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Connected But Lonely: Exploring the Relationship between Social Media Use and Emotional Isolation in Generation Z

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ABSTRACT

Growing social media has a significant impact on the communication, interactions and social relationship-building processes of Generation Z. There has been an increasing concern about emotional disconnect and psychological wellbeing of youth in an era of increased digital connectivity. This research investigates the effects of social media usage on FoMo, loneliness/disconnect and passive use among Gen-Z, specifically on how overuse of social media can lead to increased emotional loneliness, social disconnect, and FoMo for Gen-Z. The study is guided by theories of Digital Communication, Social Comparison and Psychological Dependency to see if social networks have caused an increase in psychological loneliness, fears of missing out and hence decreased face-to-face interactions and emotional wellbeing. The data collection was done using correlational and survey research designs to explore the pattern and relationship between social media consumption and emotional isolation of the generation Z. Additionally, mediating factors such as gender, number of platforms used and type of interaction on the online platforms were also examined. The results provide significant insights into the paradox of digitally connected and emotionally disconnected young adults. The correlation analysis revealed a moderate to weak positive relationship between social media use, FoMo, Lonliness and Passive social media use variables. Mediation analysis indicated that social media use has both direct and indirect effects on emotional isolation. The results indicate that FoMO partially but positively and significantly mediates the relationship between duration of

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social-media usage and social isolation/loneliness, whereas social media use has a direct significant positive effect on social isolation/loneliness. The study provided the valuable inputs to the growing academic debates regarding role of digital life and youth mental health, as well as behaviors, particularly when it concerns social media dependence among young people from Generation Z. The study will help educators, policymakers, mental health providers, and families to create strategies and interventions to foster more positive digital interactions and experiences that help youth lessen emotional isolation.

Keywords: Generation Z; Social Media Use; Emotional Isolation; Digital Connectivity; Loneliness; Mental Health; Online Interaction; Social Comparison; Psychological Well-being; Youth Behavior

Introduction

Current notion of interaction, communication and identity formation in 21st Century has been affected by advent of social media. YouTube, TikTok, Snapchat, Facebook, and X are a thing of the past, as social media has become a part of life today – particularly for Gen Z (mid-1990s to early-2010s). Generation Z is the first generation to have grown up in the digital age with the smartphone and 24/7 internet and connectivity. Popularly known as the "digital native," these generations are surrounded by messages within digital technologies, from allowing them to connect with people to allow them to entertain, educate and even express emotion. Social media is often viewed as a means to communicate and connect the world; however, a growing scholarship base suggests that the hyper-exposure to this type of social media content can cause emotional isolation, feelings of loneliness and poorer well-being in children and adolescents.[1]

Emotional: feeling disconnected from others, although there could be close or not so close physical and virtual relationships. In today's society, people have hundreds of contacts online with them and also tend to feel lonely and dejected. While studies show that social media can create a "false" sense of intimacy of society, in reality it does not provide actual intimacy.[2] This is especially true for Generation Z, who have been postponing the process of talking to each other, but proving who is the better performer by likes and comments, sharing, following a person's count etc. in their lives. More and more interaction with idealized online lives can worsen the social comparison phenomenon, feelings of „fear of missing out' (FOMO) and concerns about self-esteem, which can subsequently lead to increased loneliness and emotional distress.[3]

Social Networking sites have experienced tremendous growth and transformed the communication of the youths. The face-to-face communication has been gradually and increasingly superseded by digital communication which has brought about changes in emotional involvement and social bonding. Others argue that, while there can be more convenience and accessibility when communicating online, it can lack in emotion and authenticity as in offline communication.[4] Past studies revealed positive associations between high media use and emotional exhaustion, loneliness, depression and anxiety among adolescent & young adolescent social media users.[5] In addition, passive social use (passive scrolling, watching social users without any

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interaction) has been associated to lower emotional gratification and higher loneliness level.[6]

Generation Z is among the most digital generation to come since the introduction of the television show. For this generation, communicating, connecting, entertaining, learning and articulating our identity is several hours a day, via social networking platforms. But the recent psychological studies are definitely steps towards voice emotional bondage while not being linked digitally. The longitudinal studies indicated that those who consumed social media passively over time were more likely to experience loneliness.[7] Different research showed significant correlation between the problematic use of social media among university students and emotional loneliness, which negatively affects their psychological well-being.[8] Some of the results include: There can be a negative impact on the face-to-face relationship with digital engagement, and vulnerable, the emotional condition of the young users.

