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Excessive Social Media Usage and Psychological Stress: A Cross-Sectional Analysis of Generation Z in Gujarat

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between patterns of social media usage and perceived stress levels among Generation Z in Gujarat. Using a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from 122 participants aged 13–25 years through a structured online questionnaire. The study examined variables such as screen time, platform preferences, time of usage, and perceived stress, alongside demographic information. Chi–Square tests of independence revealed significant associations between social media usage patterns and psychological indicators including sleep disturbance, loneliness, strained family relationships, pressure on appearance, and reduced focus. The findings highlight that excessive and unbalanced social media use can have detrimental effects on mental well-being, despite its role in fostering connectivity. Recommendations include digital wellness education, promotion of device-free interactions, and balanced online engagement. This research provides region-specific evidence on the psychological implications of social media use and offers actionable suggestions for healthier digital behaviour among youth.

Keywords: Social media, Generation Z, stress, screen time, loneliness, relationships, Chi–Square analysis, Gujarat.

1. Introduction

In recent years, it is observed that social media has become an integral part of the daily lives of Generation Z, individuals born between the 1997 and 2012. As digital communities, this generation is uniquely positioned at the intersection of rapid technological growth and constant online connectivity. While social media platforms offer avenues for self-expression, communication, and information exchange, there is growing concern about their psychological consequences, particularly regarding stress, anxiety, and emotional well-being. Global and national studies have consistently highlighted a correlation between high social media engagement and elevated levels of stress and mental health disturbances among adolescents and young adults.

In the Indian context, the explosion of affordable smartphones and widespread internet access has significantly increased social media access, especially among youth. Gujarat, as one of India's rapidly developing states, reflects this national trend, with Gen Z users who are engaged extensively on platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchats, YouTube and so on. Despite the increasing relevance of this issue, there remains a lack of region-specific empirical research exploring the nuanced relationship between social media use and psychological stress among this population.

This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the patterns of social media usage and their association with perceived stress levels among Generation Z in Gujarat. A mixed-methods approach was employed, incorporating questionnaire-based surveys to gather quantitative data from a diverse sample, and semi-structured interviews to gain deeper qualitative insights into individual experiences, motivations, and coping mechanisms related to social media engagement.

By focusing on both the measurable trends and the personal narratives of Gen Z users, this research aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how social media may influence psychological well-being in this demographic. The findings can inform mental health professionals, educators, policymakers, and families about the potential risks and benefits of digital engagement, while also providing recommendations for promoting healthier online behaviours among youth in Gujarat and similar contexts.

2. Literature Review

The relationship between social media usage and stress levels among Generation Z is increasingly concerning, as evidenced by multiple studies highlighting the negative mental health impacts associated with excessive engagement on these platforms. Research indicates that high social media usage correlates with increased anxiety, stress, and depression, particularly among vulnerable individuals within this demographic(Sao et al., 2024) (Sitanggang et al., 2024). Additionally, social media-induced stress has been shown to influence behaviours such as impulsive buying, mediated by negative coping strategies and moderated by self-control(Purwaningdyah & Pratminingsih, 2025). Furthermore, the addictive nature of smartphone use exacerbates social stress, leading to detrimental effects on academic performance and overall psychological well-being(Shetu et al., 2024). Overall, the findings underscore the necessity for Generation Z to adopt healthier social media habits to mitigate these adverse effects on their mental health(Dalimunthe et al., 2025).

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1.1 Social Comparison Theory:

Adolescents often measure their own lives against the curated images of peers online. Passive browsing makes people more prone to *upward comparisons*, generating envy and anxiety. As Lai *et al.* (2023) note, without personal reference, users "use others as a standard of comparison," so passive use triggers more upward social comparison. In India, this can be acute given high emphasis on achievement; constant exposure to idealized content (Instagram/TikTok/snapchats) can erode self-image.

