

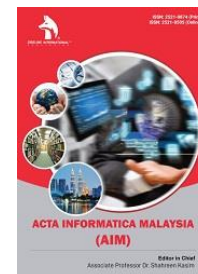
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RESEARCH ARTICLE

WIRED BUT WEARY: GEN Z'S COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP WITH ONLINE CONTENT, DIGITAL IDENTITY, AND SOCIAL MEDIA BURNOUT

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ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the paradoxical digital lives of Generation Z—an age group characterized by its deep immersion in online ecosystems. While Gen Z has harnessed the internet to express individuality, forge virtual communities, and stay globally connected, this hyper-connected existence has also bred a sense of exhaustion, identity fragmentation, and psychological fatigue. The study critically examines how algorithm-driven content delivery, the pressures of online performativity, and the relentless pursuit of relevance on social media platforms contribute to an emerging crisis of social media burnout. Drawing upon interdisciplinary frameworks from media studies, psychology, and digital sociology, the paper explores themes such as content fatigue, the dissonance between real and virtual selves, and the constant recalibration of self-worth through likes, shares, and followers. The phenomenon of digital withdrawal—where users temporarily or permanently disengage from social media—serves as a coping mechanism, highlighting an urgent need to reevaluate our digital habits. Furthermore, the research emphasizes the importance of fostering digital literacy, mental health awareness, and platform accountability to build more sustainable and mindful online environments. As Gen Z navigates the delicate balance between digital empowerment and emotional well-being, this study sheds light on the evolving nature of identity, connection, and self-care in the digital age.

KEYWORDS

Digital Identity, Social Media Burnout, Generation Z, Online Content Fatigue, Mental Health and Technology

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Generation Z, commonly defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012, represents the first cohort to grow up in an environment saturated with digital technologies and high-speed internet access (Dimock, 2019). Unlike previous generations, Gen Z has never experienced a world without smartphones, social media, and real-time connectivity. This constant engagement with digital platforms has shaped their worldview, communication patterns, identity formation, and even their emotional well-being.

Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Snapchat, and more recently, Threads and BeReal, are central to the daily lives of Gen Z. These platforms are not just tools for communication but serve as virtual stages for self-expression, social validation, activism, and information sharing (Pew Research Center, 2022). The algorithm-driven design of these platforms tailors content to user behavior, often amplifying certain types of content and creating an environment of constant stimulation, comparison, and performance (Cotter, 2019). This has led to a situation where members of Gen Z are both empowered and overwhelmed by their online lives.

Digital identity—how individuals present themselves in online environments—is increasingly curated through filters, likes, and the pursuit of social validation. Gen Z, more than any previous generation, is influenced by influencer culture, where social capital is built on appearance, relatability, and online presence (Abidin, 2016). This

performative element of digital life fosters both creativity and anxiety, as individuals struggle to maintain an idealized version of themselves in the public eye.

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite being the most connected generation in history, Gen Z is also showing signs of deep psychological strain. Studies report a rising prevalence of anxiety, depression, and social media burnout among youth (Twenge et al., 2017; Rideout and Fox, 2018). Constant exposure to curated content, coupled with algorithmic manipulation and peer comparison, has been linked to low self-esteem, sleep deprivation, and emotional fatigue (Royal Society for Public Health, 2017). The very platforms that offer opportunities for connection and expression often become sources of stress and isolation.

The paradox lies in the simultaneous empowerment and exhaustion experienced by Gen Z. They use social media to shape their identities and build networks, but also suffer from digital fatigue, a sense of inauthenticity, and pressure to be constantly visible and validated (Marwick, 2013). Social media burnout—characterized by emotional exhaustion, disengagement, and a diminished sense of purpose online—is emerging as a significant concern, particularly among younger users (Banyai et al., 2017).

Therefore, understanding the complex interplay between online content exposure, digital identity construction, and social media burnout is crucial. This research seeks to explore how Gen Z navigates this terrain, the psychological consequences involved, and the coping mechanisms they

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employ in response to the pressures of digital life.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to critically examine the relationship between Generation Z's consumption of online content, the construction of digital identity, and the increasing phenomenon of social media burnout. As digital natives, Gen Z individuals are continually exposed to algorithmically tailored content and social media influences that shape their self-perception, social expectations, and emotional resilience. This research aims to unpack how the structure and nature of social media platforms contribute to identity stress, emotional fatigue, and mental health challenges, thereby exploring the broader psychosocial implications of digital life. The study also seeks to identify the coping mechanisms Gen Z adopts in response to the pressures of online performance and connectivity.

1.4 Research Questions

To achieve the above objectives, the study will address the following research questions:

- *How do algorithms and influencers shape Gen Z's digital identity?* This question explores the role of algorithmic content curation and influencer culture in influencing how Gen Z users present themselves online, perceive others, and construct their self-image.
- *What are the psychological impacts of prolonged social media use?* This question seeks to investigate how continuous exposure to social media platforms affects Gen Z's mental health, with emphasis on issues such as anxiety, low self-esteem, digital fatigue, and burnout.
- *What coping strategies are Gen Z adopting to manage digital fatigue?* This question aims to identify and analyze the behavioral and psychological strategies that Gen Z uses to cope with stress and exhaustion resulting from their digital engagement, including digital detox, content moderation, time management, and platform switching.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is significant in multiple ways. First, it addresses an urgent and growing concern about the mental well-being of young people in an increasingly digital world. By examining the complex interplay between online content exposure, identity construction, and emotional burnout, the research provides insights that are directly relevant to educators, mental health professionals, parents, and policy-makers.

