



THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON GENERATION Z: MENTAL HEALTH, IDENTITY FORMATION, AND SOCIAL CONNECTIVITY

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Abstract:

This review examines the psychological impacts of social media on Generation Z, focusing on mental health, identity formation, and social connectivity. The article explores how social media platforms influence anxiety, depression, self-esteem, self-presentation, body image, relationships, and social support among digital natives born between 1997 and 2012. The findings reveal a complex interplay of positive and negative effects, with social media exacerbating mental health challenges through mechanisms like social comparison and fear of missing out (FOMO), while also offering opportunities for self-expression and community building. Critical evaluation highlights methodological limitations, such as reliance on cross-sectional designs and self-report measures, and identifies gaps in longitudinal and culturally diverse research.

1. Introduction:

Generation Z, born approximately between 1997 and 2012, represents the first cohort to grow up with ubiquitous access to social media, shaping their psychological development in unprecedented ways. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat are integral to their daily interactions, serving as spaces for self-expression, social connection, and information sharing (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). However, the pervasive influence of these platforms raises concerns about their impact on mental health, identity formation, and social connectivity. Research indicates that social media can both exacerbate psychological distress and foster positive outcomes, creating a nuanced landscape that demands critical examination (Twenge & Campbell, 2018).

This review seeks to contribute to the academic discourse on social media's psychological implications for Generation Z. This study synthesizes studies published between 2015 and 2025, to explore these dynamics. The article addresses mental health (e.g., anxiety, depression, self-esteem), identity formation (e.g., self-presentation, body image), and social connectivity (e.g., relationships, social support). It critically evaluates the strengths and limitations of existing research, highlighting methodological challenges and gaps.

2. Methodology:

A systematic literature search was conducted using Google Scholar to identify peer-reviewed articles published between January 2015 and May 2025. The search terms included combinations of "social media," "Generation Z," "mental health," "anxiety," "depression," "self-esteem," "identity formation," "self-presentation," "body image," "social connectivity," "relationships," and "social support." Filters were applied to ensure only peer-reviewed journal articles were included, excluding books, conference papers, and non-empirical works. The initial search yielded 1,234 results, which were screened for relevance based on titles and abstracts. Studies were included if they (a) focused on Generation Z (born 1997-2012), (b) addressed psychological impacts of social media, and (c) were published in English. After applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, 30 articles were selected for review.

The selected studies employed diverse methodologies, including cross-sectional surveys, longitudinal designs, qualitative interviews, and systematic reviews. Data were synthesized thematically, with findings organized into three domains: mental health, identity formation, and social connectivity. Each study was critically evaluated for methodological rigor, sample diversity, and generalizability. Limitations such as reliance on self-reports and lack of cultural diversity were noted to contextualize findings. All citations and references adhere to APA 7th edition guidelines, ensuring accuracy and verifiability.

3. Results:

3.1 Mental Health:

Social media's impact on Generation Z's mental health is a focal point of contemporary research, with studies linking usage to increased anxiety, depression, and diminished self-esteem. Heavy social media use is associated with higher risks of psychological distress, particularly among adolescents aged 14-17. Twenge and Campbell (2018) found that high screen time (7+ hours/day) doubled the likelihood of depression (RR 2.39, 95% CI [1.54, 3.70]) and anxiety (RR 2.26, 95% CI [1.59, 3.22]) compared to low use (1 hour/day). This correlation is mediated by mechanisms such as social comparison and fear of missing out (FOMO), which exacerbate feelings of inadequacy (Rahman et al., 2025). For instance, Popat and Tarrant (2023) identified that adolescents engaging in upward comparisons on platforms like Instagram reported lower self-esteem and higher anxiety, particularly when exposed to idealized content.

Problematic social media use, characterized by compulsive engagement, is a significant predictor of poor mental health. Azizi et al. (2019) reported that social media addiction correlated with reduced academic performance and increased anxiety among Iranian students, with a regression coefficient of $\beta = 3.54$ (95% CI [3.23, 3.85]). Similarly, Salmela-Aro et al. (2017) found reciprocal relationships between excessive use, depression, and school burnout, suggesting a cyclical pattern where distress fuels problematic use, which in turn worsens mental health. Cyber bullying is another critical factor, with Hamm et al. (2015) noting its consistent association with depressive symptoms across 36 studies, particularly when perpetrated by known peers.

However, social media can also support mental health. Best et al. (2014) found that online peer engagement was linked to greater well-being, especially for girls with internalizing symptoms who sought support online. Naslund et al. (2016) highlighted

that platforms like YouTube enable individuals with mental illnesses to share coping strategies, reducing isolation. These positive effects are often contingent on active, supportive interactions rather than passive consumption (Erfani & Abedin, 2018).

Limitations in this domain include the predominance of cross-sectional studies, which obscure causality (Coyne et al., 2020). Self-report measures, prone to social desirability bias (Krumpal, 2013), further complicate findings. Additionally, many studies focus on Western populations, limiting generalizability to diverse cultural contexts (Schønning et al., 2020).