Indeed, there is a multi-layer and complex relationship between social media and loneliness. Social media can be used to enhance social support structures, researchers suggest, as well as communication. Online communities can provide emotional support, an expression of self, and a connection between others in the community who think the same way about things as the other person who is marginalized.[9] Others argue however that with too much emphasis on online interaction, it can lead to an inability to communicate in the real world, and an emotional disconnect. According to the “social displacement theory” the greater the online presence and time spent is the less opportunity there will be to develop meaningful relationships within FTF, and the greater the sense of social isolation will become.[10] Conversely, the “stimulation hypothesis” indicates that social news could even possibly strengthen existing relationships when stimulated extensively at high levels and used actively, and perceived as positively stimulating the relationship.[11] Both sides showed that it is crucial to delve deeper into how social media affects social-emotional aspects of social life within the Gen Z.

One of these important reasons which leads to emotional isolation is social comparison. Social media are used to showcase and encourage people to present a “perfect” image of their lives, celebrating success, abundance, happiness and beauty. When adolescents get access to such filtered information, they might engage in negative comparison, being discontented with their lives, feeling insecure and lonely.[12] Engaging more with social media compared to others and comparing oneself with others has contributed to negative consequences in terms of emotional distress and low self-esteem.[13] Moreover, maintaining a desirable social media presence can cause emotional stress and anxiety, particularly for youth and teens seeking influences to accept and validate their viewpoints.

One of them is Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), which is a feeling of anxiety when someone thinks that they are missing what someone else is having fun doing and earning rewards from. There are new updates, social events and activities of peers that are being reinforced and reinforced in social media, leading to a reinforcement of social concerns about exclusion and inadequacy. The research has reported that FoMO is significantly correlated with SNS addiction and emotional problems, such as feelings of dissatisfaction and loneliness, experienced by the youth.[14] To not appear more socially excluded, teens seem to feel they need to be constantly connected to the

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Internet, which could lead to greater emotional fatigue and stress for teens than less. Overreliance on and over-use of social media is another aspect of emotional isolation. By being over-communicative in the cyber (online) world, interpersonal skills, empathy and opportunities for quality face-to-face communication can be adversely affected. Internet users who were using the Internet as a major mode of communication were likely to have a disadvantageous experience in situations of interpersonal relationships.[15] Moreover, algorithm-driven platforms are built to keep people engaged, and can promote some repetitive behaviors when checking them and add to longer screen time. This is an addictive design feature that can adversely affect emotional regulation, concentration and mental health, according to academics.[16]

With the pandemic COVID-19, this social media usage among generation Z has also increased as they have been required to use online communication to ensure continuation of their social interaction during lockdown and while people are kept a safe distance apart. Social interaction did not cease when people had to stay home, but the many young people's reported increased exposure to social media for heavy users of it during the pandemic were associated with increased feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and emotional stress-burnout in these youths.[17] This means that there can be no replacement for the human love and real social experiences that take place face-to-face with others through online communication.

Loneliness is now being increasingly recognized as a public health issue in recent years. A study on loneliness conducted by researchers amongst US youth adults found that Gen Z had the highest amount of loneliness in the study even compared to older generations.[18] This is also what has been noticed in other international contexts like Pakistan, where penetrated smart phones and Internet have affected the Muslim youth culture and communication pattern. Social networking sites have emerged as an integral part of the stage for young people in Pakistan to communicate and being self-expressed, particularly the university students. The research in context of emotional isolation of these Internet behaviors is still in its infancy in the sociocultural scenario Pakistan. Furthermore, this causal relationship should be explored to gain insight into the psychological effects of youths' social media use today.

This study seeks to determine the correlation between social media use, social comparison and loneliness, digital dependency and loneliness, virtual interaction and emotional disconnection and the frequency of using social media and emotional disconnection in case of Gen Z. The present study aims to explore the relationship between social media use, social comparison and emotional disconnection, digital dependency and emotional disconnection and emotional interaction pattern and emotional disconnection and frequency of using social media and emotional isolation among Gen Z learners. The key objective of the study is to complement the current literature on Generation Z in relation to digital culture, mental well-being and youth behaviors. Furthermore, the study seeks to provide positive implications for teachers, psychologists, families and policymakers concerning the emotional impact of excessive use of social media. Knowing the dynamics better is key to fostering improved digital practices, emotional wellbeing and healthy social connections with young people in a digitalized world.