3.1.2 Fear of Missing Out (FOMO):

Gen Z's heavy connectivity fosters FOMO. Simply seeing friends' activities online can make youth feel excluded or anxious about missing experiences. For instance, a McKinsey survey reports Gen Z respondents saying social media often "leads to a fear of missing out (FOMO)", alongside body-image concerns. Chakrabarti (2024) similarly stresses that FOMO "centres on anxiety" for Gen Z, driving compulsive checking and feelings of exclusion. The viewpoint by Panigrahi *et al.* (2024) also notes that "frequently checking their feeds" due to FOMO contributes to loneliness and disconnection. In summary, FOMO is widely recognized as a pathway from social-media engagement to stress and compulsivity.

3.1.3 Cognitive Overload/Fatigue:

Another key model sees information overload as the culprit. When users are bombarded with rapid, endless content, their ability to process diminishes and stress rises. The Journal of Competitiveness paper (2025) finds that *information overload* on social media significantly predicts "social media fatigue," consistent with cognitive-overload theory. It explains that "being bombarded by excessive information" causes stress and tiredness. In practice, Gen Z's "always-on" habit (late-night scrolling, notifications) can flood the brain, impairing sleep and well-being.

3.1.4 Addiction and Displacement Theories:

Many studies frame extreme use as addictive behaviour. Scales like the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS) are used to measure "problematic usage" in Gen Z studies. Excessive use can displace real-world activities (sleep, exercise, study), worsening stress and sleep quality. For example, Oberst *et al.* (2017) find FOMO-mediated compulsivity leads to real-life disruption. Others note that "later night usage of social media" correlates with poor sleep and higher depression.

In short, social comparison, FOMO, and cognitive overload are frequently invoked frameworks. These theories overlap: a person passively scrolling (comparison) experiences fear of missing out, consumes large streams of info (overload), and may develop addiction-like patterns, all of which can elevate stress.

4. Research Objectives

1. To examine the association between patterns of social media use and perceived stress levels among Generation Z in Gujarat.
2. To explore the impact of screen time on interpersonal relationships, sleep quality, and ability to focus.
3. To identify patterns in the purposes of social media usage and their relation to feelings of loneliness.
4. To provide evidence-based recommendations for promoting healthier and more balanced social media engagement.

5. Hypotheses

The current study investigates the relationship between social media usage patterns and perceived stress levels among Generation Z in Gujarat. Based on the literature review and variables measured in the survey, the following hypotheses were formulated.

H_{01}: There is no significant association between social media usage patterns (including screen time, time of usage, purpose of use, and platform engagement) and psychological well-being indicators (such as sleep disturbance, feelings of loneliness, stress, pressure on appearance, and ability to focus) among Generation Z in Gujarat.

H_{02}: There is no significant association between social media usage patterns and interpersonal relationship quality (including relationships with parents, siblings, and frequency of conflicts) among Generation Z in Gujarat**.**

6. Research Methodology

6.1 Research Design

The present study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationship between social media usage patterns and both psychological well-being and interpersonal relationship quality among Generation Z in Gujarat. This design was chosen for its suitability in identifying associations between variables at a single point in time.

6.2 Population and Sample

The target population consisted of Generation Z individuals aged 13–25 years residing in Gujarat. A non-probability purposive sampling method was employed to select participants who actively use social media platforms. The final sample comprised 122 respondents, representing both genders and various educational backgrounds.

6.3 Data Collection Tool

A **structured online questionnaire** was developed for data collection, consisting of:

Section A: Demographic details (age, gender, education level, etc.)

Section B: Social media usage patterns (screen time, time of usage, purpose of use, platforms used)

Section C: Psychological and behavioural indicators (sleep disturbance, feelings of loneliness, stress, pressure on appearance, ability to focus on studies/work, relationship quality, and frequency of conflicts)

The questionnaire primarily included closed-ended and multiple-choice questions to enable straightforward statistical analysis.

6.4 Procedure

The survey link was distributed via email and social media platforms to reach the target audience. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Responses were collected over a period of **four weeks**.

6.5 Data Analysis

Data were coded and analysed using Microsoft Excel. The Chi–Square Test of Independence was conducted to determine the association between social media usage patterns and the selected dependent variables related to psychological well-being and interpersonal relationships. Statistical significance was assessed at the $p < 0.05$ level. Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage) were used to summarise demographic data and key study variables.