Understanding the unique challenges faced by Gen Z can help in designing:

- Curricula and educational interventions that promote healthy digital habits.
- Psychological support frameworks that address digital-related mental health stressors.
- Policy recommendations for social media regulation, platform design ethics, and youth engagement strategies.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the growing academic discourse on digital sociology, youth psychology, and media studies, offering an interdisciplinary perspective on how emerging technologies reshape human behavior and selfhood.

2. LITERATURE

2.1 Digital Identity and Youth

Digital identity refers to how individuals present, construct, and modify their self-image in virtual environments. For Generation Z—who have grown up with digital technologies—identity formation often occurs in parallel across both offline and online spaces (boyd, 2014). Social media platforms serve not only as communication tools but also as arenas for self-expression, experimentation, and social validation.

According to the study, identity for youth in the digital age is less about stable characteristics and more about performance, visibility, and interaction (Buckingham, 2008). The curated nature of digital self-representation—enabled by filters, captions, and selective sharing—can foster both agency and anxiety. Author argues that while online platforms offer freedom to craft multiple versions of the self, they also create a pressure to maintain consistency and perfection across them (Turkle, 2011).

Further, studies indicate that digital identity is often shaped by the feedback loop of likes, comments, and shares, which leads youth to seek external validation over intrinsic self-worth (Goffman, 1959; Marwick and

boyd, 2011). This performative aspect of online identity can result in identity dissonance, emotional stress, and reduced authenticity, especially among adolescents and young adults striving to conform to digital beauty and popularity standards.

2.2 Social Media Algorithms and Personalization

Social media platforms rely heavily on algorithms to filter, rank, and recommend content based on user behavior. While personalization enhances user experience by delivering relevant content, it also creates echo chambers, limits exposure to diverse viewpoints, and intensifies repetitive or triggering content (Pariser, 2011).

They observe that algorithms not only influence what content users see but also subtly shape how they present themselves to remain visible or relevant (Cotter, 2019). Gen Z users often adapt their behavior, aesthetic, or language to align with algorithmic preferences—a phenomenon known as “playing the algorithm.” This contributes to a self-perpetuating cycle of content creation, engagement, and psychological dependency.

Additionally, research suggests that the “invisible” nature of algorithmic decision-making creates a form of emotional labor where users struggle with the unpredictability of visibility (Bucher, 2018). For Gen Z, this translates into compulsive posting, fear of being shadow-banned, and anxiety about maintaining digital presence. Such dynamics contribute significantly to digital fatigue and social media stress.

2.3 Influencer Culture and Comparison Behavior

Influencer culture has emerged as a dominant feature of online life, particularly on visual-first platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Influencers—who often appear relatable, aspirational, or authoritative—play a critical role in shaping Gen Z's ideals around beauty, success, and lifestyle (Abidin, 2016).

Social comparison theory is especially relevant here, as individuals evaluate themselves based on perceived social standards (Festinger, 1954). When exposed to idealized portrayals of life by influencers, Gen Z users may experience negative self-appraisals, body image issues, or feelings of inadequacy (Fardouly et al., 2015). This is exacerbated by the illusion of authenticity often portrayed by influencers, which conceals the commercial and curated nature of their content.

Found that parasocial interactions with influencers—unreciprocated relationships where users feel emotionally connected to public figures—can increase the pressure to conform, leading to compulsive consumption, self-objectification, and emotional exhaustion (Chae, 2018).

In this context, influencer culture operates as both a source of inspiration and distress, contributing to the broader phenomenon of social media burnout, particularly when users feel compelled to mimic or live up to digitally mediated ideals.

2.4 Social Media Burnout and Digital Fatigue

Social media burnout refers to a state of emotional exhaustion and detachment caused by prolonged and intense engagement with social media platforms. As Gen Z continues to immerse itself in digital content across multiple platforms, symptoms of psychological fatigue—including anxiety, attention fragmentation, low motivation, and emotional numbness—are becoming increasingly prevalent (Banyai et al., 2017). This form of burnout stems not only from content overload but also from the relentless pressure to remain visible, responsive, and socially engaged online.

Digital fatigue is exacerbated by the always-on nature of social media platforms, where notifications, infinite scrolling, and real-time updates make it difficult for users to disengage voluntarily (Alter, 2017). Research found that individuals experiencing fear of missing out (FoMO) are more likely to compulsively check their accounts, which contributes to poor sleep quality, increased stress levels, and reduced real-life social interaction (Dhir et al., 2018). Gen Z, in particular, struggles with the blurred lines between leisure and obligation in digital spaces—using social media both as a tool for relaxation and as a source of psychological strain.

Furthermore, burnout is not only a product of consumption but also of creation. Content creators, micro-influencers, and even everyday users often feel the burden of sustaining engagement metrics, managing personal brands, and withstanding criticism—all of which lead to emotional depletion (Luqman et al., 2017). The emotional labor involved in managing public personas, especially among Gen Z users navigating adolescence and early adulthood, adds to the mental load and fuels digital exhaustion.

2.5 Coping Strategies and Digital Detox Trends

In response to the adverse effects of social media burnout, Gen Z is increasingly adopting a range of coping strategies aimed at reclaiming agency over their digital lives. One of the most notable trends is the practice of digital detox—a voluntary and temporary disconnection from digital devices and platforms to improve mental well-being (Syvertsen and Enli, 2020). Digital detoxes may include deleting apps, taking scheduled breaks, turning off notifications, or using apps that track screen time and limit access.

