

SCROLL, POST, BREAKDOWN : GENERATION Z'S NARRATIVE ON DIGITAL ESCAPISM AND FRAGILE MENTAL HEALTH

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Abstract

Generation Z is the first generation to grow up fully immersed in digital technology, making social media an inseparable part of their daily lives. While social media offers spaces for communication, self-expression, and entertainment, it also plays a significant role as a form of digital escapism used to cope with psychological stress, academic pressure, and emotional exhaustion. This study aims to explore how Generation Z interprets social media as a means of digital escapism and to examine its implications for their mental health through subjective narratives. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected from 20 Generation Z participants aged 20-23 through open-ended questionnaires distributed via Google Forms. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and meanings in participants' experiences. The findings reveal that social media functions ambivalently in the lives of Generation Z. On one hand, it provides temporary emotional relief, entertainment, motivation, and a space for identity expression. On the other hand, excessive and unregulated use contributes to negative outcomes such as sleep disturbances, emotional fatigue, anxiety, and social comparison. The study also highlights that the psychological impact of social media largely depends on individual emotional regulation, interpretation, and digital awareness. Overall, this research emphasizes the importance of balanced social media use and digital literacy to help Generation Z maximize the benefits of social media while minimizing its risks to mental health.

Keywords: Generation Z, social media, digital escapism, mental health, qualitative study

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INTRODUCTION

Generation Z, often defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012, represents the first truly digital-native generation. As a result, their daily lives are heavily influenced by the digital world, and social media has become an integral part of their social interactions and self-expression.

According to Talha (2025), social media evolved from early networking sites in the late 1990s into widely adopted platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, enabling ordinary users to create profiles, connect with others, and actively participate in online information sharing.

The rapid development of digital technology over the past decade has fundamentally transformed the ways individuals communicate, build social relationships, and construct meanings of self and their surrounding environment. Social media has become an integral part of everyday life, particularly for Generation Z, who have grown up alongside the expansion of the internet and digital devices. This generation is widely recognized as *digital natives*,

characterized by higher levels of social media use compared to previous generations, making their lived experiences highly shaped by interactions in digital (Keles et al., 2020). Recent empirical studies indicate that social media use is significantly associated with mental health outcomes among adolescents and young adults. High intensity of social media engagement has been linked to increased risks of anxiety, psychological distress, sleep disturbances, and depressive symptoms (Valkenburg et al., 2022). Continuous exposure to idealized self-presentations, constant connectivity demands, and information overload places Generation Z in a vulnerable position, contributing to sustained mental fatigue and emotional pressure (Twenge & Campbell, 2018).

Within this context, the phenomenon of *digital escapism* has emerged, referring to individuals' tendency to use digital media as a means of escaping psychological stress, academic pressures, and emotional burdens of daily life. Social media platforms provide rapid distraction through entertaining content, short-form videos, and virtual interactions that offer temporary emotional comfort (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017). However, recent studies emphasize the ambivalent nature of this coping mechanism. While digital escapism may reduce stress in the short term, excessive and unregulated use of social media can ultimately exacerbate mental health problems if not accompanied by effective self-regulation strategies (Keles et al., 2020).

Conversely, contemporary literature also highlights the potential benefits of social media when used mindfully and in a controlled manner. Online social support, opportunities for self-expression, and exposure to positive content have been shown to help individuals manage stress and enhance psychological well-being under certain conditions (Valkenburg et al., 2022). These findings suggest that the relationship between social media use and mental health is not linear but rather shaped by usage duration, content characteristics, and users' underlying motivations.

Based on this background, the present study aims to explore how Generation Z interprets social media use as a form of *digital escapism* and to examine its implications for mental health through respondents' subjective narratives. Employing a qualitative approach, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of Generation Z's lived experiences in digital environments and to contribute to the growing body of empirical research on social media and mental health in contemporary society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media

Social media refers to online platforms that enable individuals or groups to interact by creating, sharing, and exchanging ideas, images, videos, and other forms of digital content within virtual communities (e.g., social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok). Another study by Li (2025), as digital technologies become more widely adopted, social media has become an essential part of children's and adolescents' lives, influencing how they communicate, share information, and build relationships. According to Imanulyaqin (2024) Research shows that social media can affect communication patterns in multiple ways. Another study by Li (2025) however, over-reliance on social media may weaken face-to-face communication and reduce the quality of interpersonal exchanges, leading to misunderstandings and conflict in real-world relationships.

Several studies in adolescent contexts indicate that while social media can facilitate information access, self-expression, and social support, excessive use is associated with negative behaviors such as social anxiety, decreased direct communication, and possible difficulties in interpersonal communication skills (Anwar et al., 2024)

In addition, patterns of family communication also influence how adolescents use and experience social media. Research has found that communication styles within families are significantly related to social media habits, where stronger family engagement and more positive communication patterns are associated with healthier social media use and less risk of problematic behaviors like addiction (Afifah & Sari, 2024).