7. Results

7.1 Chi–Square Summary Table

No.	Variables Cross-tabulated	χ^2 (Chi-square) Value	df	p-value	Interpretation
1	Screen Time and Sleep Disturbance	14.62	4	0.005	Significant association
2	Time of Usage and Feelings of Loneliness	9.87	3	0.02	Significant relationship

3	Validation Stress and Gender	3.12	2	0.21	No significant association
4	Social media During Meals and Relationship with Parents	12.45	4	0.014	Statistically significant
5	Purpose of Social Media Use and Feeling Lonely	8.54	3	0.036	Significant relationship
6	Screen Time and Relationship with Parents	4.42	1	0.0355	Significant association
7	Screen Time and Relationship with Siblings	10.81	1	0.00101	Significant association
8	Screen Time and Arguments/Conflicts at Home	0.872	1	0.3504	No significant association
9	SM Usage and Taking Break from social media	13.81	1	0.0002	Significant association
10	Screen Time and Pressure on Appearance	14.4	1	0.00014	Significant association
11	Feeling Stressed and Using SM During Meals	6.09	1	0.0135	Significant association
12	Feeling Stressed and Using SM in Gatherings	7.11	1	0.0076	Significant association
13	Screen Time and Ability to Focus or Study/Work	5.23	1	0.022	Significant association

8. Discussion

The results of this study, analysed using Microsoft Excel, provide strong evidence that social media usage patterns are significantly related to multiple aspects of psychological well-being and interpersonal relationship quality among Generation Z in Gujarat.

Regarding H_{01} (psychological well-being) — The Chi–Square analyses revealed significant associations between social media usage patterns (screen time, time of usage, purpose of use) and several indicators of mental health, including sleep disturbance, feelings of loneliness, pressure on appearance, stress levels, and ability to focus on study/work. These findings suggest that excessive or poorly managed social media use can negatively influence emotional stability, sleep quality, self-perception, and concentration. This aligns with previous studies (Goel & Grover, 2017; Baishideng Publishing Group Inc., 2024) that linked high social media engagement with increased mental health challenges among youth. The paradoxical finding that participants using social media "to stay connected" still reported loneliness underscores the idea that online connections may lack the depth and emotional support of in-person interactions (Coe et al., 2023).

Regarding H_{02} (interpersonal relationships) — Significant associations were also found between social media usage patterns and relationship quality with parents and siblings, as well as behaviours such as using social media during meals or gatherings. Frequent device use during shared family time appears to weaken communication and bonding. These results support Shahi and Sharma's (2024) assertion that constant digital engagement can displace valuable in-person interactions. Interestingly, no significant association was found between screen time and frequency of household conflicts, suggesting that relational strain may occur subtly through reduced engagement rather than overt arguments.

Overall implications — The rejection of both null hypotheses indicates that social media usage patterns have a broad and measurable influence on both individual mental well-being and relationship dynamics within Generation Z. These findings highlight the importance of fostering balanced digital habits, encouraging device-free interactions during meals and gatherings, and promoting awareness about the potential psychological costs of excessive online activity.

7.2 Interpretations and Suggestions

1. Screen Time and Sleep Disturbance

As per the data collected, there is a statistically significant association between screen time and sleep disturbance ($\chi^2 = 14.62$, df = 4, $p = 0.005$). This suggests that higher screen time is linked to a greater likelihood of experiencing sleep problems. This could be due to late-night device usage, blue light exposure, or overstimulation from social media engagement before bedtime.

Suggestion: Encourage limiting screen exposure at least one hour before sleeping, promote awareness campaigns on digital well-being, and educate about the impact of blue light on circadian rhythms.

2. Time of Usage and Feelings of Loneliness

The results show a significant relationship between the time of day when social media is used and reported feelings of loneliness ($\chi^2 = 9.87$, df = 3, p = 0.020). Night-time and solitary usage may be associated with greater loneliness.

Suggestion: Promote community-based or group offline activities, and encourage balanced use of social media during daytime hours rather than late at night.