Empirical studies have shown that intentional reduction of social media use can improve mood, increase concentration, and reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression (Hunt et al., 2018). However, the success of such detox practices often depends on individual motivation, peer influence, and the broader cultural norms surrounding connectivity. For many Gen Z users, social media remains a necessary tool for communication, education, and professional networking, making total disengagement difficult.

In addition to detoxing, Gen Z users employ selective engagement tactics—such as muting accounts, curating their feed, unfollowing toxic influencers, and engaging with mental health content—as adaptive strategies to manage digital overwhelm (Yang et al., 2021). Mindful media consumption, awareness campaigns on screen addiction, and peer support communities also contribute to a growing movement among youth advocating for digital wellness.

Interestingly, this generation is also redefining how authenticity is expressed online. Trends such as “photo dumps,” unfiltered stories, and apps like BeReal signal a cultural shift away from hyper-curation and toward casual, real-time sharing that reflects emotional reality. These practices offer users a sense of relief from performative pressures and create safer digital environments for self-expression (Tiggemann et al., 2020).

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To understand the paradox of Gen Z’s simultaneous dependence on and fatigue from social media, this research integrates four key psychological and communication theories. These frameworks shed light on how digital platforms shape identity, behavior, cognitive engagement, and emotional health in a hyperconnected world.

3.1 Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

They introduced Uses and Gratifications Theory to explain how individuals actively select media to fulfill distinct psychological, emotional, and social needs (Katz, et al., 1973). Unlike passive media consumers, Gen Z users approach platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat with conscious motives—ranging from entertainment, escapism, and information-seeking to social connectivity, identity formation, and self-presentation.

With Gen Z’s digital nativity, social media becomes an extension of self, used not only to consume content but also to create and communicate meaning. According to the study, these gratifications can be immediate (such as mood enhancement or validation through likes) or long-term (such as building social capital or professional identity) (Sundar and Limperos, 2013). However, this constant quest for gratification may lead to compulsive usage patterns, where users feel obligated to remain connected, resulting in increased anxiety and dissatisfaction.

UGT helps uncover why Gen Z remains so deeply tied to digital spaces—because these platforms satisfy both their intrinsic needs (connection, self-expression) and extrinsic desires (status, approval). The theory is especially relevant when analyzing the emotional burnout that follows when these gratifications become repetitive, shallow, or unfulfilling.

3.2 Social Comparison Theory

Author proposed Social Comparison Theory, which posits that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their lives, achievements, and appearances to others—especially when objective self-assessment is not

possible (Festinger, 1954). In the age of algorithm-driven feeds, Gen Z is constantly exposed to idealized content curated by influencers, peers, and brands.

Social media, especially visual platforms like Instagram and TikTok, amplifies upward social comparison, where users perceive others as more attractive, successful, or fulfilled. This often results in negative self-evaluation, reduced self-esteem, and increased anxiety or depressive symptoms (Fardouly et al., 2015; Vogel et al., 2014). The presence of quantifiable popularity metrics (likes, comments, followers) exacerbates this issue, reinforcing the idea that one’s worth is linked to digital validation.

This theory is instrumental in explaining how the everyday act of scrolling through social media becomes emotionally taxing for Gen Z. The performative nature of digital culture, combined with exposure to curated realities, fosters insecurity, envy, and a constant need to “measure up”—which are key psychological precursors to burnout.

3.3 Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Developed, Self-Determination Theory explains motivation through the fulfillment of three innate psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci and Ryan, 1985). In the context of social media, this theory sheds light on the conflict Gen Z faces between authentic self-expression and the pressures of performance and conformity in online spaces.

While platforms offer spaces for individualism and creativity, they also impose unspoken norms about appearance, humor, ideology, and success. Many Gen Z users feel compelled to portray a version of themselves that aligns with social expectations or platform aesthetics—even when it contradicts their true identity (Chae, 2018). This leads to motivational dissonance: users post content not because they want to, but because they feel they must to remain relevant, accepted, or validated.

When these needs—especially autonomy and authenticity—are undermined, social media becomes a source of stress rather than empowerment. Research found that inauthentic online behavior was associated with lower subjective well-being (Reinecke and Trepte, 2014). SDT thus provides a framework to understand how Gen Z’s mental health suffers when their digital lives become detached from their intrinsic motivations and true self-concept.

3.4 Cognitive Load Theory

Originally proposed, Cognitive Load Theory explores how information processing is limited by the human brain’s capacity. In today’s attention economy, Gen Z navigates an environment of constant sensory input—from short-form videos and endless scrolls to alerts, news, messages, and ads—all competing for cognitive attention (Sweller, 1988).

Unlike previous generations, Gen Z multitasks across multiple platforms and devices, often shifting from content consumption to communication to creation within minutes. This constant switching and volume of stimuli result in extraneous cognitive load, which can diminish learning, memory retention, and emotional regulation (Paas and Ayres, 2014).

Additionally, the algorithmic design of platforms—such as autoplay, personalized feeds, and infinite scrolls—further traps users in a loop of content that can lead to mental exhaustion. This mental fatigue manifests as difficulty concentrating, decision fatigue, and emotional numbness—core symptoms of digital burnout.

Applying Cognitive Load Theory, this research situates Gen Z’s digital fatigue not just as an emotional issue, but also as a neurocognitive one, emphasizing the physiological strain caused by continuous online engagement.