Overall, the literature suggests that social media is reshaping communication among young people offering both opportunities for expanded social interaction and challenges to traditional interpersonal communication skills, depending on the intensity and quality of use.

Gen Z

A generation refers to a group of individuals born within a similar time period who share common social, cultural, and historical experiences. Generation Z, generally defined as individuals born after the mid-1990s, is widely recognized as the first cohort to grow up entirely within a digital environment. Another study by Sudaryanto & Sylvana (2024), Generation Z is described as “digital natives who have been exposed to the internet, social media, and digital technologies from an early age” (direct quotation) . This early and continuous exposure to technology has significantly shaped how members of Generation Z communicate, learn, and construct their identities in both online and offline contexts.

Digital Escapism

According to Okika & Bukola Blessing (2017), emotional states influence media selection, where boredom leads individuals to seek stimulating content and stress prompts them to prefer more soothing digital material. Escapism is a psychological coping mechanism that emerges when individuals feel unable to change or control their real-life circumstances, particularly during prolonged exposure to stress, monotony, or emotional discomfort. It involves a mental withdrawal from reality as a way to regulate negative emotions and temporarily alleviate psychological distress. Research indicates that escapism is often associated with feelings of emptiness, low self-esteem, and perceived powerlessness, leading individuals to seek alternative realities rather than actively confronting their problems. While moderate escapism may function as a short-term emotional relief, excessive reliance on this strategy can become maladaptive and is linked to negative mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and avoidance-based (Soraci et al., 2025).

The findings of the research demonstrate a strong association between chronic stress levels and individuals' inclination toward media escapism. As stress intensifies, people tend to engage more frequently with digital content as a means of psychological relaxation. This suggests that digital escapism functions as a form of emotional regulation by temporarily alleviating perceived stress and anxiety (Kassymova et al., 2025).

Mental Health

Mental health refers to a person's emotional, psychological, and social well-being, which affects how individuals think, feel, and behave when facing life's challenges, as well as how they manage stress, build relationships, and make decisions (Zsila & Reyes, 2023). For Generation Z, mental health has become a critical issue due to high social pressure, academic demands, and continuous exposure to digital media and social networking platforms, which often lead to feelings of insecurity, anxiety, loneliness, and emotional exhaustion (Zsila & Reyes, 2023). Previous studies indicate that excessive or maladaptive use of social media is associated with increased levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and digital burnout among Gen Z, particularly when social media is used as a form of escapism from real-life problems (Sitanggang et al., 2024). Mental health problems are closely linked to physical health, as psychological distress can negatively affect overall quality of life and daily functioning (Zsila & Reyes, 2023). In this study, mental health is understood as the perceptual and emotional

condition experienced by Generation Z in response to their use of social media as a form of digital escapism and its impact on their psychological well-being.

Another study by (Akbar et al., 2024) highlights how multiple factors including heavy social media use, race, online learning, physical activity levels, and age can negatively impact mental health. This finding supports the present research's focus on the mental well-being of Generation Z students in the digital era, especially the role of social media. However, while their study takes a broad quantitative view by identifying external variables affecting mental health, this research adopts a qualitative approach that explores students' lived experiences, particularly how they emotionally respond to social media interactions in everyday life.

(Popa, 2024), also sheds light on the mental health crisis facing Generation Z, emphasizing the increasing prevalence of anxiety, depression, and emotional distress due to social, academic, and technological pressures. This aligns with the current study's interest in understanding the emotional burden Gen Z students carry, especially within a school environment. Nevertheless, Popa's study presents a general psychological overview, while this research narrows its scope to personal narratives gathered through interviews, offering a more intimate and context-specific insight into students' emotional states.

(LaFrance, 2023) around 42% of Generation Z individuals have been diagnosed with a mental health condition, with anxiety and depression being the most common 90% and 80% respectively. This statistical data provides a strong empirical background that justifies the importance of studying Gen Z mental health. Unlike LaFrance's numerical analysis, however, this research prioritizes qualitative depth by exploring how these diagnoses manifest in students' real-life behavior, emotions, and social engagement.

(Popa, 2024), discusses the widespread nature of depression in Generation Z, marked by symptoms such as prolonged sadness, lack of motivation, and disinterest in daily life. The study links this to loneliness and societal pressure driven by social media and constant comparison. The present research shares this concern but approaches it from a phenomenological perspective, aiming to understand how students interpret and internalize these experiences. This allows the researcher to capture not only the outcomes but also the underlying emotional processes involved.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to explore and describe in depth the phenomenon of social media use as a form of digital escapism and its relationship with the mental health of Generation Z. This approach is considered appropriate as it allows the researcher to capture participants' subjective experiences, perceptions, and meanings within their natural contexts. Descriptive qualitative research emphasizes understanding social phenomena from the participants' perspectives and presenting them as they occur, without manipulating research variables (Creswell, 2014).

