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Stress, anxiety, depression and social media in generation Z: A scoping review

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Abstract

Background: Social media is deeply embedded in Generation Z's daily routines, shaping their social lives and psychological well-being. Growing concerns have emerged regarding its adverse effects on stress, anxiety, and depression.

Purpose: To review and map existing research that explores the link between social media use and mental health outcomes in this population.

Method: A scoping review conducted through a systematic search of three databases: PubMed, Science Direct, and Medline. The selection criteria focused on studies published in English or Indonesian between 2015 and 2025. This study concentrated on research examining the correlation between social media usage and mental health outcomes, particularly stress, anxiety, and depression, in Generation Z.

Results: Fourteen eligible articles were analysed. Three main themes were identified: (1) Type of user, encompassing excessive and addictive users, (2) Psychological symptoms, characterized by diminished social functioning, memory impairment, feelings of loneliness, and sleep disruptions, and (3) Mental Health issues, including stress, anxiety, and depression.

Conclusion: Evidence indicates a correlation between social media usage and negative mental health issues in Generation Z. Preventive strategies and targeted interventions are essential to address and mitigate stress, anxiety, and depression among social media users.

Keywords: Anxiety; Depression; Generation Z; Social Media; Stress.

INTRODUCTION

Generation Z or known as Gen Z, are the first generation to grow up with advanced technology, including smartphones, the internet, and social media, making them "digital natives". Social media consists of mobile and web systems that let people interact with each other, communities to communities, or individuals to connect in virtual networks platforms like Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter, where people may exchange and collaborate on many kinds of digital material, including messages, photographs, videos, and information (Ahmed, Ahmad, Ahmad, & Zakaria, 2019). As a result, social media usage has become a defining characteristic of Generation Z's daily life and

Generation Z participates as active social media and internet user (Li, Jiang, Yan, & Li, 2024).

The number of internet users continues to rise globally, with 79% of the world's population engaging in social media (Petrosyan, 2023). In Indonesia, social media users reached to 50.2% out of the total populations by January 2025. The growth of social media has elicited increasing apprehension regarding its possible psychological hazards, especially among Generation Z, who are navigating critical physical, emotional, and social transitions during their adolescent. These changes increase the susceptibility of individuals to psychological disturbances,

particularly when in conjunction with the pressures of digital environments (Zahara & Wisnusakti, 2022). A study argues that adolescents who frequently access social media are at higher risk of experiencing poor sleep quality, which may lead to increased anxiety and depression. Other studies have linked excessive social media use with increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, suggesting that adolescents often turn to these platforms as a coping mechanism, thereby reinforcing negative emotional cycles (Prasad, Ait Souabni, Anugwom, Aneni, Anand, Urhi, & Oladunjoye, 2023).

The process of formation of identities in adolescents is significantly impacted by social media. It serves as a medium for emotional expression and support-seeking, while facilitating the sharing of interests, values, and experiences through photographs, videos, and written content to construct one's self-image (Valkenburg & Peter, 2021). As digital platforms become integral to communication and self-expression, Generation Z increasingly uses them to construct and negotiate their identities (Butler, 2024). Although this exploration of identity can be uplifting, it is frequently hindered by false representations of life on the internet. Continuous exposure to idealized representations of others on social media can result in detrimental social comparisons, hence amplifying feelings of inadequacy, fear, and humiliation (Perloff, 2024). Furthermore, comparing oneself to others on social media significantly contributes to psychological distress, including anxiety and low self-esteem (Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2024). Research has shown a strong link between social media comparison and increased depressive symptoms, especially among adolescent girls (Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian, & Halliwell, 2025).

Social media addiction is increasingly common among Generation Z. The excessive utilization and compulsive monitoring of social media lead to sleep disturbances, diminished physical activity, and compromised academic performance (Woods & Scott, 2016). These factors collectively heighten the risk of developing mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, and depression. Given the large amount of literature relating social media use to mental health issues, a scoping review is necessary to comprehensively map the data, identify knowledge

gaps, and inform future interventions geared to Generation Z. This study maps and analyzes the existing evidence on how social media use affects Generation Z stress, anxiety, and depression (Tullett-Prado, Stavropoulos, Gomez, & Doley, 2023).