3.5 Synthesis and Integration

These four theories collectively provide a comprehensive lens for examining the paradox of hyperconnectivity and emotional exhaustion among Gen Z:

Table 1: Summary of Theoretical Frameworks Addressing the Paradox of Hyperconnectivity and Emotional Exhaustion Among Gen Z

Theory	Focus	Insight Offered
UGT	Media Use Motivation	Explains why Gen Z engages with digital media for emotional/social needs
Social Comparison Theory	Identity and Self-esteem	Clarifies how social media fosters comparison and affects mental health
SDT	Motivation and Authenticity	Highlights the struggle between real identity and online performance
Cognitive Load Theory	Mental Processing	Explains how digital environments overwhelm cognitive capacities

Together, these frameworks help decode how and why Gen Z's digital experiences—although initially gratifying—often spiral into stress, fatigue, and burnout. The study uses these theories not in isolation but in synthesis to capture the complex interplay between behavior, identity, cognition, and emotion in the digital age.

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This research conceptualizes the intricate interplay between Gen Z's digital behavior, identity formation, emotional well-being, and adaptive strategies within the context of social media engagement. The framework is constructed around five key interrelated components: Social Media Usage, Algorithmic Influence, Digital Identity Formation, Social Media Burnout, and Coping Mechanisms. Together, these constructs map the pathway from platform interaction to psychological exhaustion, while also accounting for the mitigating role of self-regulation and digital awareness.

4.1 Generation Z's Digital Burnout Cycle

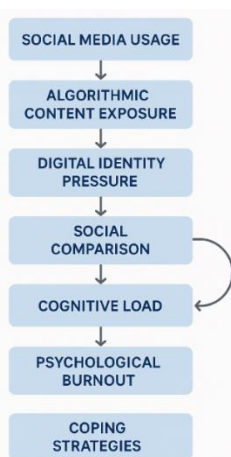


Figure 1: Social Media Usage: The Entry Point of Engagement

Social Media Usage: The Entry Point of Engagement

At the foundation of this framework lies Gen Z's ubiquitous and habitual use of social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Twitter, and YouTube. As digital natives, members of this cohort have grown up with immediate access to online communication and content-sharing technologies. Their engagement is driven by a desire to connect, express themselves, stay informed, and participate in global or local discourses. According to the study, social media usage among youth is deeply rooted in diverse gratifications including entertainment, escapism, self-promotion, and peer interaction (Whiting and Williams, 2013). However, this frequent and immersive interaction often becomes excessive and compulsive, leading to overexposure to curated digital realities. In this framework, social media usage acts as the initiating variable that sets into motion a series of psychosocial effects and emotional responses.

4.2 Algorithmic Influence: The Invisible Architect of Experience

Once users enter the digital environment, their content exposure is largely shaped by algorithmic systems that control what is seen, recommended, and promoted. Algorithms, driven by artificial intelligence, learn user preferences and deliver personalized feeds that are designed to optimize engagement. While personalization enhances user satisfaction in the short term, it also limits content diversity and creates filter bubbles and echo chambers (Bucher, 2018). Gen Z's extended exposure to algorithmically reinforced ideals—especially regarding beauty, lifestyle, and success—intensifies the psychological strain of trying to match digital expectations. This curated content stream leads to a narrowing of perspectives and increased feelings of inadequacy, making algorithmic influence a crucial amplifier in the framework that heightens the emotional and cognitive toll of digital interactions.

4.3 Digital Identity Formation: The Mediating Psychological Process

At the heart of this conceptual model is the process of digital identity formation. Social media platforms function as stages for Gen Z to craft and project idealized versions of themselves, often aligning with trends, aesthetic standards, and performative behavior. This curated identity is mediated through likes, shares, filters, and comments, becoming increasingly strategic and image-conscious rather than authentic (Zhao et al., 2008). The discrepancy between one's real self and projected online persona leads to identity dissonance, which can provoke feelings of imposter syndrome, low self-worth, and emotional exhaustion. This

identity tension becomes particularly pronounced when individuals feel obligated to maintain constant engagement and digital visibility. Thus, digital identity formation serves as a mediator in this framework, linking both usage patterns and algorithmic pressures to deeper psychological effects, such as burnout.

4.4 Social Media Burnout: The Emotional and Cognitive Outcome

The continuous cycle of engagement, performance, and comparison culminates in what is termed social media burnout—a psychological condition characterized by emotional exhaustion, reduced empathy, and a sense of disconnection from online interactions. It emphasizes that the pressure to remain “always online” combined with unrelenting exposure to idealized content and feedback mechanisms can lead to a state of chronic fatigue and cognitive overload (Han, 2018). Burnout in this context also involves depersonalization, where users begin to feel indifferent or alienated from their online persona and peer networks. This condition is particularly concerning for Gen Z, who often conflate digital validation with self-worth. Within the conceptual model, burnout is the primary outcome variable, emerging as a result of the compounding effects of usage, algorithmic influence, and identity-related stress.

4.5 Coping Mechanisms: The Moderating Factor

To mitigate the impact of burnout and regain control over their digital lives, many Gen Z individuals adopt a range of coping strategies. These include taking digital detoxes, practicing mindfulness, restricting screen time, unfollowing toxic content, or transitioning to more private or niche platforms where authenticity is encouraged. They have shown that conscious digital disengagement and content curation are effective in reducing anxiety and improving well-being (Dhir et al., 2018). However, these coping strategies vary widely in effectiveness based on individual awareness, peer influence, and platform design. Within the framework, coping mechanisms act as a moderating variable, capable of weakening or intensifying the link between digital identity stress and emotional exhaustion. Those who lack adaptive strategies are more susceptible to long-term psychological harm, whereas those who employ healthy digital habits are better able to manage the pressures of online life.

