



The Impact of Social Media Usage on Anxiety and Self-Esteem Among Gen Z Students

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Abstract

Generation Z, in its broad definition of people born between 1997 and 2012, is the first to have lived their entire lives in the digital and social media age. The study used a qualitative and descriptive approach to examine the effects of the use of social media on a student's self-esteem and anxiety in Gen Z. This study examines recurrent topics from peer-reviewed journal articles, published research studies, psychological reports, and educational literature pertaining to the exposure to, anxiety about, body image issues with, peer comparisons of, and self-perception of, social media use among student populations. The literature shows five main themes: intensity of social media use and anxiety symptoms; social comparison and low self-esteem; idealized social media content and body image dissatisfaction; psychological effects of cyberbullying and online social exclusion; and digital literacy and mindful social media use as protective factors. The analysis shows that although there are very real possibilities for social connection and expression of identity through social media, passive and excessive use of social media is always linked to increased anxiety and lower self-esteem. Conclusions and recommendations for mental health intervention, digital literacy education, and future research are presented.

Keywords: Gen Z, social media, anxiety, self-esteem, mental health, social comparison, body image, digital literacy, qualitative research.

Introduction

The generation between 1997 and 2012, known as Generation Z, has been called the “first truly digital generation,” because their smartphones, broadband Internet and social media platforms are the “main structures of social life” (Twenge, 2017). As Genny students are growing up in a world where social media is ubiquitous, they are experiencing a different environment than their Millennial counterparts who saw social media come and go in their youth. Overall, this unprecedented digital immersion provokes fundamental questions about the psycho-social impact of social media on the



mental health and self-concept of the students of Generation Z, especially anxiety and self-esteem.

Anxiety disorders are the most common type of mental disorder in the world, affecting an estimated 284 million people worldwide (Our World in Data, 2018). Anxiety has also risen significantly among adolescents and young adults in the last 20 years, and this rise has corresponded to the emergence of new social media outlets like Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and Twitter/X (Twenge et al., 2018). Although correlation does not mean causation, the experimental, longitudinal, and survey evidence is slowly accumulating to give more and more validation to causal mechanisms in the relationship between social media use and increased anxiety symptoms, notably those related to social comparison, cyberbullying, and sleep disturbance.

Self-esteem is one of the most important constructs in psychological well-being, and it is related to academic performance, resilience, and mental health outcomes (Rosenberg, 1965). The self-presentations created and displayed in a curated and idealized fashion, which is common on social media platforms, has been linked to negative social comparison, body image dissatisfaction, and lower self-esteem, especially for young women in the Gen Z cohort who are exposed to unrealistic beauty and lifestyle ideals (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015).

This study uses a qualitative and descriptive research approach to synthesize and critically examine the existing know-how on social media, anxiety, and self-esteem in relation to Gen Z students. The study seeks to help build a coherent, comprehensive account of the psychological aspects of social media influence on the emotional health of the present generation of University students by highlighting any emerging themes, patterns, and evidence-based insights from secondary sources.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been a great deal of research into the psychological consequences of social media use among adolescents and young adults from many different fields and disciplines, such as in the field of developmental psychology, clinical psychology, communication studies, and educational research. The key findings will be summarized in the following review, grouped into five thematic areas that are important to understanding the link between social media use and the anxiety and self-esteem of Gen Z students.

Social Media Use Intensity and Anxiety

Twenge et al. (2018) conducted a long-term study of more than half a million teenagers and reported that more time spent on social media was consistently linked to increases in depressive symptoms, feelings of loneliness, and anxiety. Adolescents who used



electronic devices for 5 or more hours per day were more likely to have at least one suicide risk factor than the one who uses electronic devices for one hour per day. Subsequent studies have confirmed and expanded these results. Kelly et al. (2019) examined data from the UK Millennium Cohort Study to determine whether heavy social media use (more than three hours a day) was related to higher levels of psychological distress among 14-year olds, specifically girls.

It seems there are several pathways between social media intensity and anxiety. Woods and Scott (2016) discovered that sleeping with social media use (which was associated with poor sleep patterns) was a significant mediator between social media use and psychological well-being. Late night use of screens and unfavourable content on social media has been linked to increased cortisol levels, emotional regulation and decreased ability to manage academic and social stressors (Levenson, Shensa, Sidani, Colditz, & Primack, 2017).