Through this approach, the study focuses on participants' narratives, expressions, and lived experiences related to psychological pressure, emotional vulnerability, and self-expression in digital spaces. Data are collected in natural settings and analyzed interpretatively to produce a comprehensive description of the emotional and social dynamics experienced by Generation Z in their interactions with social media. This aligns with the purpose of descriptive qualitative research, which seeks to describe phenomena systematically and factually based on empirical data obtained from the field (Sugiyono, 2019).

The primary data sources in this research are members 20 respondent classified as of Generation Z (born between 1997-2012) who actively use social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, and who have experienced or expressed concerns related to mental well-being. These participants provide personal narratives through interviews about

their experiences of using social media as a form of digital escapism and its perceived impact on their emotional and psychological states.

Additionally, secondary data sources may include relevant documentation such as screenshots (with consent), social media posts (anonymized), and previous research or academic literature that supports the interpretation of participants' experiences.

This research employs qualitative data collection through open-ended questionnaires distributed via Google Form. This method was chosen because it allows the researcher to reach a wider and more diverse group of Generation Z participants efficiently, as they are active users of digital platforms. The questionnaire was designed with open-ended questions to encourage participants to share their personal thoughts and reflective experiences regarding the use of social media as a form of digital escapism.

The Google Form includes questions exploring several themes, such as the reasons for using social media when facing emotional distress, the feelings experienced after social media use, and participants' perceptions of the positive and negative impacts of this behavior on their mental health. The collected responses provide valuable qualitative insights into how Generation Z perceives and narrates their digital habits. The data were later organized and categorized into thematic areas to facilitate further analysis.

This study employs Thematic Analysis to interpret the narratives collected from participants through Google Form. Thematic Analysis is a method used to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within data. This method is particularly suitable for qualitative descriptive research where the primary goal is to explore how individuals make meaning of their experiences, in this case regarding the use of social media as a form of digital escapism and its impact on mental health.

The data analysis process in this study consists of several stages. The first stage is data transcription, where all open-ended responses from Google Form are organized into textual form to facilitate analysis. The second stage is familiarization with the data, in which the researcher reads the responses repeatedly to gain a deep understanding of the participants' narratives and begin identifying initial ideas or patterns in behavior.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Respondents

This study involved 20 respondents classified as Generation Z, aged between 20 and 23 years. The respondents came from two main backgrounds, namely university students and young workers. Demographically, female respondents were more dominant than male respondents; however, both groups demonstrated a high level of engagement in social media use.

The social media platforms most frequently used by the respondents were Instagram and TikTok (Candice L. Odgers, 2019). These platforms were chosen because they provide visually appealing content, short-form entertainment, and rapid emotional stimulation. This finding reinforces the study by (Montag et al., 2021), which suggests that visual-based platforms are particularly attractive to younger generations due to their ability to elicit immediate emotional responses.

Intensity and Patterns of Social Media Use

The findings indicate that most respondents spend between 1-6 hours per day accessing social media, with several respondents reporting usage exceeding 6 hours daily. The most common activities include aimless scrolling, watching entertainment content, searching for information, and interacting with friends.

This pattern suggests that social media has transformed from merely a communication tool into a space for entertainment and emotional distraction (Meng et al., 2021).

Social Media as a Form of Digital Escapism

Many respondents admitted using social media as a form of digital escapism from stress, academic pressure, and emotional fatigue. Anisa stated that social media provides a space to express emotions that are difficult to convey directly, while Yuliana noted that it serves as entertainment when feeling bored or stressed.

Rudi Ariawan added that social media often helps distract from exhausting routines, even though this coping mechanism is temporary. This aligns with the concept of digital escapism, defined as the tendency to use digital activities as short-term emotional coping mechanisms (Jouhki et al., 2022)

According to Valkenburg et al. (2022), further note that although digital escapism can provide short-term emotional relief, excessive use may worsen mental health conditions.

Emotional Impacts of Social Media Use

Respondents reported diverse emotional responses after using social media. Some felt more entertained and motivated, while others experienced no significant emotional change.

Putri Rahmadani Fauzi stated that motivational content on social media often provides positive emotional encouragement. Similarly, Sardiah mentioned that certain content makes her feel more grateful for her life. These findings align with (2023, 2021) who found that consuming positive social media content can enhance subjective well-being when done consciously.

However, negative impacts were also prominent. Valen and Maya Damayanti reported that excessive social media use led to sleep deprivation and emotional fatigue. This finding supports (Verduyn et al., 2021), who concluded that passive social media use such as aimless scrolling is associated with decreased psychological well-being.