4.6 Integrated Conceptual Pathway

To summarize, the flow of the conceptual framework follows a logical sequence:

- Social Media Usage initiates engagement,
- Algorithmic Influence customizes and intensifies exposure,
- Digital Identity Formation is shaped and distorted under platform and peer pressure,
- Social Media Burnout emerges as a psychological consequence, and
- Coping Mechanisms determine whether this burnout is alleviated or exacerbated.

This integrated model allows for a multi-dimensional understanding of Gen Z's digital behavior—one that moves beyond simplistic explanations of overuse to include platform design, identity negotiation, psychological resilience, and adaptive behavior.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research Design

This research employs a mixed-methods research design to comprehensively investigate Generation Z's engagement with social media, the construction of their digital identities, and the resultant psychological impact of burnout. The mixed-methods approach integrates quantitative and qualitative methodologies, leveraging the strengths of both to provide a holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

The quantitative component uses structured surveys to measure variables such as frequency and patterns of social media usage, levels of social media burnout, identity-related stress, and the coping mechanisms adopted by Gen Z users. The quantitative data enables statistical analysis to identify correlations, patterns, and potential causal relationships among these factors.

Complementing this, the qualitative component involves semi-structured interviews designed to explore the nuanced, lived experiences of participants. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the subjective emotional and psychological dynamics underlying their digital interactions. By capturing personal narratives and individual perspectives, the qualitative data enriches the quantitative findings and reveals complexities that numeric data alone cannot fully capture.

The combination of these methods—known as triangulation—strengthens the reliability and validity of the study's conclusions, enabling a more robust and multi-dimensional analysis of how Gen Z navigates the digital world.

5.2 Population

The study focuses on Generation Z, defined here as individuals born between 1996 and 2012, currently aged roughly 13 to 27 years. This cohort is uniquely positioned as the first generation to have matured fully in a digital ecosystem where social media is an integral part of socialization, identity exploration, and information consumption. Their developmental years coincide with the advent and proliferation of platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and YouTube, making them critical subjects for examining contemporary digital behaviors and psychological outcomes.

The population is diverse, spanning adolescents to young adults who differ in educational status, socio-economic background, geographic location, and cultural milieu. This diversity is essential for capturing varied experiences of social media use and its psychological ramifications.

5.3 Sample Size and Sampling Strategy

To adequately represent Gen Z's heterogeneity and enable meaningful analysis, a sample size of 150 participants is targeted for the quantitative survey phase. This number balances statistical power and practical constraints and aligns with standards for behavioral studies involving youth populations (Creswell, 2014).

Sampling strategy details:

- **Purposive Sampling:** Participants will be deliberately selected based on their active engagement with social media platforms, ensuring that data gathered pertains directly to the research questions. This method ensures relevance and depth, avoiding participants with negligible or no social media use.
- **Snowball Sampling:** Recognizing the challenges of reaching a representative and willing sample of young users, initial respondents will be asked to refer peers who fit the study criteria. This approach helps to expand reach into varied social networks and facilitates access to individuals across different demographic backgrounds.

Table 2: Sampling Criteria, Descriptions, and Rationales Used in the Study

Sampling Criteria	Description	Rationale
Age	13–27 years	Captures the full range of Generation Z
Social Media Engagement	Regular use of multiple platforms	Ensures participants have relevant experience
Location	Urban and semi-urban areas	Allows for contextual diversity
Gender	Balanced representation across genders	Avoids bias, ensures inclusivity
Education Level	School, college, early career	Reflects developmental and life stage differences

Source: Researcher

This sampling strategy aims to gather a diverse yet focused sample, providing both generalizability and depth to the study findings.

5.4 Data Collection Methods

A mixed-mode data collection strategy will be employed, combining online surveys with qualitative interviews to maximize participation convenience and data richness.

Table 3: Data Collection Methods Employed in the Study

Data Collection Method	Purpose	Instruments/Techniques	Expected Outcomes
Online Quantitative Survey	Quantify usage patterns, burnout levels, identity stress, and coping behaviors	Structured questionnaire including validated scales: Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS), Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), Brief COPE Inventory	Numerical data amenable to statistical analysis, enabling correlation and regression analyses
Qualitative Semi-Structured Interviews	Explore subjective experiences and coping narratives in depth	Interview guide developed around core themes (digital identity, emotional stress, coping strategies); conducted via Zoom or face-to-face; audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim	Rich, detailed narratives facilitating thematic analysis to uncover patterns beyond quantitative scope

Source: Researcher

Survey Implementation:

The survey will be hosted on platforms such as Google Forms or Qualtrics, accessible via smartphones, tablets, and computers. Recruitment will be conducted via social media outreach, educational institutions, and youth forums, encouraging voluntary participation.

Interview Implementation:

Approximately 20-25 participants will be selected from survey respondents who indicate willingness to participate in follow-up interviews. These interviews will last approximately 45-60 minutes, conducted at mutually convenient times to encourage candid sharing.