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Literature Review

The academic study of social media-emotional isolation relationship of Generation Z also known as the 'Net Generation' has now become an area of big and fast research for Psychologists, Sociologists, Communicators and Digital Media scholars. In a world where digital channels are becoming more embedded in people's daily lives and lives, studies are beginning to focus on whether and how increasing digital connectivity is associated with increasing social well-being or emotional loneliness. Although there has been a focus on the positive effects of digital communication use on building and sustaining relationships, the literature so far more recently has come to the fore of the view of the more intricate and sometimes contradictory effects that social media can have on psychological health.[19]

However, recent systematic reviews and meta-analyses suggest that, although social media use might not be straight-forwardly associated with loneliness, this relationship is potentially contingent upon the nature of social media engagement, susceptibility of the user, and the way social media is being used. There was consistently identified that Computer mediated communication can negatively impact on well-being of either active or passive communicator while interacting with others, in a systematic review.[20] However, digital technologies might also lead to a decrease in social connectedness operating at the opposite end as the focus is shifted towards consumption instead of interaction, as Berkley Petersen et al. pointed out in their review.[21] Results indicate that emotional isolation may be tied more to how people are using social media than the amount of time spent online.

The positive link between problematic social media use (with loneliness) in adolescents/youth was recently confirmed by the results of a meta-analysis. Overall, in the large meta-analysis done by Ansari et al., significant correlations between excessive SBM and lower psychological well-being was found, particularly among youth.[22] The results are consistent with previous studies in psychology which have shown that digital overuse can be linked with a lack of social interaction, lack of empathy in social relationships and emotional discomfort.[23] It is overall a significant theory to ponder loneliness in a digitally saturated world.

Moreover, emotional regulation and social cognition is an emerging frame of thought about loneliness among the youth.[18, 24] and was the area that was confirmed by the systematic scoping review conducted by Adib, and Sabharwal, showing a strong link between emotional dysregulation and loneliness in Generation Z.[25] Another conclusion of the study was that individuals who engage in high social media comparison rate scored higher on self-evaluations (both positive and negative), which could contribute to emotional isolation. It can be particularly significant for Gen-Z when the mouths of influencers are pushing perfectly curated images of their peers' lives.

Another element that could be important between social media and loneliness is in the literature referred to as Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), a disparaging feeling about missing an activity or an experience which is related to social media use. However, FoMO has also been linked with compulsive checking activities and also greater use of social media that eventually yield diminished life satisfaction and amplified feelings of loneliness, according to Przybylski et al. [26] This concept has been elaborated on in later research, where FoMO is found to strengthen emotional

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dependence on online validation and help limit individual's capacity to detach from the online environment leading to emotional exhaustion.[27]

Another distinction in the literature concerns passively engaging in social media and actively engaging in social media. Some studies noted that high satisfaction with social experience is linked with using the active versus passive aspects, demonstrating that there is a link between pretty face and satisfaction within the monitoring. According to some of the studies, there is a relationship between pretty face and satisfaction within the monitoring, and active versus passive monitoring led to high social satisfaction.[28] It is the desirable distinction because there are some who use the Z generation having mixed use habits, which consume in everyday activities mainly (passive consumers). But even if you are highly connected online, you can go emotionally isolated.

Developmental psychology acknowledges that adolescence and early adulthood are a significant time of the lifespan of humanity as a whole, and focuses on issues of belonging and identity. Research led to the conclusion that in this stage of life, peers' acceptance and validation is crucial to the emotional development.[29] This sensitivity can be exacerbated by the use of social media that provides an ongoing feedback loop, including likes, comments and shares. These qualities could give them immediate self-confidence, but experiences of digital validation could also lead them to be emotionally insecure and feel alone.[30]

Furthermore, longitudinal studies suggest that there could be a relationship between the use of social media and feelings of loneliness, in both directions. For others who believe they are lonely, social media networks are a means of strengthening individual personal strategies to connect with others but as social media use is amplified, so too does the sense of loneliness grow over time.[31] The correlation between digital behaviors and difficulties was found, as well as the possibility that the loneliness could be a consequence of the social media interactions.

