

The Impact of Social Media on Mental Health

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Abstract

This study explores the multifaceted influence of social media on Generation Z, focusing on both its positive and negative impacts. On one hand, social media platforms provide Gen Z with essential tools for social connection, emotional support, self-expression, and the creation of online communities. These digital spaces often serve as outlets for creativity and identity exploration. On the other hand, excessive or unhealthy use of these platforms has been linked to mental health concerns such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, and low self-esteem. The work draws upon a range of contemporary studies, survey data, and published reports to examine how social media affects not only the mental health and social behavior of Gen Z, but also their academic performance and educational engagement. The findings point to the urgent need for digital wellness education, mental health support systems, and responsible platform usage. These initiatives are critical to helping Generation Z navigate the fast-paced, often overwhelming digital world in a balanced and mindful way. (1) To analyze existing data, including surveys, reports, and articles related to Gen Z's social media habits and their psychological and behavioral effects. (2) To examine usage trends on major platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and LinkedIn to understand Gen Z's engagement patterns and their implications.

Keywords: Social media, mental health, generation Z, digital wellness, cyberbullying, self-esteem, online behavior, social media trends

INTRODUCTION

Generation Z, born roughly between 1997 and 2012, is the first cohort to grow up fully immersed in the digital world. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z has had constant exposure to technology and social media from a young age, profoundly shaping their social interactions, information consumption, and self-expression. According to studies, around 90% of Gen Z individuals in the United States use at least one social media platform daily, with platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and snapchat being especially popular. This high engagement makes them both pioneers and primary stakeholders in the evolving digital landscape, but it also places them at the centre of concerns regarding mental health, privacy, and overall well-being.

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Gen Z's relationship with technology is distinct because they have never known a world without smartphones, high-speed internet, or social media networks. As a result, they not only embrace these technologies but often rely on them as essential tools for communication, learning, and entertainment. This constant connectivity offers many opportunities for creative expression and social engagement; however, it can also lead to challenges, such as heightened risks of online harassment, privacy issues, and mental health impacts. A report by the American Psychological Association highlights that increased social media use among Gen Z is associated with higher levels of anxiety and depression, as well as reduced face-to-

face interactions [1]. Understanding the impact of social media on Gen Z is crucial for educators, healthcare providers, and policymakers. Educators must consider how social media affects learning and focus, as well as how to incorporate digital literacy into the curriculum. Healthcare providers, especially those in mental health, need to recognize the unique stressors that constant social media use can impose, such as comparison-driven anxiety. Meanwhile, policymakers are tasked with implementing safeguards that protect Gen Z from privacy violations and exploitation online while promoting positive digital engagement. By exploring both the potential and pitfalls of social media, stakeholders can better support Gen Z's development and help ensure that these digital tools foster positive outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mental Health Implications

Social media's impact on mental health is a key concern for Generation Z. According to the McKinsey Health Institute, Gen Z is particularly susceptible to mental health struggles such as anxiety and depression, with correlations observed between high social media use and heightened emotional distress. A significant factor contributing to this is the "comparison culture" fostered by platforms like Instagram and TikTok, where users are often exposed to idealized images that can distort self-perception and lead to negative self-comparisons [2].

In another study by the Policy Circle, researchers observed that while social media can provide mental health support through community groups and awareness campaigns, it can also trigger feelings of isolation and inadequacy due to unrealistic portrayals of others' lives. Additionally, cyberbullying and trolling are common issues, with Gen Z reporting higher instances of online harassment compared to previous generations [3].

Privacy and Cybersecurity Concerns

Gen Z's digital behavior includes a high degree of personal sharing, which often leads to privacy risks. According to the Children's Health Council (CHC), many Gen Z users do not fully understand the privacy implications of their online actions, leaving them vulnerable to identity theft, data breaches, and cyberbullying. Platforms are known to collect vast amounts of user data, which raises privacy concerns, especially among younger users who may be unaware of data handling practices [4].

The Policy Circle study suggests that while Gen Z values online connectivity, they need more education about privacy and cybersecurity best practices. Research by Microsoft also highlights how Gen Z's cybersecurity awareness influences digital safety trends, reinforcing the need for improved digital literacy [3, 5].

Social and Behavioral Changes

Studies show that social media has shifted how Gen Z interacts socially, leading to reduced face-to-face communication and an increased preference for digital interactions. Emory University's Rollins School of Public Health highlights that while social media provides a platform for connection, it may also reduce real-world social skills and contribute to feelings of loneliness when digital interactions replace in-person connections [6].

Additionally, social media's instant gratification model has impacted Gen Z's attention span and mental resilience. Excessive screen time has been linked to sleep disturbances and reduced academic performance, as young users often prioritize online engagement over other activities [6]. Research from Open Research supports these findings, indicating that face-to-face communication is declining due to increased reliance on digital interactions [7, 8].

Educational Influence and Career

On a positive note, social media has made information more accessible for Gen Z. Platforms like YouTube and LinkedIn have become valuable educational resources, offering tutorials, career advice,

and networking opportunities [9]. The McKinsey Health Institute suggests that while social media can distract from traditional educational pursuits, it also serves as an alternative learning tool that aligns with Gen Z's preference for video-based and interactive content [2, 10].

Furthermore, the rise of social media influencers has created new career paths, allowing Gen Z to explore professions as digital content creators, marketers, and influencers. Research from the Journal of Digital Learning also highlights how social media contributes to digital literacy and career growth [4, 10].