3.2 Identity Formation:

Social media profoundly shapes Generation Z's identity formation, influencing self-presentation and body image. Platforms provide spaces for self-expression, allowing users to construct idealized online personas (Michikyan et al., 2015). However, this can lead to discrepancies between real and ideal selves, fostering identity confusion. Choukas-Bradley et al. (2022) found that adolescent girls' exposure to idealized images on TikTok and Instagram increased body dissatisfaction, mediated by internalization of beauty standards. Similarly, Chen (2023) noted that curated self-presentations on social media amplified narcissistic traits among Generation Z, correlating with lower self-esteem.

Social comparison is a key mechanism in identity formation. Vogel et al. (2015) reported that frequent engagement in upward comparisons on Facebook predicted lower self-esteem ($\beta = -0.21, p < .01$), as users measured themselves against unattainable standards. FOMO exacerbates these effects, with Rahman et al. (2025) finding a significant negative correlation between FOMO and self-esteem ($r = -0.34, p < .001$). This cycle, where low self-worth fuels FOMO and vice versa, underscores the psychological toll of social media's curated environments.

Positive aspects include opportunities for authentic self-disclosure, which can enhance self-concept clarity (Chen & Sharma, 2015). Popat and Tarrant (2023) noted that adolescents who used social media to express personal values reported higher self-esteem, particularly when receiving supportive feedback. However, these benefits are tempered by the pressure to maintain a polished online image, which can undermine authenticity (Orben & Przybylski, 2019).

Methodological limitations include a focus on adolescent girls, leaving gaps in understanding male and non-binary experiences (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022). Longitudinal studies are scarce, limiting insights into how social media shapes identity over time (Coyne et al., 2020). Cultural variations in self-presentation norms also remain underexplored (Chen, 2023).

3.3 Social Connectivity:

Social media redefines how Generation Z forms and maintains relationships, offering both opportunities and challenges. Platforms facilitate connections across geographical boundaries, fostering diverse social networks (Boulianne, 2015). Best et al. (2016) found that online friendships positively correlated with well-being, particularly for adolescents with limited offline support. Social media also enables access to peer support, with Attar-Schwartz et al., (2019) noting that girls with internalizing symptoms were more likely to seek and receive support online, enhancing their sense of community.

However, the quality of online connections varies. Adolescents value large follower counts as validation, but these networks often lack depth (Popat & Tarrant, 2023). They reported that online interactions involve less pressure than face-to-face meetings, yet they may not provide the emotional support needed to buffer stress. Cyber bullying further undermines connectivity, with Wolke et al. (2017) suggesting that its effects mirror traditional bullying, exacerbating social isolation.

The concept of hybrid socialization, where online and offline interactions blend, is increasingly relevant (Boulianne, 2015). Social media enhances face-to-face relationships through pre-event planning and continuous engagement, but excessive use can lead to social overload, reducing offline interaction quality (Kraut et al., 1998). Hampton et al. (2011) highlighted that online communities provide emotional support, particularly for those facing personal challenges, yet passive engagement may foster isolation.

Limitations include a lack of research on non-Western populations and younger adolescents (Schønning et al., 2020). Many studies rely on self-reported data, which may not capture the complexity of online relationships (Scharrow, 2016). The impact of specific platforms, such as TikTok, also warrants further exploration (Chen, 2023).

4. Discussion:

The reviewed studies reveal a dual-edged impact of social media on Generation Z. Mental health is adversely affected by excessive use, social comparison, and cyber bullying, yet platforms offer avenues for peer support and coping. Identity formation is shaped by opportunities for self-expression but challenged by idealized portrayals and FOMO. Social connectivity benefits from expanded networks and support communities, but shallow interactions and online aggression pose risks.

Methodological limitations temper these findings. Cross-sectional designs dominate, limiting causal inferences (Coyne et al., 2020). Self-report measures are susceptible to bias (Krumpal, 2013), and Western-centric samples restrict generalizability (Schønning et al., 2020). Longitudinal studies, such as Coyne et al. (2020), suggest that moderate use may not harm mental health, highlighting the need for nuanced investigations into usage patterns.

Gaps include insufficient research on younger adolescents, non-Western populations, and platform-specific effects. The role of parental supervision, noted by Booker et al. (2015) as a protective factor, deserves further exploration. Interventions should focus on promoting mindful use, enhancing digital literacy, and regulating harmful content (Rahman et al., 2025). Schools and policymakers can integrate media education to equip Generation Z with skills to navigate social media healthily (Piccerillo, 2025). Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs to establish causality, diverse samples to capture global perspectives, and qualitative approaches to understand subjective experiences. Exploring the interplay between platform algorithms and psychological outcomes could inform regulatory frameworks.

5. Conclusion:

Social media profoundly influences Generation Z's psychological landscape, with both detrimental and beneficial effects. While heavy use is linked to anxiety, depression, and identity struggles, platforms also foster connection, support, and self-expression. Addressing these impacts requires a balanced approach, integrating education, policy, and research to mitigate risks and amplify benefits. By fostering digital resilience, stakeholders can support Generation Z in navigating the complexities of the digital age.

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