5.5 Data Analysis Techniques

Table 4: Overview of Data Analysis Methods

Data Type	Analysis Method	Tools/Software	Purpose
Quantitative Data	Descriptive statistics (mean, SD), correlation analysis, multiple regression	SPSS, R, or Python (Pandas, Statsmodels)	Identify key relationships, predictors of burnout and identity stress, quantify prevalence
Qualitative Data	Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006)	NVivo, ATLAS.ti, or manual coding	Extract core themes around identity construction, emotional impacts, coping mechanisms

Source: Researcher

Details:

- **Descriptive Statistics:** Summarize demographic data and key variables such as average daily social media use, burnout scores, and coping frequency.
- **Inferential Statistics:** Test hypotheses such as the predictive relationship between hours spent on social media and burnout

severity, or whether certain coping strategies mitigate identity stress.

- **Thematic Analysis:** The interview transcripts will be coded in a six-phase process: familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme review, defining/naming themes, and report writing. Themes will be validated through peer review and participant feedback where possible.

5.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical rigor is paramount, especially given the involvement of potentially vulnerable young participants.

- **Informed Consent:** Participants will receive clear, accessible information about the study aims, procedures, voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any point without penalty. For participants under 18, parental or guardian consent will be obtained in addition to the participant's assent.
- **Confidentiality:** Personal data will be anonymized. Identifiers will be replaced with unique codes to protect privacy. Data will be stored securely on encrypted devices accessible only to the research team.
- **Psychological Safety:** Given the sensitive nature of mental health topics, participants will be informed of support resources, including

helplines and counseling services, should they experience distress.

- **Approval:** The study protocol will be submitted for review and approval by an institutional ethics committee or review board before data collection begins.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

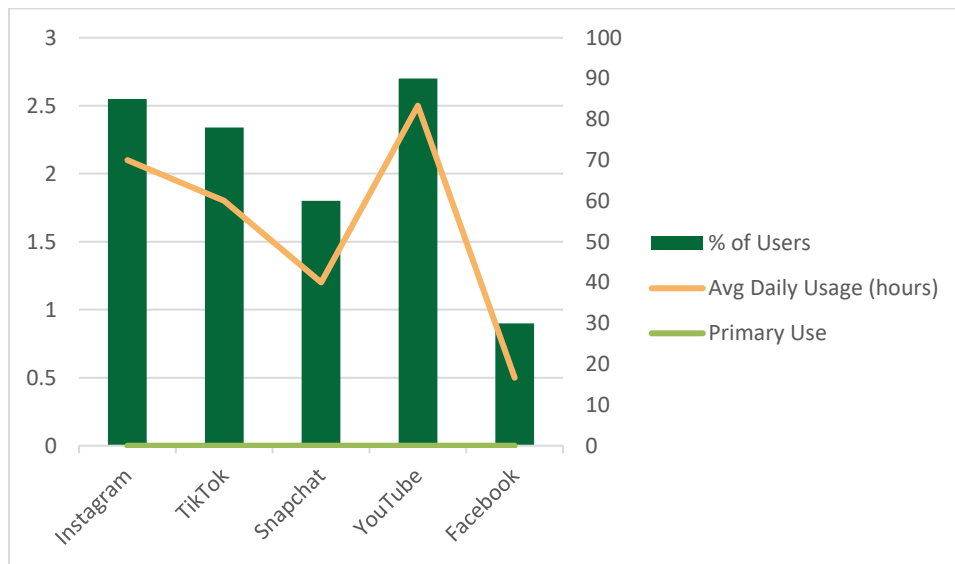
6.1 Social Media Usage Patterns

The quantitative survey results highlight that Generation Z engages extensively with a variety of social media platforms, often juggling multiple accounts and identities. The average daily screen time spent on social media is between 3.5 to 5 hours, confirming earlier studies that characterize Gen Z as "digital natives" deeply embedded in online environments (Anderson and Jiang, 2018).

Table 5: Social Media Platform Usage Among Gen Z

Platform	% of Users	Avg Daily Usage (hours)	Primary Use
Instagram	85	2.1	Visual content sharing, stories, reels
TikTok	78	1.8	Short videos, trends, entertainment
Snapchat	60	1.2	Messaging, ephemeral content
YouTube	90	2.5	Video consumption, learning, entertainment
Facebook	30	0.5	News, groups, events

Source: Researcher



Example: One respondent noted: "I check Instagram and TikTok multiple times a day. Sometimes I scroll mindlessly for hours, especially when I'm stressed or bored." Another respondent described YouTube as an "always-on background" for study and entertainment:

"YouTube is my go-to for tutorials, music, and just relaxing after a long day."

Multiplatform Use: The survey reveals that **72%** of respondents are active on three or more platforms, engaging in different activities suited to each:

Table 6: Number of Social Media Platforms Used by Respondents

Number of Platforms Used	Percentage of Respondents (%)
1	10
2	18
3 or more	72

This multi-platform engagement leads to a fragmented digital presence, which requires switching between different social norms, content styles,

and social circles—a cognitively demanding process contributing to mental fatigue.

Table 7: Temporal Usage Patterns

Time of Day	Peak Social Media Activity (%)
Morning (6 AM–10 AM)	15
Afternoon (12 PM–4 PM)	30
Evening (6 PM–11 PM)	55

Usage peaks in the evening, with **55%** of participants reporting heavy social media activity between 8 PM and 11 PM. This aligns with leisure time but overlaps with key sleep hours.

Example: A participant shared:

"I try to go offline by 10 PM but often end up scrolling through my feeds till midnight. It's hard to stop because there's always something new."