Opportunities

On a positive note, social media has made information more accessible for Gen Z. Platforms like YouTube and LinkedIn have become valuable educational resources, offering tutorials, career advice, and networking opportunities. According to the McKinsey Health Institute, while social media can be a distraction from traditional educational pursuits, it also serves as an alternative learning tool that aligns with Gen Z's preference for video-based and interactive content.

METHODOLOGY

Methodology of 1st Objective

1. *Data collection:* Gather secondary data from reputable surveys, reports, and articles published by academic institutions, market research firms, and government organizations. Ensure sources are credible and relevant to Gen Z social media usage trends and their impact.
2. *Data analysis:* Use qualitative content analysis to identify patterns, themes, and insights related to social media usage and impacts on mental health, productivity, and relationships. Employ statistical methods where quantitative data is available to compare usage trends and measure impacts.
3. *Categorization:* Organize data based on demographics, platforms, and specific impacts (e.g., psychological, social, or professional).
4. *Validation:* Cross-verify findings with multiple sources to ensure consistency and reliability.
5. *Presentation:* Summarize results in visual and narrative formats for clarity and accessibility.

Methodology of 2nd Objective

1. *Data collection:* Compile secondary data from reports, studies, and platform statistics on Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and LinkedIn usage by Gen Z.
2. *Trend analysis:* Identify patterns in content creation, engagement metrics, and feature usage across platforms.
3. *Impact assessment:* Evaluate the effects of platform usage on communication, mental health, career opportunities, and lifestyle choices.
4. *Comparative study:* Compare engagement trends and impacts across platforms to find unique and common behaviors.
5. *Validation and reporting:* Cross-check data reliability and present insights using visual tools like charts and infographics.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis and Discussion of 1st Objective

1. *Usage patterns:* Gen Z prefers visually engaging platforms like Instagram and TikTok for entertainment and self-expression, while Twitter is used for news and opinions, and LinkedIn for professional networking.
 - a. Average daily screen time exceeds 3-4 hours, indicating high engagement levels.
 - b. Short-form content (e.g., Reels, TikTok) is most popular, aligning with Gen Z's preference for quick and engaging interactions.
2. *Psychological impact*
 - a. Positive effects include enhanced connectivity, community building, and self-expression.
 - b. Negative effects include increased anxiety, cyberbullying, and issues with self-esteem due to comparison culture.

3. *Social and professional effects*
 - a. Social platforms facilitate networking and brand-building opportunities, especially on LinkedIn and Instagram.
 - b. However, overuse can lead to reduced face-to-face interactions and productivity challenges.
4. *Trend dynamics*
 - a. Platform-specific trends, like TikTok challenges and Instagram stories, dominate engagement strategies.
 - b. Authenticity and relatability in content resonate most with this generation.

Analysis and Discussion of 2nd Objective

1. *Engagement Trends*
 - a. *Instagram*: Predominantly used for visual storytelling and personal branding, with high engagement through stories, reels, and influencer content.
 - b. *TikTok*: A hub for short, creative videos and viral challenges, emphasizing humor, trends, and relatability.
 - c. *Twitter*: Utilized for real-time news, opinions, and social movements, with concise and conversational engagement.
 - d. *LinkedIn*: Growing popularity for career networking, skill-sharing, and professional development among Gen Z students and young professionals.
2. *Behavioral insights*
 - a. Gen Z values authenticity and prefers content that is relatable and interactive.
 - b. The preference for short-form content reflects a need for quick consumption and engagement.
3. *Impacts*
 - a. *Positive*: Enhanced connectivity, creative expression, and professional opportunities (notably on LinkedIn).
 - b. *Negative*: Risk of mental health issues, including anxiety and comparison-driven self-esteem challenges.
4. *Platform-specific effects*
 - a. Instagram and TikTok shape cultural trends and drive consumer behaviors.
 - b. Twitter and LinkedIn influence thought leadership and career advancements.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of existing data reveals that Gen Z's social media engagement is highly dynamic, platform-specific, and deeply influential.

1. *Social media usage trends and impact*: Gen Z demonstrates a preference for visually engaging, authentic, and shortform content, with platforms like TikTok and Instagram driving cultural and lifestyle trends. While social media fosters creativity, connection, and professional growth, it also poses challenges such as mental health risks and productivity concerns.
2. *Platform-specific engagement*: Gen Z utilizes Instagram and TikTok for entertainment and self-expression, Twitter for opinions and real-time updates, and LinkedIn for career networking and development. Each platform uniquely impacts their communication styles, behaviors, and aspirations.

Social media empowers Gen Z while also presenting various challenges, highlighting the importance of mindful engagement and improved platform experiences.

Future Work

1. *Deeper behavioral studies*: Conduct primary research through surveys or focus groups to gain firsthand insights into Gen Z's evolving social media behavior and motivations.
2. *Longitudinal analysis*: Analyze changes in platform preferences and usage trends over time to understand long-term patterns and emerging platforms.
3. *Impact assessment expansion*: Investigate specific impacts of social media on mental health, career growth, and societal engagement through targeted studies.

4. *Cross-cultural comparisons*: Explore differences in Gen Z social media usage trends and impacts across diverse geographic and cultural contexts.
5. *Platform design influence*: Examine how platform algorithms and features influence engagement patterns and their potential for positive or negative impacts.

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