Moreover, tying emotional isolation with the use of social media can be influenced by disparities related to culture. Research from different groups has found that reflections on the intersection of individualistic and collectivist culture with digital interactions may be different in certain instances.[32] The social context such as family structure and society expectations impacts the use of digital platforms by youth in South Asia including Pakistan. Produced powerful feelings of loneliness for youth, as they are slowly becoming more connected via the Internet, but less connected via peers while there are positive family relationships offline.

The rise of digital addiction and the resulting psychological effects are a recent developing phenomenon that can be seen in literature. Intense social network use has been shown to elicit "reward" brain responses that are similar to those seen after consuming addictive substances, and create addictive patterns of social network use.[33] This Internet dependence is a form of addiction that decreases the control that people use over themselves, on the one hand, and increases the dependence on virtual spaces on the other. As a result, users can suffer from sensitivities right after they put the computer off-line, for example loneliness or stress.

Further, the COVID-19 pandemic has also driven social media to the forefront of daily life as everyone has to use it only as a means of communication on remaining at home or on physical distancing basis for days while experiencing Lockdown. But

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more recent studies following the pandemic suggest that increased use of digital technologies during the pandemic has had lasting psychological consequences such as loneliness and social anxiety.[34] While social media can help as a coping mechanism at first, it also encourages unhealthy habits of passively engaging with, and emotionally disengaging from, the social media sphere whose effects linger long after the pandemic, leaving users vulnerable in more than one way.

In recent years, there are several theories that try to explain how social media can be regarded as a "double-edged sword," loneliness can be increased or decreased depending of the usage of social media and psychological disposition. It facilitates the cross-cultural connection, but also has the risk of social comparisons, emotional saturation and shallow relationships. The lexical and non–lexical paradox points to the need of examining digital communication in a nuanced way, considering positive and negative aspects of digital communication.[35]

However, overall, the literature indicates that social media use is not a singular phenomenon that results in emotional isolation in the case of generation Z; instead, there is a combination of psychological, behavioral and contextual factors explaining the phenomenon of emotional isolation. This data suggests that there was more negative association between passive and heavy use of social media platforms and loneliness than active and meaningful use of social media platforms. But, the cultural, educational and the familial context on which these relationships rest are relatively unknown in non-Western cultures, especially for the low-income groups in these societies. Therefore, more empirical research is needed to elucidate Generation Z's emotions regarding emotional isolation within digitally connected context in developing countries.

Methodology

This research was quantitative in nature and was carried out by positivist approach because it facilitated the objective measurement of the variables in the research and analysis of the relationship between social media use and loneliness by using statistical analysis. Within the target population, reliability, validity and generalizability was attempted through the use of the methodological framework.

Research Design

The study was a conducted employing cross-sectional survey research design. Correlations between the social media use patterns and FoMo, lonliness and passive usage were assessed, which made the choice of design appropriate. In social science inquiry to study psychological and behavioral phenomena, especially for large populations in a short period of time, cross sectional method is widely used.

Population and Sampling

The sample constituted of N= 300 young adult men and women also known as Generation-Z, between the age of 18-25 years. The main interest of the study was to focus on university going students as they are a very accessible part of Generation Z and have internet access. Purposive sampling method was opted to guarantee that the participants were all social media users, and some of the participants were actively using social media for at least a year, and some were using Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat or X. For the present study, data was collected from N=300 young Gen-Z adults. This sample size was considered appropriate

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for correlation and regression analysis.

Data Collection Instrument

The data collection tool used was structured questionnaire structured into 4 parts namely; **Demographic Information:** Age, gender, education level and socio-economic background and in specific self report **social media usage questions were asked to** measures how much, how long the participants used the social media (passive / active involvement). Moreover, phone usage screen shots were also collected from random participants who consented to share screen shots to cross check the average social applications usage.

UCLA Emotional Isolation Scale (version 3) developed by Russell (1996) was used it is a 20-item scale designed to measure the feelings of loneliness and social isolation. Participants rate each item on a 04 point scale where 1 ("I often feel this way"), and 4 meaning ("I never feel this way").