RESEARCH METHOD

A scoping review to map the existing literature of the major ideas supporting a research area. This scoping review examined the impact of social media usage on stress, anxiety, and depression among Generation Z, including identifying factors that influence these mental health outcomes in relation to social media use because this method is comprehensive and is a thorough and broad method, which is suitable for this research question as it can cover a wide range of studies and provide a complete overview of previously existing research. Searches were conducted a systematic search through three databases such as PubMed, Science Direct and Medline with relevant keywords such as using the text words found in the titles. The keywords are "stress", "anxiety", "depression", "social media" and "Generation Z" and after founding some key terms through the keywords, then the key terms will combine using Boolean operators "AND" and "OR".

The inclusion criteria or the eligibility for this study were based on Population, Concept, and Context (PCC) strategy. The population included are Generation Z and all population that include to key terms for Generation Z. The concept was impact on mental health issues specifically stress, anxiety and depression in Generation Z. The context included the role of social media use in shaping mental health issues outcomes among Generation Z. Any research with an abstract that is not answer the current research question which can be seen from the general conclusion, do not have full text or free access, population other than Generation Z, and paper used research methods other than qualitative or quantitative were an exclusion for this research. A total of 1.320 publications were discovered, comprising 917 from Medline, 239 from PubMed, and 164 from ScienceDirect. All retrieved articles at this step were loaded into the Covidence application to enable filtering and data extraction. Out of the total articles, 114 were recognized as duplicates and eliminated, resulting in 1.206 articles for further

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examination. Subsequent to the elimination of duplicates, the researchers examined the titles and meticulously assessed the abstracts of each publication. Consequently, 1.138 articles were removed for failing to match the inclusion criteria, leaving 68 articles for the subsequent round.

The researchers evaluated the full text of the remaining 68 articles. At this stage, 54 items were excluded for the following reasons: Eleven articles were excluded for conceptual inaccuracies, as they did not examine the influence of social media usage on stress, anxiety, and depression; twenty-three articles were excluded for contextual irrelevance, as they failed to address the impact of social media on the mental health of Generation Z; six articles were excluded for demographic inappropriateness, as the respondents did not belong to Generation Z and were not encompassed by the key terms associated with this cohort; and fourteen articles were excluded for utilizing research designs that were neither quantitative nor qualitative.

A total of 14 publications were ultimately selected for inclusion in this study. The concluding scoping review displayed the search results and the study inclusion process in a PRISMA-ScR flow diagram. In the data extraction phase, the researchers separately retrieved data from each article. The extraction method adhered to a seven-item format established by the research team encompassing: title, author, year, country, study design, sample, and findings. This autonomous methodology was utilized to uphold integrity and reduce bias. A consensus was reached among researchers to address any disagreement.

