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Gen Z's Social Engagement and Digital Adaptability Skills toward Academic Development: A Narratology of Experiences and Challenges

Jeaany Rose S. Unico[1], Salahudin D. Solaiman[2]

[1]Cotabato Foundation College of Science and Technology (CFCST), Arakan, Cotabato, Philippines, xhianne.ashi23@gmail.com
[2]Cotabato Foundation College of Science and Technology (CFCST), Arakan, Cotabato, Philippines sdsolaiman@cfcst.edu.ph

ABSTRACT

This study is limited to examining Gen Z's social engagement and digital adaptability skills and their impact on academic development focusing on students' experiences within the educational context. It will explore the relationship between social engagement, digital adaptability, and academic success. The study will involve 278 respondents selected using a complete enumeration technique. The research will be conducted within the vicinity of selected schools in Kidapawan City Division during the School Year 2024-2025. The findings will be specific to this context and may not be generalized beyond the studied population and location.

1. Introduction

Social engagement and digital skills are key drivers of academic development among Gen Z students. Using social media and online tools fosters collaboration and quick access to information. Adaptability to technology builds resourcefulness, while digital proficiency eases academic tasks. Together, these strengths improve learning outcomes.

Gen Z's academic competence is increasingly influenced by their social engagement and digital adaptability. As digital natives, they navigate complex environments where these factors are intertwined Understanding their impact on academic success is crucial. Effective strategies are needed to enhance competence in a digitally-driven world (Smith, 2023).

In the Philippines, diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds present challenges in fostering digital adaptability and social engagement among Gen Z. Limited access to technology and varying digital literacy levels hinder academic performance. Disparities between urban and rural schools exacerbate these issues. Addressing these challenges is essential for educational equity (Reyes, 2022).

Locally, the study of (Cruz, 2020; Manalo, 2021) highlights that educators in the Philippines face significant hurdles in promoting digital adaptability and social engagement. Insufficient professional development programs leave teachers underprepared to integrate technology effectively into their teaching practices. Moreover, a lack of institutional support for technology-driven education exacerbates the issue. The pressure to meet academic standards without adequate resources creates a challenging environment for both teachers and students.

While social engagement and digital adaptability are recognized as critical factors for academic success, their combined impact remains underexplored. Research by Valdez (2023) highlights the need for further investigation into how these skills interact. Santos (2024) suggests that social engagement independently influences academic competence, while Rodriguez (2022) and Martinez (2023) propose that their interplay creates synergistic effects, amplifying academic performance more than either factor alone. Additionally, insights from Gonzales (2021) and Navarro (2022) emphasize the need for longitudinal studies to understand the developmental trajectory of these skills in tandem. A comprehensive investigation into the combined effects of social engagement and digital adaptability is vital to inform strategies that optimize learning outcomes among Gen Z students.

This study aimed to identify the key factors influencing Gen Z's social engagement and digital adaptability and to explore how these skills contribute to their academic development. The study also proposed policy recommendations for improving educational practices that support the development of these critical skills among students.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

This study aimed to examine the Gen Z's Social Engagement and Digital Adaptability Skills toward Academic Development within selected schools in Kidapawan City Division, North Cotabato.

Specifically, it answered the following research questions:

Study 1: Gen Z's Social Engagement and Digital Adaptability Skills Toward Academic Development.

1.   What is the level of the Gen Z's Social Engagement in terms of Cognitive engagement, Behavioral engagement, and Emotional or affective engagement?

2.   What is the level of Digital Adaptability Skills in terms of Social Interaction, Digital Literacy Proficiency, and Innovativeness?

3.   What is the level of Academic Development based on their grades in English, Math and Science?

4.   Is there a significant relationship between Gen Z's Social Engagement and Academic Development?

5.   Is there a significant influence between Gen Z's Social Engagement and Academic Development?

6.   Is there a significant relationship between Digital Adaptability and Academic Development?

7.   Is there a significant influence between Digital Adaptability and Academic Development?

1.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored to Technological-Motivational Learning Theory, proposed by Lopez and Abadiano (2023). This theory explains how Generation Z's learning process is shaped by their technological dependence and motivational drivers. It highlights how digital adaptability and social engagement contribute to academic development. The theory provides a framework for understanding how Gen Z develops cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement by observing and interacting with peers in digital environments. Through observational learning, Gen Z students enhance their understanding, participate actively, and build self-efficacy, essential for academic growth. In this context, social engagement plays a crucial role, as peer interactions foster collaboration, validate learning experiences, and support emotional resilience.

Moreover, this theory emphasize on Digital adaptability, defined in terms of social interaction, digital literacy proficiency, and innovativeness, is another key component of the study. Social Cognitive Theory underscores that these skills emerge as Gen Z models effective digital behaviors and gains confidence in their technological abilities. By focusing on academic development in English, Math, and Science, the study highlights how digital and social skills together contribute to Gen Z's success in core subjects. This theoretical foundation is vital, as it illuminates the pathways through which social and digital environments shape learning outcomes, providing insight into strategies that can further enhance Gen Z's academic performance.

This theory is essential in this study because it provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how Gen Z learns and adapts in a rapidly evolving digital landscape. The theory emphasizes the importance of observational learning, where Gen Z students develop cognitive, behavioral, and emotional skills by observing, interacting with, and modeling the behaviors of peers and influencers in digital and social environments (Smith, 2020).

2. Methods

This chapter discusses the research design, study variables, population and sampling, place of study, research instrument, data collection, scoring interpretation, and statistical treatment to evaluate the Gen Z's Social Engagement and Digital Adaptability Skills toward Academic development and their experiences and challenges for the school year for the school year 2024-2025.