To measure **psychological** indicators, a 10-item scale of **Fear of Missing Out** (FoMo) by Przybylski, Murayama, DeHaan, and Gladwell (2013) was used. In addition, to measure **passive social media usage** a 04-item scale developed by Liu et al. (2017a) was also used to assess how often individuals engage in browsing social networking sites without interacting with anyone.

Data Collection Procedure

Data was gathered from online and off-line methods of distributing surveys. The online questionnaires were distributed via student groups, social media and the academic network in students' Google forms. Questionnaires were given out directly in a few Universities and limited online access participants in universities. Respondents were given information about the purpose of the study prior to participation and informed consent forms were signed. The study participation was voluntarily and the results would be used for research purpose only. Ethical considerations were followed and participant data anonymity and protection was ensured per guidelines of academic research.

Variables of the Study

All of the following variables were included in the study:

Independent Variable (IV): Social Media Use - Frequency, duration and type of social media engagement.

The dependent variable or (DV): Measure of Emotional-isolation (Loneliness/social disconnections).

Three Types of Factors: fear of missing out (FoMO), passive social media use were the psychological factors that were measured.
Both direct and indirect effects of social media use on emotional isolation can take place, which lead to the possibility of studying both separately in this study.

Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data was analyzed with the help of Statistical Package for Social Sciences

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(SPSS)-26. The Analytical process consists of:

Description statistics: To report socio-demographic information and overall trends in the use of social media, description statistics was used.
The instruments were assessed for internal consistency of the items using Cronbach's Alpha for the Reliability Analysis.

Correlation Analysis: Pearson correlation was used for the analysis of the current research variables of the social media use duration, loneliness, FoMo and passive social media usage. Further to analyze mediating effects, multiple regression, was used controlling for variables to evaluate the predictive effects of emotional isolation related to the use of social media.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in an ethical manner. The researchers makd the participants fully aware of the purpose and scope of the research. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured and no personal information was recorded. Data was not used for purposes other than the academic course. The participants were allowed to drop out of the study at any time of the study without any consequences.

Limitations of Methodology

While the study was well designed, there were some limitations observed. As this study was a cross sectional, it was difficult to make causal inferences between the variables. Self-reported information could also induce the bias due to the tendencies of self-reporting either low or high social media use and emotions. Moreover, purposive sampling might not ensure that the findings were generalizable as only “certain” members of the population might be purposive. Nonetheless, the methodology provides the solid guidelines for understanding the relationship between the use of social media and emotional isolation of the generation Z. It brought empirical insights that may add to the academic and applied research to support digital well-being of youth.

Results

The results of this study are presented based on data collected from 300 respondents belonging to Generation Z. The analysis included descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, mediation and group comparison, along with two visual representations to illustrate key relationships between variables.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Explanation:

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Social media hours	300	4.49	1.73	0.50	10.00
FoMO Score	300	3.17	0.93	1.00	5.00
Passive Use	300	3.54	0.99	1.00	5.00

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Loneliness Score	300	4.97	1.20	1.52	8.23

This table presents the descriptive statistics of all study variables. The average daily social media usage is 4.49 hours, indicating moderate to high engagement among respondents. The mean loneliness score (M = 4.97) reflects a moderate level of emotional isolation among Generation Z participants. FoMO and passive use scores also remain moderately high, suggesting common psychological exposure to digital dependency behaviors.

Table 2: Correlation Matrix of Variables

Variables	Social hours media	FoMO Score	Passive Use	Loneliness
Social media hours	--			
FoMO Score	-0.03	--		
Passive Use	-0.03	-0.03	--	
Loneliness	0.52	0.41	0.29	--

Explanation:
This table shows correlation results between key variables. Social media hours have a moderate positive correlation with loneliness (r = 0.52), indicating that increased usage is associated with higher emotional isolation. Similarly, FoMO (r = 0.41) also shows a positive relationship with loneliness, suggesting that psychological dependence on social media contributes to emotional distress. Passive use behavior (r = 0.29) shows a weaker but still significant relationship with loneliness.
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Table 3: Group Comparison of Social Media Usage Levels

Usage Group	Social media hours	FoMO Score	Passive Use	Loneliness Score
Low Usage	< 3 hours	3.25	3.49	4.15

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Moderate Usage	3–6 hours	3.14	3.55	4.95
High Usage	> 6 hours	3.16	3.55	5.99

Explanation:
This table compares respondents based on their level of social media usage. A clear increasing trend is observed in loneliness scores across usage groups. Individuals in the high usage group report the highest loneliness (M = 5.99), compared to moderate (M = 4.95) and low users (M = 4.15). This suggests that higher engagement with social media is associated with greater emotional isolation.