Social Comparison and Self-Esteem

Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory suggests that people make judgments about their opinions and skills based on how they compare to others, especially when there are no objective criteria available. Social media offers an unprecedented platform for upward social comparison, with users always coming across carefully selected snapshots of other users' successes, visibility, lifestyles and social networks. A study by Vogel, Rose, Roberts, and Eckles (2014) was conducted that showed significant reductions in self-evaluations were seen when participants were exposed to profiles of people with highly desirable characteristics. This was especially true for those who already have a poor self-image; this negativity literally became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Nesi and Prinstein (2015) coined the term "technology-based social comparison and feedback-seeking" (TSCFS) to describe the behavior of adolescents who feel compelled to seek validation via likes, comments and followers as a proxy for self-worth. Their study showed that TSCFS was significantly related to the presence of depressive symptoms and this relationship was mediated by social comparison orientation. Similarly, Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian, and Halliwell (2015) determined that Facebook use was related to higher rates of appearance related social comparison and increased levels of body dissatisfaction, especially among young women who were already body concerned.

Body Image Dissatisfaction and Idealized Digital Content

One of the most well-documented ways in which social media negatively impacts Gen Z students' self-esteem is through the depiction of idealized physical appearance on social media. Instagram, specifically, has been cited as a social media site where physical



appearance is almost always shown in a filtered, edited, and stylized way and differs significantly from what is truly found in humans (Kleemans, Daalmans, Carbaat, & Anschütz, 2018). Such images trigger appearance-related social comparison processes that always generate negative body image consequences.

Hogue and Mills (2019) performed a meta-analysis of experimental research on the link between exposure to idealized social media images and body dissatisfaction among young women. Their results supported that this exposure had a significant and strong negative impact on body esteem, and that this impact was stronger for thin-ideal imagery as compared to other appearance-related content. The rise of influencer culture has furthered this, wherein social media personalities appropriate a tatted-up body and lifestyle and make it look like an aspiration and an attainable goal for anyone capable of personal effort and consumer choice (Chae, 2018).

Cyber-bullying and Online Social Exclusion.

Cyberbullying is a type of peer aggression that takes place via electronic communication media and is made possible by the anonymity, accessibility and permanence of social media. The literature consistently has linked cyberbullying to anxiety, depression and lowered self-esteem in adolescent and youth populations (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014). Cyberbullying differs from “classic” bullying in that it can happen anywhere, anytime, and without the victim even being able to see the perpetrator. Cyberbullying takes place without the temporal and spatial recourses of “classic” bullying: the victim may not see or hear the bully, and it can happen anywhere, anytime.

In a recent study (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010), more than 4,400 teens were surveyed, and the researchers discovered that cyberbullying victimization highly correlated with lower self-esteem and higher suicide ideation rates than traditional bullying victimization. Even “inoffensive” experiences of online exclusion, like being left out of group chats or of digital social events, caused measurable anxiety and reduction in self-esteem (Mehari, Farrell, and Le, 2014). The extent to which online exclusion is visible to other people, for example, when peers are socially interacting without the excluded person, can enhance the psychological effects of such exclusion compared to offline exclusion.

Protective Factors: Digital Literacy and Mindful Engagement

However, not every aspect of social media is harmful to the psyche, and there is emerging evidence that suggests that there are individual and contextual factors that buffer the link between social media presence and mental health. Digital literacy is recognised as a major protective factor from social media anxiety and self-esteem loss



(Livingstone, 2004), that is, being able to critically assess, produce and participate in digital content. Students who are more digitally literate can better identify that social media content is curated and constructed, which decreases the chances of engaging in harmful social comparisons.

In their study, Primack et al. (2017) noted that the way people use social media (passive consumption vs. active interaction) shaped the association between social media use and well-being. Passive scrolling, defined as silently viewing other people's posts without creating posts, commenting, and engaging in reciprocation, was more strongly related to negative outcomes than active use (creation, commenting, and reciprocal communication). The separation may indicate that interventions to encourage meaningful and social active use of social media may reduce the negative psychological outcomes of passive use.

Research Methodology

The method used in this research is qualitative and descriptive research with an extensive and systematic review of academic literature as a source of information. This study, instead of gathering primary data from participants, compiles and critically reviews existing data from peer-reviewed journal articles, published empirical studies, educational sources and reliable secondary data sources that address social media use, anxiety, body image, social comparison and self-esteem of student populations of the Generation Z.

Considering the use of a literature-based qualitative approach, this choice was in line with the interpretive research traditions in which the systematic synthesis of existing knowledge is an accepted method of scholarly research (Snyder, 2019). By doing this, the researcher can recognize the patterns, inconsistencies, and similarities that emerge from a wide range of evidence and come up with a theoretically and empirically grounded description of the phenomena being studied that goes beyond the bounds of any one study.

The following criteria were used to select literature: relevance to the key themes of the study—social media, anxiety, self-esteem, and Gen Z students; publication in peer-reviewed journals or reputable academic presses; publication of literature in the last ten years of the study (2005-2024); and methodological rigour, including experimental, longitudinal, survey, and qualitative study designs. Thematic interpretation and comparative discussion of information from secondary sources enabled the identification of reiterated themes, patterns of evidence, and scholarly debate. This method allows for a more complex understanding of how social media affects students' emotional health, as well as its psychological and social aspects, while



also not being constrained by the sample size of any single major study, or by the specific setting.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A thematic analysis of the literature reviewed is conducted to pinpoint key findings that contribute to the understanding of the intricate connection between social media usage and psychological well-being among Gen Z students. These results are discussed below in terms of relevant theoretical frameworks and empirical results.