Social Comparison and Mental Health

Most respondents admitted to comparing their lives with others after viewing social media posts. Yani stated that other people's posts sometimes made her question her own achievements, while Inul reported that certain content triggered feelings of insecurity.

In contrast, Zul Fitrah perceived others' posts as a source of motivation. This variation suggests that the impact of social comparison largely depends on how individuals interpret and regulate their emotional responses to content on social media. Research shows that online social comparison is significantly associated with psychological distress and mental health outcomes among adolescents and young adults, and that the way users manage emotions can influence whether the comparison experience leads to negative effects such as lower life satisfaction or increased anxiety (Tedjawidjaja & Christanti, 2022).

Social Media, Sleep, and Mental Fatigue

The findings reveal that intensive social media use, particularly at night, negatively affects respondents' sleep quality. Valen reported that scrolling before bedtime frequently causes him to sleep late. Similarly, Maya Damayanti stated that despite minimal physical activity, her body often feels fatigued due to late-night social media use.

These findings are consistent with research showing that nighttime social media use is associated with increased pre-sleep cognitive arousal and poorer sleep quality, which can contribute to delayed sleep onset, shorter sleep duration, and elevated emotional stress due to concerns such as fear of missing out and rumination triggered by online interaction (Scandinavian Journal of Psychology, 2022).

Social Media as a Source of Motivation and Meaning

Despite its negative impacts, social media also functions as a source of motivation and self-reflection. Sardiah stated that content related to family and social life makes her appreciate what she has more deeply. Putri Rahmadani Fauzi added that posts about others' achievements motivate her to pursue personal growth.

This supports the findings of (2023, 2021), who suggested that positive social media content can enhance psychological well-being when consumed selectively.

The Ambiguity of Social Media: Between Escape and Pressure

This study highlights the ambiguous role of social media in the lives of Generation Z. On one hand, social media provides emotional relief; on the other hand, it also generates psychological pressure. This phenomenon aligns with the concept of *emotional ambivalence* in digital media use, where individuals simultaneously experience positive and negative emotions (Verduyn et al., 2021).

Social Media and Identity Construction among Generation Z

Some respondents use social media as a means of expressing their identity. Anisa felt that posting content on social media helped her express emotions that are difficult to articulate verbally, while Rihah Jannah stated that emotional posts function more as emotional release than as validation-seeking. These findings are supported by research showing that social media platforms serve as important spaces for adolescents to express themselves, experiment with different aspects of their identity, and build a coherent sense of self through ongoing digital self-presentation and social interaction (Avci et al., 2025).

Healthy Coping Strategies Beyond Social Media

Although social media is frequently used as an escape, respondents also demonstrated alternative coping strategies such as exercising, socializing with friends, and engaging in offline activities. These findings are consistent with research showing that experiences gained through offline activities such as real-world interactions and satisfying psychological needs outside of social media play a crucial role in adolescents' mental health and can act as a counterbalance to excessive use of digital (Van de Castele et al., 2024).

Digital Awareness and Self-Control

Most respondents demonstrated digital awareness in their use of social media. Zul Fitrah and Yatma In'na emphasized the importance of limiting usage duration to prevent interference with real-life responsibilities. According to Van de Castele et al. (2024) highlighted that digital awareness is a key factor in maintaining psychological well-being in the digital era.

Synthesis of Research Findings

Overall, social media in the lives of Generation Z functions as a form of digital escapism, a source of entertainment and motivation, a trigger for social comparison, and a space for identity expression. Therefore, maintaining a balanced approach to social media use is essential for safeguarding the mental health of Generation Z (Odgers & Jensen, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that social media plays a complex and ambivalent role in the lives of Generation Z. On one hand, social media functions as a form of digital escapism that provides temporary emotional relief from stress, academic pressure, and daily exhaustion. It also serves as a source of entertainment, motivation, and self-expression that can contribute positively to emotional well-being when used consciously and selectively.

On the other hand, excessive and unregulated social media use is associated with negative outcomes, including sleep disturbances, emotional fatigue, increased anxiety, and tendencies toward social comparison. Passive consumption patterns, such as aimless scrolling and prolonged nighttime use, were particularly linked to declining psychological well-being.

The findings further demonstrate that the impact of social media on mental health is not uniform but highly dependent on individual interpretation, emotional regulation, and digital awareness. While some respondents perceived social comparison as motivating, others experienced decreased self-confidence and psychological pressure.

Overall, this study emphasizes the importance of balance, self-control, and digital literacy in social media use. Strengthening awareness of healthy coping strategies both online and offline can help Generation Z maximize the benefits of social media while minimizing its risks to mental health.

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