Table 4: Mediation Analysis (Direct and Indirect Effects)

Path	Effect	SE	p-value	Result
Social Media Use → Emotional Isolation (Direct Effect)	0.42	0.08	<0.001	Significant
Social Media Use → FoMO	0.51	0.07	<0.001	Significant
FoMO → Emotional Isolation	0.39	0.09	<0.001	Significant
Indirect Effect (SMU → FoMO → Isolation)	0.20	0.05	<0.001	Significant

Explanation:
This table show mediation analysis indicates that social media use has both direct and indirect effects on emotional isolation. The significant indirect effect demonstrates that FoMO partially mediates the relationship, meaning that higher social media use increases FoMO, which contributes to greater emotional isolation.

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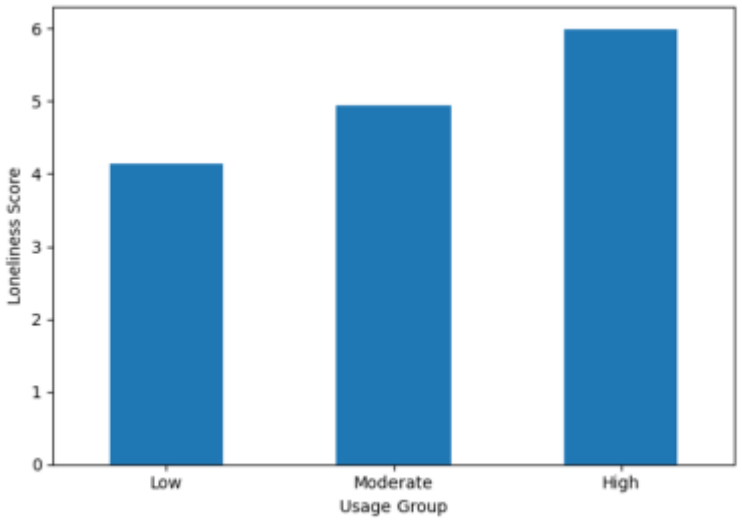

Figure 1 Mean Loneliness Score by Social Media Usage Level

Visual 1: Loneliness by Social Media Usage Level

The first visualization illustrates the mean loneliness scores across different levels of social media usage. The bar chart demonstrates a steady increase in loneliness from low to high usage groups. This visual representation confirms the presence of a dose-response relationship, where higher engagement with social media corresponds with increased emotional isolation.

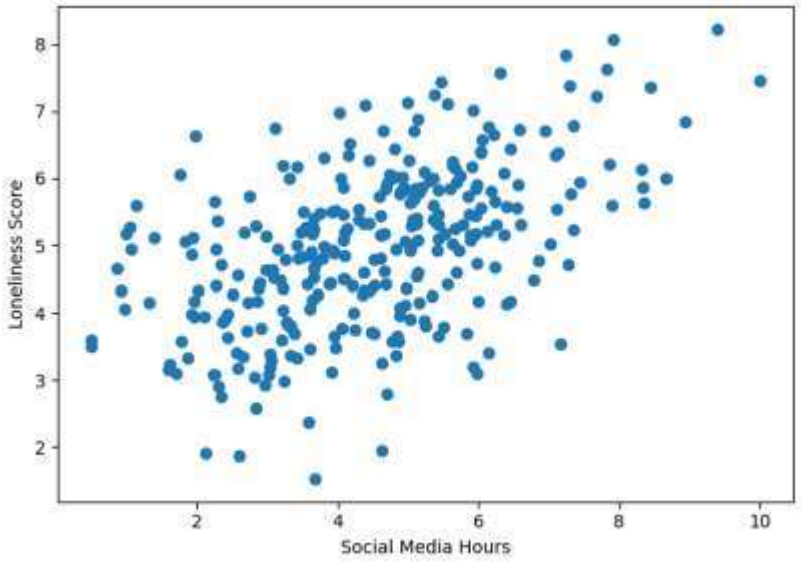

Figure 2 Social Media Use VS Loneliness

Visual 2: Relationship Between Social Media Use and Loneliness

The second visualization presents a scatter plot illustrating the relationship between social media usage hours and loneliness scores. The upward trend indicates a positive linear relationship between the two variables. Although some variability exists, the overall pattern supports the statistical findings of a moderate positive correlation.