Research links late-night social media use to poor sleep quality and increased daytime tiredness (Levenson et al., 2017).

The qualitative interviews shed light on the psychological challenges Gen Z faces in constructing and maintaining digital identities. A dominant theme is the pressure to curate a perfect online self.

6.2 Experiences of Digital Identity Pressure

Table 8: Key Themes and Illustrative Quotes from Participant Interviews

Key Themes from Interviews	Examples/Quotes
Performance pressure and authenticity tension	"I want to be myself, but social media rewards perfection and trends."
Social comparison and low self-esteem	"Seeing others' highlight reels makes me question my worth."
Key Themes from Interviews	Examples/Quotes
Algorithm-driven content and performativity	"I feel pushed to post flashy stuff to get likes and followers."
Digital identity fragmentation	"I have different profiles for friends, family, and public. It's confusing."
Emotional exhaustion and burnout	"Sometimes I feel drained from maintaining my online image."

Social Comparison Theory in Practice

Participants often compared themselves unfavorably to peers and influencers, triggering negative self-evaluations: "I scroll through influencer posts showing perfect lives and bodies, and it makes me feel like I'm not enough." (Participant 9, Age 21) Studies confirm that such comparisons on social media can decrease self-esteem and increase

anxiety (Vogel et al., 2014).

Algorithmic Influence

Algorithms favor engagement-driven content, incentivizing performative behavior:

Table 9: Algorithms favor engagement-driven content, incentivizing performative behavior

Algorithmic Features	Impact on Users
Personalization	Tailors content to user preferences but creates echo chambers
Engagement Metrics (Likes)	Users chase validation via likes and comments
Trending Content Promotion	Pushes users to mimic popular trends, reducing authenticity

"If I don't post trendy videos, my content doesn't get seen. It's like the algorithm controls me." (Participant 15, Age 19)

Digital Identity Fragmentation

Many participants maintain distinct digital personas:

Table 10: Types of Online Profiles and Their Emotional Impacts

Profile Type	Purpose	Emotional Impact
Personal	Close friends and family	Comfort but limited self-expression
Public/Fan	Wider audience/followers	Pressure to perform and impress
Professional	Career/networking	Formal, controlled self-presentation

Fragmentation can cause confusion and stress, as participants struggle to integrate their multiple online selves into a coherent identity (Turkle, 2011).

mental overload. According to Cognitive Load Theory, this overload can impair cognitive functioning, leading to burnout symptoms observed in the survey (Sweller, 1988).

6.3 Discussion

The results illustrate the dual nature of social media in Gen Z's lives—providing social connection and self-expression opportunities but also imposing significant psychological burdens.

- High Usage and Cognitive Load: Gen Z's intense, multi-platform use exposes them to continuous information streams, contributing to

- Identity Pressure: The need to navigate between authentic and performative selves aligns with Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000), where extrinsic rewards like likes undermine intrinsic motivation, affecting well-being.

- Social Comparison: Persistent upward social comparisons on social media foster negative self-perceptions, a finding consistent with Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954).

Table 11: Summary of Theoretical Framework Applied to Findings

Theory	Application in Findings	Psychological Outcome
Uses and Gratifications	Platforms fulfill social needs but also generate stress	Mixed gratification, anxiety
Social Comparison	Users compare selves with curated online personas	Lower self-esteem, increased anxiety
Self-Determination	Extrinsic motivation dominates online self-presentation	Decreased authenticity, emotional exhaustion
Cognitive Load	Multitasking across platforms causes information overload	Mental fatigue, social media burnout

Additional Example: Coping Strategies (From Qualitative Data)

Participants described varied coping mechanisms to manage digital stress:

Table 12: Coping Strategies for Social Media-Related Stress and Their Effectiveness

Coping Strategy	Description	Effectiveness (Self-reported)
Digital Detox	Periodic breaks from all social media	High: Improved mood and sleep quality
Content Moderation	Unfollowing negative or triggering accounts	Moderate: Reduced exposure to harmful content
Mindfulness and Meditation	Using apps or practices to reduce anxiety	Moderate to High: Enhances emotional regulation
Seeking Offline Support	Talking to friends, family about online stress	High: Emotional relief and validation

This section demonstrated that while Generation Z's relationship with

social media provides critical social and informational benefits, it also

fosters identity-related stress, cognitive overload, and emotional burnout. The data emphasize the need for digital literacy programs, algorithm transparency, and user-centered platform designs that promote healthier engagement.

According to my students, Generation Z represents a complex and compelling mix of ambition, empathy, self-awareness, and contradiction. They are redefining traditional paths to success by rejecting rigid, outdated educational models in favor of flexible, skill-based, and experiential learning that aligns with their desire for meaningful, creative, and balanced careers. Unlike previous generations that glorified relentless hustle and burnout, Gen Z embraces what they proudly call the “soft life” — a lifestyle that prioritizes mental peace, personal boundaries, and emotional well-being. They speak openly about issues like stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout, treating mental health not as a stigma but as a central pillar of their identity and daily life. My students pointed out that this generation doesn’t just consume social media; they use it as a tool for advocacy, community building, and pushing for real change — whether it’s climate action, gender justice, inclusivity, or the destigmatization of mental illness. Yet, they also highlighted a growing concern: the phenomenon they call “Gen Z brainrot.” This includes endless doom-scrolling, procrastination, and an obsession with absurd, surreal humor rooted in AI-generated content and nonsensical memes. Characters like *tralalero tralala* (a shark in Nike shoes) and *bombardino crocodilo* (a crocodile fused with an airplane) flood their feeds, alongside a new vocabulary — skibidi, rizz, sigma, delulu, gyat — that is as confusing to outsiders as it is entertaining to them. While these trends may seem harmless or hilarious, my students recognized the deeper implications: cognitive fatigue, reduced attention spans, weakened memory, and a diminished capacity for creative thinking and problem-solving. In their own words, “it’s not just our feeds getting crazy — it’s our brains too.” This reflects a broader tension Gen Z is grappling with — they are digital natives who are socially conscious, emotionally intelligent, and forward-thinking, yet they are also navigating the mental overload of constant connectivity, algorithm-driven content, and digital escapism. In essence, my students see their generation as a movement — striving to live authentically, advocate fearlessly, laugh unapologetically, and still find their way through the chaos of the modern world.

