basis for refining the visual narrative

and improving aesthetic details within the composition, including adjusting lighting direction, color balance, and visual depth.

2.2.2.7 Finishing

The final stage of production involved examining the work at various zoom levels to ensure resolution quality and visual precision. Visual elements that were previously blurry were clarified, while overly dense areas were simplified to maintain visual balance. The final work was then exported in high-resolution PSD format (300 DPI) for printing and digital presentation.

2.2.3 Post-Production

2.2.3.1 Documentation

Both completed works were documented in 80 x 80 cm digital prints. The author also compiled documentation of the final works in the form of a portfolio in preparation for the final exam presentation.

2.2.3.2 Presentation Preparation

For the purposes of the final exam and publication, the author prepared presentation materials that included conceptual narratives, visual analysis, and the relationship between the works and the social context of Gen Z in digital culture. The works are packaged with a reflective narrative that demonstrates how melancholic expression is an important part of digital identity construction. The author also prepared explanations of the visual symbols used in both works so that the audience can understand the meaning behind the aesthetics displayed.

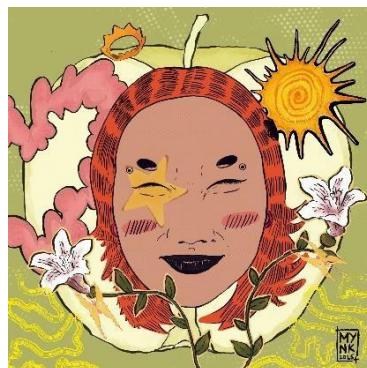## 2.3 Description and Analysis of the Work

2.3.1 Work 1

Figure 6. Melancholia 1
Source: Author, 2025

Artwork Specifications

Title   : "Melancholia 1"

Media   : Digital Printing on Canvas

Technique   : Digital Drawing (Bitmap)

Size   : 80 x 80 cm

Year   : 2025

2.3.1.1 Description of the Work

The first work, titled "Melancholia 1," depicts a woman's face smiling serenely, her eyes closed, surrounded by natural elements and warm colors. The main figure is placed in the center of the composition, against an olive green background and decorative elements such as a spiral sun, white lilies, pink clouds, and gently flowing orange hair. The composition is symmetrical, giving a sense of balance and peace. The relaxed and gentle facial expression suggests a stable and harmonious inner state.

One of the visual elements central to the composition is a pale yellowish apple located behind the

main figure's face. This apple is depicted as a semicircle, complete with its stem, and serves as the foundation for the entire composition. The large yet subdued apple allows the focus to remain on the face while providing a strong symbolic dimension to the work's overall meaning.

2.3.1.2 Content Analysis

Table 2. Content Analysis of Melancholia 1

No	Visual Symbols	Meaning
1	Closed Eyes	Self-reflection, introspection, inner peace
2	Small Smile	Emotional balance, self-acceptance
3	Orange Hair	Creative energy, vitality, zest for life
4	White Lily	Purity, hope, growth
5	Red Cloud Pink	Dreams, tranquility, freedom of imagination
6	Spiral Sun	Life cycle, passion, inner enlightenment
7	Yellow Apple Pale	Self-awareness, symbol of life, and balance Emotional
8	Green Background Olive	Natural balance, healing, closeness with organic life

Source: Author, 2025

This work represents the melancholic personality type in a positive light. The figure depicted is someone with emotional depth, sensitivity to their surroundings, and high self-reflection. The closed eyes suggest a contemplative moment, as if journeying inward. The subtle smile conveys an acceptance of personal emotions, not as a burden, but as a source of inner strength.

Natural symbols such as the white lily represent purity and spiritual growth, the pink cloud a metaphor for dreams and freedom of expression, and the spiraling sun a symbol of the cycle of life and inner enlightenment. Meanwhile, the apple behind the face plays a crucial role in underpinning the symbolic meaning of the entire work. Historically and culturally, apples are often associated with self-awareness, knowledge, and the center of human existence. In this context, the apple represents the core of a healthy emotional life, a place where the melancholic personality can grow positively and productively. It serves as both a visual and metaphorical foundation, demonstrating that the figure in this work possesses strong and stable emotional roots, despite its sensitivity.

Art has the therapeutic potential to express and heal an individual's deepest emotions, as suggested by (McNiff S, 2004). Thus, this work illustrates how individuals with a melancholic type, especially in the real world, have the ability to harmonize emotions, enjoy silence peacefully, and make inner depths into a constructive personal strength. Visual symbols such as apples, glitch, and spirals can be analyzed through a visual semiotic approach as explained by (Barthes R, 1977).

2.3.1.3 Aesthetic Analysis

Aesthetically, this work employs a soft, symmetrical, and balanced visual approach. The dominant color choices, such as olive green, reddish orange, and golden yellow, create a warm and natural atmosphere. The composition is built around the face as the center, with visual elements flowing from the inside out, following the shape of the apple as the backdrop. This creates a structural and symbolic harmony that reinforces the work's emotional message.

The apple's circular shape provides a visual structure that unifies all the symbolic elements and serves as a strong conceptual backdrop. It is not merely a visual decoration but also functions as an inner container, where emotions and self-identity are structured in a holistic and utopian way. The apple, in this context, serves as a link between the body, mind, and the external world, representing the balance between logic and feeling, between consciousness and instinct. This visual suggests that a healthy emotional life does not come from eliminating melancholia, but from embracing and balancing it within one's identity.

The use of an expressive cartoonish illustration style, soft textures, and orderly visual movement are characteristic of a modern art approach. This work rejects realism, but retains symbolic and narrative power, an approach that allows for open emotional interpretation from each audience.