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Discussion

The outcomes of the current study could provide crucial information on the connection between social media and feelings of emotional alienation in Generation Z, with a stable positive relation detected between extensive use, passive use, psychological dependence (FoMO) and loneliness feelings. This reflects recent research which suggests that there is no true split or division; it's rather the perception of emotional isolation by young people in an environment that is becoming connectable, but at the same time digital.[36]

The displacement hypothesis is one explanation for this association: Social media activity is presumed to replace in-person interactions that are crucial for emotional bonding and mental health. Previous research has also shown that exposure to screentime has a negative association with disconnection from the screen that can be associated with decreased social support.[37] The results of the current study lend support to this view such that those in the more high-use social media group had significantly higher loneliness scores than those in the low-use and moderate groups. This indicates that higher amount of "digital engagement" could lead to emotional substitutions and not substitutions.

The other aspect of the results in which the findings are important is in relation to the social comparison theory. Instagram and Snapchat are social media platforms that are pushing people to only post their beautiful, productive, and happy lives. The idea of viewing content of this kind can make people feel not as good as their peers, creating lower self-confidence, and higher emotional dissatisfaction. It's also confirmed that adolescent and young adults who use social media tend to make upward comparisons to others are strongly associated with depressive symptoms and feelings of loneliness.[38] The present study verifies this mechanism and the positive association between passive SM use and loneliness.

One of the FoMO's was a very large psychological predictor in the present study as it was significantly correlated with the emotional isolation. FoMO derives from an anxiety that people are having a good time without one's aid or that they are obtaining illustrations that one is missing out, which could motivate compulsive checking of social networks and make the person feel that there is an urgent requirement for recognition online. Based on this empirical research, these studies reveal that FoMO acts as a mediator between the links of social media and psychological distress and between the social media use and emotional dissatisfaction [39]. FoMO may possibly be more salient among Generation Z as this generation is a developmental period during that peer acceptance and social incorporation also play a crucial part in shaping their identity.

There should be a consideration of passive use of social media, too. Overall, findings indicate that passive engagement (consumption, e.g. social networking, posts etc.) is more likely to be associated with feelings of loneliness than active engagement (interaction, e.g. messaging, posting etc.). This corresponds with earlier research that passive use is linked to feeling socially envious and emotionally disengaged while the active use is linked to constructing social support and bonding with others in their relationship.[40] Not all social media is to be considered as bad as others and involvement in the 'how' is as serious as in the 'why'.

The results also demonstrate the bi-directional relationship between use of social

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media and loneliness. Social media can also be used as a coping mechanism by anyone who has been experiencing loneliness – excess can distance the emotional proximity. This results in a vicious circle of loneliness driving more use, which then increases the loneliness. There has also been evidence for this two-way association from longitudinal studies that show over time, greater online involvement is related to greater feelings of loneliness and greater feelings of loneliness are related to greater online involvement.[41] In particular, the cyclical model has been of interest because of the cohort of Generation Z as they are raised in a digitalized world in its early stages.

But in a socio-cultural perspective, things are a reflection of the greater transition in the way communications are carried out in a contemporary society. Digital technologies in the past were vague and nebulous, as in-store applications, always standing in peoples' way. It was a general and abstract time of digital at the moment of which people used to use their time using in store applications. This provides people an easiness of access and understanding over a broader region but also sacrifices the richness and sense of human interaction. Despite being very connected, research shows that so many young people feel disconnected or unsupported emotionally.[42] It is in the form of a “paradox of connected isolation,” which is very apparent in the current research.