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RESEARCH RESULTS

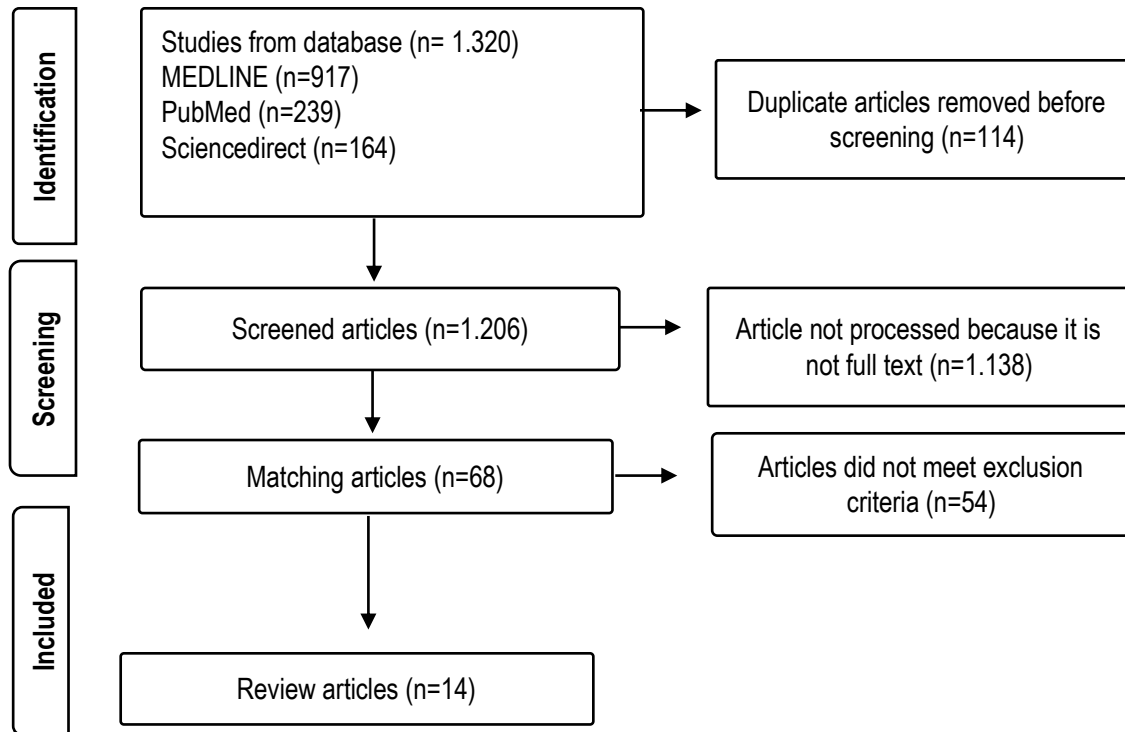


Figure Flow Prism Diagram

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Table Summary of Review Article

(Author, Year) (Country)	Purpose	Method	Results
(Ergün et al., 2025) (Turkey)	To investigated how social media addiction is associated with three components of mental health: depression, anxiety, and stress.	Structural equation modeling	Social media addiction was associated with poorer mental health via internet addiction and phubbing. More specifically, associations between social media addiction and stress, and social media addiction and anxiety were explained by both internet addiction and phubbing.
(Malaeb et al., 2021) (USA)	To examine the association between problematic social media use with depression, anxiety, insomnia, and stress in a sample of young Lebanese adults.	Cross-sectional study	Higher problematic social media use was significantly associated with higher depression, anxiety, and insomnia, but not stress. Stress mediated the relation between depression, anxiety, insomnia, and problematic social media use.
(Sha & Dong, 2021) (China)	To know effect of depression, anxiety, and stress between “ <i>TikTok</i> ” use disorder and memory loss.	Structural equation modeling	a partial mediation effect of depression and anxiety between “ <i>TikTok</i> ” use disorder and forward digit span. A partial mediation effect of depression, anxiety, and stress between “ <i>TikTok</i> ” use disorder and backward digit span is also shown. These results also show gender differences.
(Ojha et al., 2021) (India)	To assess the relationship between the pattern of SNS use among young adults and depression, anxiety, and social comparison.	Cross-sectional study	We collected data from 220 students (mean age 20.44 years). Impression management was associated with higher social comparison, depression, and anxiety scores. Social comparison had a significant correlation between depression and anxiety scores.

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(Vieira et al., 2022) (Brazil)	To assess the prevalence of excessive use of social media and associated factors, as well as possible health consequences in high school students in southern Brazil.	Cross-sectional study	The prevalence of students who reported excessive use of social media was 35.9%. The groups that were most susceptible to excessive use of social media had the following profile: female, black/brown skin, aged between 18 and 20 years old, attending the first year of high school. Excessive use of social media was shown to be associated with smoking, risk of depression, anxiety and stress, high risk of suicide and drug use.
(Yu & Du, 2022) (China)	To investigated the associations of the youths' daily use of social networking sites/apps and their social networking addiction with their mental health and quality of life during the pandemic.	Cross-sectional study	Participants who used social networking sites/apps but for <3 h per day (excluding students who never used social networking sites/apps) showed significantly fewer problems of depression, anxiety, and stress than did those who spent more than 3 h per day on social networking sites/apps. Social networking addiction was found to be consistently associated with poor mental health and health-related quality of life.
(Cui et al., 2023) (China)	To evaluate latent subgroups of problematic social media use among college students and to investigate the impact of depression, anxiety, and stress on these latent subgroups.	Cross-sectional study	Problematic social media use of Chinese college students can be categorized into four latent subgroups, namely, the high-risk group, the moderate-risk with pleasure group, the moderate-risk with compulsion group, and the low-risk group. The regression model showed that there was a significant difference between the high-risk group and the low-risk group on the stress scale. There was a significant difference between the moderate-risk with pleasure group and the moderate-risk with compulsion group on the depression scale.
(Shannon et al, 2024) (USA)	To examine the relationship between changes over time in problematic	Cross-sectional study	Increases in problematic social media use were significantly associated with increased depressive symptoms and loneliness