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Summary of Findings

This research has provided a detailed examination of Generation Z’s multifaceted relationship with social media platforms, focusing on the construction of digital identities and the growing psychological phenomenon of social media burnout. The data indicates that Gen Z engages extensively with multiple social media applications daily, often averaging between three to five hours of use. Such pervasive engagement, while facilitating connection, self-expression, and information access, also contributes to significant cognitive overload. This constant exposure to a stream of digital stimuli results in increased levels of mental fatigue and symptoms of digital burnout.

Moreover, social media emerges as both a tool for empowerment and a source of emotional strain for Gen Z. While it enables young individuals to explore and express their identities, it simultaneously imposes pressures to curate and perform idealized versions of themselves online. Algorithms designed to maximize engagement tend to reinforce this behavior by prioritizing content that garners more likes and shares, thereby fueling comparison and competition among peers. This environment often undermines self-esteem and exacerbates feelings of inadequacy. The phenomenon of managing multiple, sometimes conflicting, digital personas across different platforms adds another layer of complexity, resulting in what this study terms “digital identity fragmentation.” These pressures lead to increased anxiety, stress, and, ultimately, burnout among youth.

The study also explored coping mechanisms that Gen Z employs to counteract these challenges. Strategies such as digital detoxes, selective content consumption, and mindfulness exercises have shown promise in alleviating burnout symptoms. However, such practices are not yet widespread or systematically supported, pointing to a gap between awareness of digital fatigue and effective, sustained mitigation.

7.2 Implications

The findings of this study have important implications across several domains, especially in digital education, platform design, and mental health policy.

In the realm of education, there is a critical need to embed comprehensive digital literacy programs within school and university curricula. These

programs should not only teach technical skills but also emphasize the importance of mental well-being in digital spaces. Educating students about the psychological effects of social media, recognizing early signs of burnout, and fostering strategies for responsible digital identity management can empower young users to engage with technology in a healthier, more balanced way. Schools can also introduce workshops that encourage critical thinking about social media content, promoting resilience against comparison and social pressure.

For social media platforms and designers, the study highlights a moral and ethical imperative to rethink how digital environments are structured. Current platform algorithms prioritize maximizing user engagement often at the expense of mental health. Developers should innovate features that promote healthier use, such as built-in reminders to take breaks, customizable content filters, and options that encourage authentic self-presentation without the pressure of external validation. Introducing greater transparency around how content is selected and presented can also empower users to regain control over their digital experiences, potentially reducing cognitive overload and emotional distress.

Mental health policies must evolve to address the unique challenges posed by digital technology. Policymakers should consider social media burnout as a serious emerging mental health concern, particularly for adolescents and young adults. Public health initiatives need to incorporate awareness campaigns, accessible mental health resources tailored for digital stress, and collaborations with educational institutions and technology companies to develop preventive strategies. Integrating mental health screenings related to digital use in school health programs could further aid early identification and support.

7.3 Suggestions for Future Research

While this study advances understanding of Gen Z’s digital interactions and psychological outcomes, it also opens avenues for further investigation.

Longitudinal research would be particularly valuable in tracking the evolving impact of social media on mental health and identity over time, helping to determine whether digital burnout has lasting effects on young people’s well-being and social development.

Cross-cultural studies could explore how cultural contexts influence the experience of digital identity pressures and coping strategies, as social media use and its meanings vary widely across global populations. Such comparative research could inform culturally sensitive interventions.

Platform-specific analyses are also needed, as different social media channels possess distinct features, user demographics, and engagement patterns. Understanding these nuances could help tailor policies and educational programs more effectively.

Further, empirical studies evaluating the effectiveness of various coping interventions—such as digital detox programs, mindfulness apps, and social media literacy workshops—would provide evidence-based recommendations for reducing digital fatigue.

Finally, the growing role of emerging technologies like virtual reality, augmented reality, and the metaverse in youth digital identity and mental health warrants rigorous examination to anticipate future challenges and opportunities in this evolving landscape.

7.4 Final Reflection

Generation Z stands at the crossroads of technological innovation and psychological complexity. As digital natives, they reap immense benefits from interconnectedness and creative expression offered by social media but face unprecedented challenges of mental fatigue and identity stress. This research emphasizes the importance of fostering a balanced digital environment—where technology enhances life rather than diminishes well-being. Achieving this balance requires coordinated efforts among educators, technology designers, mental health professionals, and policymakers. Only by recognizing and addressing the nuanced realities of Gen Z’s digital experiences can society nurture a healthier, more resilient generation poised to thrive in the digital age.

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