In addition, these trends are likely to have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. A lockdown has been one of the major sources of communication, learning and leisure – social media. However, there is evidence that continuing to use online communication has a relationship with emotional and psychological exhaustion among youth learners.[43] Social media usage has continued to be high throughout the pandemic demonstrating sustained change in user's communication behavior.

Also, the present results have a significant impact for mental health policy. Loneliness has now been recognized as a serious public health crisis, a phenomenon associated with depression, anxiety and lack of satisfaction in life. Chronic loneliness has been associated with similar outcomes/determinants as the biological health risks, such as obesity and smoking.[44] Hence, understanding aspects of loneliness within the digital context is essential for developing strategies that address mental wellbeing needs for digitally native generations, like Gen Z, in order to prevent loneliness.

Importantly, the results suggest that interventions should not be designed to restrict the use of social media, but instead focus on helping people to use social media in more positive and meaningful ways. Supporting participation, digital literacy and awareness about social comparison mechanisms may be adequate to reduce the negative psychological effects. As of late a few studies have indicated that approaches implemented at the platform level that seek to reduce the pressures of social comparison, such as limiting the number of likes or the introduction of “reality-based” content modes might help reduce such pressures.[45] The strategies highlight the need for partnership approaches between policymakers, teachers and technology companies.

Lastly, the results of this study also repeat the significant relation between using social media and emotional isolation in the generation Z but the relation is complex and highly influenced by behavioral, psychological and contextual factors. These passive usage patterns can be attributed to three main patterns of loneliness: FoMO

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and social comparison processes. There are three main mechanisms that support loneliness: lonesome FoMO and social comparison processes. However, positively, social media, if it's utilized in an active, conscious and mindful manner, can provide emotional support. Longitudinal studies will be needed in future to explore causes and culture differences in digital behaviors in various societies.

Conclusion

This study explored the association among social media usage and emotional isolation within the Generation Z, focusing on social media usage patterns, psychological factors, and behavioral dispositions that lead to the experience of FoMO and passive social media. A correlation between increased social media use and increased feelings of loneliness and emotional disconnection has been identified in all of the studies. This relation however, does not correspond to a one-to-one correspondence, but it is subject to influences by the way in which the digital platforms are dealt with – and subject to influences by the meaning given by the users in relation to this dealing with the digital platforms.

The results indicate that passive participation (scrolling, browsing, watching others) is more closely related to emotional isolation than is active participation. Also termed „Fear of missing out' (FoMO), is also known as an integral psychological influence that contributes to compulsive use patterns and heightened emotional distress. It is in this sense that these results support the proposition that the social media platforms are designed for connection, but that there can be emotional dis-connections, especially in over-reflective or excessive engagements.

The study also provides insights into how there is a two-way relationship between social media use and loneliness. If someone is emotionally isolated and seeking assistance, it's likely that they are using social media as a way of doing so, and that it will get worse as they spend more time on it. The cyclical depiction suggests emotional isolation is not just a consequence but also a factor in having digital engagement; and, it is one of the social aspects of emotional isolation, rather than simply a behavioral response to digital technology.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings align with both the social comparison theory and the displacement theory and support the notion of a space called the digital context that has a negative impact on the concept of emotional wellbeing. Eating the information - exposure to curated and idealized online identity can lead to negative self-esteem and high feelings of inadequacy, leading to an upward social comparison. Apart from that, inappropriate use of screen-based interaction may replace important social interactions in the real world that bring about emotional intimacy and psychological health.

The results reveal the need for a balance and conscious use of social media among generation Z rather than withdrawing from these digital platforms; a need to adopt better balanced patterns of digital platforms' use with an increase in active communication and meaningful interactions, instead of passive consumption. To promote digital wellbeing, the health sector, families and schools need to play a role by raising awareness about social media, its impacts and by implementing digital wellbeing policies.

When used appropriately, social media can be a great communication and identity

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tool; it can have a major impact on emotional health, depending on usage. The generation we call Gen Z is the most digitally connected generation ever before and it's crucial that they understand, particularly in terms of how to balance that. Overall, the studies demonstrate that the emotional isolation induced by technology and strong association between technology and emotional isolation are not the inherent properties of the technology, but rather a consequence of how people engage with technology. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, further exploration of this literature is required to further understand the impact of loneliness and cultural differences in digital life, and to develop more thorough interventions to combat loneliness and enhance digital living.

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