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	social media use and mental health outcomes in students.		between visits. Resilience significantly moderated the relationship between increased problematic social media use and heightened perceived stress. Poor mental health at baseline did not predict increased problematic social media use over time. Contrarily to problematic use, frequency of social media use was not significantly correlated with any mental health measures at baseline.
(Balpande et al., 2024) (India)	To assess the psychological effects of social media/media use and coping mechanisms adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic.	Cross-sectional study	It was observed that around one-fifth of the participants have moderate depression, followed by mild 10.97%; one-fifth of the participants have moderate levels of anxiety 20.41% followed by extremely severe anxiety 13.27% and about two-thirds of the study participants having no stress 64.29% followed by mild stress 14.80% and moderate stress 9.69%.
(Parmar et al., 2024) (India)	To investigate the prevalence of cyberbullying, social media addiction, and their associated mental health conditions, as well as to explore the associated factors among medical students.	Cross-sectional study	The prevalence of cyberbullying, social media addiction, depression, anxiety, and stress among participants was 27.5% (95% CI: 23.4%–31.9%), 32.1% (95% CI: 27.8%–36.7%), 37.6% (95% CI: 33.1%–42.2%), 41.9% (95% CI: 37.3%–46.6%), and 46.2% (95% CI: 41.6%–50.9%), respectively. Factors associated with increased risk of being a cyber victim included older age, female gender, later years of study, increased daily mobile and social media usage, social media as the preferred mobile usage, and social media addiction. Factors associated with being a cyberbully were similar, except for the male gender. Both cyber victimization and social media addiction were significantly associated with higher odds of depression [aOR-2.5 (1.6–3.9) and 2.1 (1.4–3.2)], anxiety [aOR-2.2 (1.4-3.4) and 1.9 (1.3–2.8)] and stress [aOR-2.8 (1.8-4.3) and 2.4 (1.6–3.6)].

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(Shiraly et al., 2024) (Iran)	To assessed the relationships between SMU and coping style with psychological distress and academic performance of medical students.	Cross-sectional study	Students with higher levels of psychological distress were more likely to be engaged in frequent social media use. Spending more than two hours a day on social media use had a positive association with maladaptive coping ($p < 0.001$), particularly with substance use and behavioral disengagement both of which could negatively affect academic performance. Maladaptive coping mediated the relationship between students' SMU and psychological distress.
(Taddi et al., 2021) (India)	To study the impact of social media on the mental wellbeing of adolescents, and the associated potential dangers in India.	Cross-sectional study	Excessive use of social media is correlated with increased stress, anxiety, and depression. Adolescents engage in compulsive behaviors such as scrolling in the middle of the night, which negatively impacts their mental and physical health, and leads to significant sleep disruption. Findings from the study aim to provide insights into the current state of adolescent mental health and inform strategies to promote positive wellbeing in the Indian population.
(Luque-Reca et al., 2024) (Spain)	To introduces a novel comprehensive scale, the Problematic Smartphone and Social Network Use Scale (PSSNUS), meticulously developed and validated across five studies.	A mixed-methods approach across five stages	The PSSNUS manifested as a reliable (ω ranging 0.70–0.89) instrument, comprising a structure with five key factors ($\chi^2 = 173.994$, $df = 125$, $p = 0.002$, $CFI = 0.994$, $CFI = 0.993$, $SRMR = 0.039$, and $RMSEA = 0.027$) that capture both individual and social aspects of this construct: Psychological dependence (PD), Online interaction preference (OIP), Digital recognition desire (DRD), Social networks control seeking (SNCS), and Productivity loss (PL).
(Lee et al., 2023) (Malaysia)	To determine the prevalence and factors associated with cyberbullying and social media addiction.	Cross-sectional study	Psychological motives such as positive attitudes toward cyberbullying and gaining power were associated with cyberbullying perpetration. Cybervictimization doubled the

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tendency to depression (aOR 2.50, 95% CI [1.23, 5.08], $p = 0.012$), anxiety (aOR 2.38, 95% CI [1.29, 4.40], $p = 0.006$), and stress (aOR 2.85, 95% CI [1.41, 5.77], $p = 0.004$), whilst social media addiction was associated with a higher tendency to depression (aOR 1.18, 95% CI [1.10, 1.26], $p < 0.001$), anxiety (aOR 1.15, 95% CI [1.08, 1.22], $p < 0.001$), and stress (aOR 1.21, 95% CI [1.12, 1.32], $p < 0.001$). Medical schools in Malaysia need policies and guidelines against cyberbullying.