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative research approaches to thoroughly examine Gen Z's social engagement and digital adaptability skills toward academic development. Mixed-methods research is well-suited for capturing the complexities of these skills in relation to academic success, providing both breadth and depth in understanding the factors that influence Gen Z's educational outcomes.

2.2 Research Respondents

The respondents of this study were 278 Grade 7 to Grade 10 students from selected public secondary schools in the Kidapawan City Division, North Cotabato. These schools are grouped into four districts as follows: District 1 – Kidapawan City National High School; District 2 – Perez National High School; District 3 – Nuangan Integrated School; and District 4 – Amas National High School, Puas Inda Integrated School, and Juan L. Gantuangco School of Arts and Trades.

2.3 Research Procedure

The sampling procedure involves selecting a subset of the target population to represent the entire group of interest. Since studying the whole student population is often impractical, researchers use a smaller sample that closely reflects the larger population's key characteristics, allowing them to draw meaningful conclusions (Turner, 2020).Below is the table showing the allocation of the 330 teacher-respondents needed in each Municipality. For the quantitative phase of this study, Slovin's formula was applied to determine the appropriate number of student respondents. As a result, a total of 278 students from selected public secondary schools in the Kidapawan City Division, North Cotabato for School Year 2024–2025 were included in the study. In the qualitative phase, twenty-five (25) students were selected using purposive sampling. This type of non-probability sampling allowed the researcher

to intentionally choose students based on their relevance to the research objectives. The selection required prior knowledge of the participants' backgrounds to ensure that they could provide meaningful and insightful responses related to the study themes (Birgit Keller & Udo Buscher, 2015).

2.4 Research Instrument

The research instruments used in this study were carefully selected and adapted from established and reputable sources, ensuring their reliability and validity. By using well-validated tools, the study aimed to gather accurate and credible data that accurately reflects the variables under investigation. This approach enhances the overall rigor of the research, ensuring that the instruments are both appropriate for the study's context and capable of producing meaningful, trustworthy results (Fuller, 2005).

In Part 1, the level of Gen Z's Social Engagement was assessed using a questionnaire based on the Gen Z Activism Survey (PSS-10), developed by He et al. (2015). This scale has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.95 and was used to interpret respondents' assessments of Gen Z's Social Engagement related to cognitive engagement, behavioral engagement, and emotional or affective engagement. The following grading scale was employed to categorize the responses:

The indicators of the study were rated using 5-level Likert Scaling system as follows:

Level	Range	Description	Descriptive Interpretation
5	4.21 - 5.00	Highly Engaged	This means that the teachers are exceptionally skilled in technology within the range of 81% - 100%.
4	3.41 - 4.20	Engaged	This means that the teachers are highly skilled in technology within the range of 61% - 80%.
3	2.61 – 3.40	Moderately Engaged	This means that the teachers are moderately skilled in technology within the range of 41% - 60%.
2	1.81- 2.60	Often Engaged	This means that the teachers are slightly skilled in technology within the range of 21% - 40%.
1	1.00 -1.80	Never Engaged	This means that the teachers are very slightly skilled in technology within the range of 1% - 20%.

2.5 Data Gathering Procedure

The researchers followed a systematic process to obtain necessary approvals before engaging with targeted respondents. Initially, approval was sought from the thesis adviser, followed by the Dean and the Research Committee at Cotabato Foundation College of Science and Technology. After securing institutional approval, the researchers obtained permissions from relevant supervisors and school principals to access the targeted teachers within the five schools in the 2nd congressional district of Cotabato. Finally, the researchers sought consent from individual respondents, ensuring ethical considerations were upheld before distributing the survey questionnaires.

2.6 Data Analysis

This study explored the relationship between Gen Z students' social engagement and digital adaptability with their academic development, using a mixed-methods approach to provide both statistical evidence and personal insights. The findings affirm that behavioral engagement plays a pivotal role in academic performance, particularly in Mathematics, while cognitive and emotional engagement, though present at high levels, did not show a statistically significant effect on academic outcomes. The study concludes that while Gen Z students are digitally adept and socially active, academic development remains primarily influenced by their behavioral engagement and self-regulatory strategies rather than digital adaptability alone. This highlights the need for educational frameworks that integrate digital skills with pedagogical guidance and personal development support to fully optimize academic outcomes in the digital age

3. Results

The following are the findings of this study:

1. Results show that students demonstrate high levels of cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement, with behavioral engagement being the strongest and most significantly related to academic performance, particularly in Mathematics. Despite high engagement levels, only behavioral engagement had a statistically significant influence on Math grades, while cognitive and emotional engagement showed no significant impact across subjects.

2. In terms of digital adaptability, students displayed strong skills in social interaction, digital literacy, and innovativeness, indicating their capability to collaborate, evaluate information critically, and adapt to new technologies. These skills support their readiness for digital learning environments.

Furthermore, the study found no statistically significant relationship or influence between digital adaptability skills namely Social Interaction, Digital Literacy Proficiency, and Innovativeness and academic development across core subjects (Math, English, Science) and overall GPA.

4. Recommendation

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Schools may design activities that promote active participation, responsibility, and consistent academic behaviors, especially in subjects like Mathematics where behavioral engagement showed a strong impact.

2. Teachers may embed digital literacy and innovation into classroom instruction through project-based learning and guided online research, ensuring these skills directly support academic goals.

3. Educators and counselors may train students in time management, goal-setting, and focus techniques (e.g., Pomodoro, to-do lists) to help them navigate distractions in digital environments.

4. Interventions such as reading programs, writing workshops, and language enrichment activities may be implemented.

5. Access to reliable digital tools and platforms to ensure equitable learning opportunities for all students may be given priority.

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