Finding 1: Intensity of Social Media Use Predicts Anxiety Severity

The findings reveal that there is a link between the level of social media use and the severity of anxiety. The results indicate that the amount of social media use predicts anxiety severity.

The literature reviewed in this study consistently shows that the more intense the use of social media is, the more severe are the anxiety symptoms of Gen Z students. Studies that use a longitudinal design yield the most compelling evidence for this relationship, because they account for pre-existing differences in mental health and they provide temporal precedence. Both Twenge et al. (2018) and Kelly et al. (2019) identified a temporal relationship between heavy use of social media and over time, reported anxiety and depressive symptoms. The discovery has serious consequences for mental health intervention, as reduction in excessive social media use could lead to tangible improvements in anxiety outcomes among University students.

Finding 2: Social comparison is a mediator between social media and self-esteem.

The findings of the evidence reviewed strongly support that social comparison is a key mechanism that social media has an adverse impact on self-esteem. Social comparison has been shown to be a key mediator variable by both of these studies: Vogel et al. (2014) and Nesi and Prinstein (2015); both found that the negative relationship between social media and self-esteem was significantly weakened when social comparison orientation was controlled. The results indicate that interventions that focus on social comparison cognitions, such as cognitive-behavioral interventions that challenge the validity and relevance of social media comparison, can help reduce self-esteem harm in Gen Z students. Findings 1 and 2 demonstrate that viewing idealized imagery creates body image dissatisfaction.

Finding 3: Exposure to Idealized Imagery Produces Body Image Dissatisfaction

The reviewed meta-analytic evidence was consistent in finding negative body image outcomes with exposure to idealized physical appearance imagery on social media



platforms like Instagram among Gen Z students. This effect was shown to be consistent across experimental designs, and also to be unrelated to pre-existing body image concerns, by Hogue and Mills (2019). Unrealistic photos and appearance-based comparisons have been exacerbated by the growing sophistication of the digital image manipulation tools that allow people to alter their physical appearance, with little or no technical skill. Therefore, educational activities that will help Gen Z students become media literate and critical of digital image manipulation may be useful as part of body image protection programs.

Finding 4: Cyberbullying Constitutes a Significant Threat to Mental Health

The literature reviewed clearly indicates that cyberbullying is one of the most detrimental effects of social media usage among students of the Generation Z. Because cyberbullying is always available, socially visible, and there are no boundaries on who can be targeted, it is a qualitatively different form of peer victimization from that which occurs in the real world, and this accounts for its disproportionate effects on anxiety and self-esteem. The increasing prevalence and seriousness of cyberbullying among adolescent populations is described by both Kowalski et al. (2014) and Hinduja and Patchin (2010), and evidence shows that the consequences of being a victim of cyberbullying don't just result from severe or persistent victimization but from less extreme forms of online social exclusion as well. It is, therefore, imperative on the universities to create strong anti-cyberbullying policies and provide adequate support mechanisms to safeguard the mental well-being of the Gen Z students in online learning settings.

Active Engagement and Digital Literacy as Protective Factors is a key finding in this report. One consistent theme across the literature consulted is that the negative psychological impacts of social media use are not automatic, but rather are significantly mitigated by digital literacy and critical media awareness and by the type of social media use. Both Primack et al., (2017) and Livingstone (2004) argue that purposeful, socially reciprocal social media usage is a protective factor against the anxiety and self-esteem problems of passive, comparison-focused uses. The results of this study indicate that digital literacy and mindful social media use education could have a tremendous impact on the psychological resilience of the Gen Z students in the digital world.

Conclusion

The current study has offered a comprehensive qualitative and descriptive analysis on the relationship between the social media usage and anxiety and self-esteem among Gen Z students. The body of literature examined clearly and consistently reveals that excessive, passive and social media comparison use is significantly related to increased



anxiety, decreased self-esteem, body image dissatisfaction and increased exposure to cyberbullying. These effects are transmitted through upward social comparison, exposure to idealized and unrealistic digitally mediated content, disruption of sleep, and the constant social visibility of peer exclusion, and victimization.

The evidence shows, however, that these negative outcomes are not unavoidable effects of using social media but are significantly tempered by patterns of purposeful and active engagement and digital literacy, as well as by critical media awareness. The University, teachers and mental health practitioners are in an important position to teach Gen Z students the intellectual skills and emotional resources needed to positively interact with social media and avoid potential harm to their mental health. Further studies into the effectiveness of targeted digital literacy and social media education on the anxiety and self-esteem of university students among Gen Z, in various national and cultural settings is recommended.

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