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DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was to map and analyze the existing literature on the impact of social media use on Generation Z's stress, anxiety and depression. Fourteen articles were analysed obtaining 3 major themes (Balpande, Pusdekar, Bhagat, Patil, & Saoji, 2024). Out of 14 articles, 10 articles discussed about the type of social media users, especially excessive and addicted users. Of the entire article, the most discussed theme is about excessive use of social media, where users spend three hours or more per day on digital platforms, as mentioned in seven studies (Yu & Du, 2022). Ten articles raised the topic of type of users with varying emphasis, while two of them alluded to addictive users, namely individuals who not only spend a lot of time on social media but also show compulsive behavior, emotional dependence, and difficulty stopping use even though it has a negative impact on daily life (Lee, Kaur, Shaker, Yee, Sham, & Siau, 2023). Most studies indicate that excessive use of social media correlates with increased symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression, particularly among adolescents and university students (Hu, Hu, & Hou, 2022). These individuals often feel pressured to maintain their self-image online, engage in intense social comparisons, and are continuously exposed to emotionally charged content. Although not all studies establish a definitive causal relationship, the general trend suggests that the duration of social media use has a significant impact on psychological well-being (Malaeb, Salameh, Barbar, Awad, Haddad, Hallit, & Hallit, 2021).

Stress is among the most frequently reported issues, especially when individuals are exposed to emotional content, experience cyberbullying, or feel obligated to maintain an ideal online persona. Psychological distress often arises from social expectations and the need to always present a "perfect" image on social media (Sha, & Dong, 2021). Such psychological pressure manifests in significant stress symptoms, both emotionally and physically. Anxiety also emerges as a major symptom identified in eleven of the reviewed articles, many of which highlight how fear of missing out (FOMO) and social comparison can exacerbate users' anxiety (Ojha, Soohinda, Sampath, & Dutta, 2021). Anxiety with the process of comparing oneself to others on social

media. This aligns with Festinger's social comparison theory, which posits that individuals tend to evaluate themselves based on comparisons with others a process that, in the digital context, often leads to feelings of inadequacy (Popat, & Tarrant, 2023). Depression has also been reported as a consequence of continuous exposure to negative interactions and social pressure online. Individuals who experienced negative judgments or bullying on social media displayed higher symptoms of depression (Shiraly, Roshanfekar, Asadollahi, & Griffiths, 2024). Conducted a meta-analysis concluding that increased social media use significantly raises the risk of depression among adolescents (Carter, Rees, Hale, Bhattacharjee, & Paradkar, 2016). Some studies note that the effects of social media use on mental health are more pronounced in females. Females are more likely to experience heightened anxiety due to social media exposure. Several studies reported a predominance of female participants in their samples suggesting that females tend to be more active social media users than males, thereby indicating a potentially higher psychological risk (Cui, Wang, Liu, & Yang, 2023). Female individuals, particularly older women and those identifying as Black or Brown, are more likely to engage in excessive social media use. Females with fewer followers are more vulnerable to negative social comparisons that affect their psychological well-being (Vieira, Viero, Saes-Silva, Silva, Silva, Saes, & Dumith, 2022).

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that gender is one of the demographic factors influencing the tendency to use social media, which in turn may increase the risk of mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, and impairments in social and cognitive functioning (Twenge & Campbell, 2018). Several international studies support this conclusion, showing that adolescent females tend to use social media more frequently than males, and this is correlated with increased symptoms of depression and anxiety. Heavy digital media use is more strongly associated with lower psychological well-being among adolescent females than among males. High levels of social media use are linked to increased depressive symptoms and decreased affective well-being among adolescent females with low emotional self-efficacy.

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These findings highlight the importance of considering gender differences in research and interventions related to social media use and mental health. Did not find significant differences between males and females regarding the impact of social media on stress, anxiety, or depression, indicating that further investigation is needed to gain a deeper understanding of the role of gender (Ergün, Özkan, & Griffiths, 2025).