2.3.2 Work 2

Figure 7. Melancholia 2
Source: Author, 2025

Artwork Specifications

Title   : "Melancholia 2"

Media   : Digital Printing on Canvas

Technique   : Digital Drawing (Bitmap)

Size   : 80 x 80 cm

Year   : 2025

2.3.2.1 Description of the Work

The second work, titled Melancholia 2, depicts the same face as the previous work, but in a more intense and dramatic setting. The figure has wide-open eyes with a piercing gaze, and a red tear flows from one eye. The hair is rendered in a digitally shimmering blue-to-cyan gradient. On the left side of the head, a magenta visualization of a brain is displayed, surrounded by glitchy elements, digital symbols such as spiral stars, and a pixelated cat face icon. The stark black background creates a high contrast with the scattered neon elements.

2.3.2.2 Content Analysis

Table 2. Content Analysis of Melancholia 2

No	Visual Symbols	Meaning
1	Eyes Open Wide	Hypervigilance, Tension, Condition Hyperrealism
2	Red Tears	Emotional Wounds, Inner Intensity, Psychological Pressure
3	Blue-Cyan Hair	Digital Identity, Coldness, Futurism, Alienation
4	Magenta Brain	Overthinking, Mental Hyperactivity, Stress Intellectual
5	Glitches and Distortions	Identity Instability, Side Effects of Cyberspace
6	Background Black	Emptiness, Isolation, Psychic Darkness
7	Cat Icon Pixels	Virtual World Representation, Artificial Identity, Nostalgia Digital
8	Spiral Star White	Symbol of Confusion, Unfinished Emotional Cycle

Source: Author, 2025

This work represents the melancholic personality type in a negative form, a condition where high emotional sensitivity transforms into psychological burden in cyberspace. The figure's wide-open gaze, with red tears, suggests a state of overthinking, anxiety, and inner burden caused by exposure to information and social pressures in digital media. The magenta brain element symbolizes hyperactive mental activity, while the glitches, broken lines, and contrasting colors represent the identity distortions common in cyberculture.

This work echoes the emotional unease of Gen Z, who often face the duality between their digital persona and their authentic self. Melancholia, in this context, is not only sadness but also uncertainty, a sense of being trapped in social algorithms, and loneliness amidst connectivity.

2.3.2.3 Aesthetic Analysis

Aesthetically, this work relies on high-contrast colors such as black, neon blue, and magenta, creating an awkward and intense digital atmosphere. The asymmetrical and dense composition suggests an unstable inner state. The use of glitch effects and pixelated visuals emphasizes the influence of digital media in the formation of modern identity. The color palette in both works also refers to the principles of color psychology developed by Itten (1970).

Within the context of modern art, this work maintains a spirit of experimentation and visual symbolism. The human figures appear with distortions and digital accessories, which serve as metaphors for existential pressures in the virtual era.

3. Conclusion

The process of creating the digital illustrations "Melancholia 1" and "Melancholia 2" represents an artistic and reflective exploration of the emotional dynamics experienced by individuals with melancholic personalities amidst an increasingly complex digital culture. The authors, as members of Generation Z, position themselves in an existential space between the real world and the virtual world. Through a symbolic, narrative, and expressive visual approach, these two works represent two sides of the melancholic emotional spectrum: the positive side full of peace and self-awareness in the real world, and the negative side full of psychological stress and identity distortion in the virtual world. This experimental and symbolic approach is in line with the spirit of modern art as described by (Greenberg C, 1939).

The work "Melancholia 1" illustrates how a melancholic personality can be a source of healthy, reflective, and balanced inner strength. Visual elements such as closed eyes, white lilies, pink clouds, and pale yellow apples symbolize self-acceptance, emotional calm, and psychological harmony. Meanwhile, the work "Melancholia 2" represents the fragile side of the same personality under the pressures of virtual culture. Open eyes with an intense gaze, red tears, brain visualizations, and digital glitches reflect anxiety, overthinking, and identity alienation in an unstable virtual reality.

Through a modern art approach and digital illustration, the author demonstrates that emotional expression in the Gen Z context can be powerfully articulated through visuals. The digital medium allows for the combination of symbols, colors, textures, and narratives with great flexibility and precision, creating works that are both personal and communicative. The process of creating these works also demonstrates that art is not merely an aesthetic medium, but also a space for healing, reflection, and self-understanding.

Both works serve as visual documents that not only speak to personal experiences but also represent the collective psychosocial conditions of the digital generation. Melancholia, in this context, is not merely seen as an emotional disorder, but as a legitimate and important emotional language that needs to be recognized and expressed. It is hoped that this article will open a dialogue about the role of visual art as a bridge between inner experience and contemporary cultural phenomena, while also contributing to enriching the study of art, psychology, and digital culture from the perspective of Gen Z itself.

Collage" can be completed. I express my gratitude to the honorable Prof. Dr. S. Martono, M.Si. (Rector of Semarang State University), Prof. Dr. Tommi Yuniawan, M.Hum. (Dean of the Faculty of Language and Arts), and Dr. Ratih Ayu Pratiwinindya, S.Pd., M.Pd. (Head of the Fine Arts Education Study Program) for their direction and support. Special thanks to my parents, Mr. Danang Purwoko and Mrs. Harni Winarsih, for their love, hard work andAll prayers are with me; to my partner and friends who have supported my academic journey thus far. Finally, I would like to thank myself, in whatever form, for continuing to believe and trust in my abilities. I hope my writing and knowledge will not stop here and can bring blessings to many.

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