Although many studies point to social media as a contributing factor to mental health problems, it is important to note that not all users experience clinical symptoms such as stress, anxiety, or depression. In some cases, the symptoms remain within the realm of psychological and behavioral issues, such as sleep disturbances, loneliness, reduced social functioning, and memory problems. While these may not meet the threshold for mental disorders, they are nonetheless relevant as they can evolve into more serious conditions if left unaddressed. High levels of social media use increase users' feelings of loneliness, as the interactions that occur online are often superficial and lack emotional depth (Shannon, Bush, Shvetz, Paquin, Morency, Hellemans, & Guimond, 2024). Sleep disturbances are another important concern. Few studies found that nighttime use of social media disrupts the body's natural sleep rhythm, reduces melatonin production, and causes daytime fatigue. Chronic sleep problems are known to exacerbate psychological conditions and increase the risk of depression and anxiety. Chronic stress from social media use may impair cognitive functions, including short-term memory. "TikTok" with its infinite scrolling feature, very strong algorithmic personalization, and short but emotionally intense content, is considered more easily addictive than other platforms.

The social media platforms used in the studies analyzed included Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Snapchat, with TikTok and Instagram dominating in producing negative psychological impacts. Instagram is also often mentioned in studies because of its association with body image and social pressure. The number of followers and engagement levels on Instagram are associated with levels of depression and anxiety, especially in female college students. This platform emphasizes visual aspects and social comparison, which can exacerbate feelings of insecurity or low self-esteem. Meanwhile,

WhatsApp and Facebook are used more for social communication but still have the potential to trigger stress. Another consistent finding is the decline in real-world social functioning. Several studies showed that the more adolescents are engaged in online activities, the lower their ability to engage in face-to-face interactions (Munn, Peters, Stern, Tufanaru, McArthur, & Aromataris, 2018). Adolescents' face-to-face communication skills declined as exposure to digital media increased. Regarding type of users, the reviewed studies generally classify social media users into two broad categories: excessive users and addicted users. Excessive users are typically defined as those who spend three or more hours per day on social media, a higher time threshold (4–5 hours) to define excessive use. These discrepancies suggest that there is no universal consensus in the literature regarding the amount of time that constitutes excessive use; hence, interpretations should be made cautiously (Parmar, Yogesh, Damor, Gandhi, & Parmar, 2024).

Not all excessive users exhibit addiction symptoms, most of them report higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression compared to users with more limited exposure. Among addicted users, however, these symptoms appear more severe and pervasive. They display behavioral addiction traits such as loss of control, withdrawal-like symptoms, and emotional attachment to social media. Compulsive social media use can lead to a decline in academic performance and real-life social relationships, as well as worsening symptoms of stress and depression. Behavioral addiction models suggest that the repeated activation of the brain's dopaminergic reward system by social media encourages the pursuit of instant gratification and impairs long-term emotional regulation. Social media use can indeed lead to stress, anxiety, and depression either directly or indirectly (Taddi, Kohli, & Puri, 2024). The severity and type of symptoms are significantly influenced by the manner and intensity of use, as well as by user characteristics. Although some users may only experience psychological symptoms such as loneliness or sleep disturbances, these symptoms should not be overlooked, as they have the potential to develop into more serious mental disorders. In light of these findings, it is essential to adopt a proactive approach to understanding and addressing the impact of social media use, particularly

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among Generation Z, who are in a vulnerable stage of psychosocial development (Primack, Shensa, Sidani, Whaite, yi Lin, Rosen, & Miller, 2017).

Despite the associated risks, research also shows that social media can have positive effects. It provides broad access to important information in fields such as academics and health, facilitates emotional expression, and plays a role in identity formation especially during adolescence. Furthermore, digital platforms allow users to form social connections and offer a space to receive emotional support. However, these benefits can turn into threats to mental health and well-being if social media is used excessively, such as for more than five hours per day, as highlighted in several studies (Tiggemann & Slater, 2023).

CONCLUSION

Excessive and addicted social media use significantly worsens psychological symptoms like loneliness, sleep disturbances, memory loss, and reduced social functioning, which in turn increase mental health problems. Both the amount and quality of social media use, including exposure to negative content, contribute to these issues. Addressing this requires comprehensive strategies focused on digital literacy, healthy coping, and balanced usage habits.

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