3. Validation Stress and Gender

No significant association was found between validation stress (e.g., seeking likes, comments) and gender ($\chi^2 = 3.12$, df = 2, p = 0.210). This indicates that the tendency to feel pressured by online validation is not gender-specific in the given sample.

Suggestion: Interventions to reduce validation stress should target all genders equally.

4. Social Media During Meals and Relationship with Parents

The analysis indicates a statistically significant association between using social media during meals and the quality of relationship with parents ($\chi^2 = 12.45$, df = 4, p = 0.014). Frequent social media use during family meals may reduce face-to-face communication, leading to weaker parent–child bonding.

Suggestion: Encourage device-free mealtimes to improve family communication and strengthen emotional connections.

5. Purpose of Social Media Use and Feeling Lonely

As per the data collected, the most common stated purpose of social media use was "to stay connected" — 54 out of 122 participants (44.26%) reported this as their primary reason. However, notably, all these individuals still reported experiencing feelings of loneliness despite using social media for connection. This reflects a paradox: while the platform offers virtual connection, it may not fulfil deeper emotional or social needs, possibly due to superficial interactions or lack of physical presence.

Suggestion: Promote awareness about the limitations of online-only connections and encourage more in-person socialising and community engagement.

6. Screen Time and Relationship with Parents

The data indicates a significant association between higher screen time and weaker perceived relationship with parents ($\chi^2 = 4.42$, df = 1, p = 0.0355). This suggests that excessive device usage may interfere with parent–child communication.

Suggestion: Promote balanced digital habits within households and encourage quality family time without devices.

7. Screen Time and Relationship with Siblings

There is a significant relationship between screen time and sibling relationships ($\chi^2 = 10.81$, df = 1, p = 0.00101). High screen use may reduce shared activities and direct communication among siblings.

Suggestion: Organise family or sibling activities that encourage cooperation and bonding without digital distractions.

8. Screen Time and Arguments/Conflicts at Home

No significant relationship was observed between screen time and frequency of arguments/conflicts at home ($\chi^2 = 0.872$, df = 1, p = 0.350). This indicates that conflict may be influenced by other factors rather than screen time alone.

Suggestion: Future research should explore other family dynamics or stressors that could lead to conflict.

9. Social Media Usage and Taking a Break from Social Media

There is a highly significant relationship between overall social media usage and the likelihood of taking intentional breaks from it ($\chi^2 = 13.81$, df = 1, p = 0.0002). This suggests that heavy users are more likely to feel the need for a "digital detox" due to fatigue, stress, or burnout.

Suggestion: Introduce and normalise periodic offline days in educational and workplace environments.

10. Screen Time and Pressure on Appearance

The results show a strong and significant association between screen time and reported pressure on appearance ($\chi^2 = 14.40$, df = 1, p = 0.00014). This could be due to prolonged exposure to idealised images on social media.

Suggestion: Conduct media literacy programs to promote body positivity and critical thinking about unrealistic beauty standards.

11. Feeling Stressed and Using Social Media During Meals

The association between stress levels and social media use during meals is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 6.09$, df = 1, p = 0.0135). This may indicate that stressed individuals use mealtime scrolling as a coping mechanism.

Suggestion: Promote mindful eating practices and stress-relief methods that don't involve devices.

12. Feeling Stressed and Using Social Media in Gatherings

A significant association exists between stress levels and the use of social media during social gatherings ($\chi^2 = 7.11$, df = 1, p = 0.0076). This may reflect avoidance behaviour or difficulty engaging face-to-face when stressed.

Suggestion: Provide social skills training and encourage "device-down" moments in gatherings to foster real-world connections.

13. Screen Time and Ability to Focus on Study/Work

Based on the data collected, it can be interpreted that there is a statistically significant association between screen time and a person's ability to focus on studies or work. Since the p-value (0.0477) is less than the conventional threshold of 0.05, we reject the null hypothesis of no association. This indicates that the amount of time individuals spend on screens is likely influencing their concentration levels. The finding suggests that higher or prolonged screen time might be correlated with decreased ability to concentrate, study efficiently, or perform work-related tasks effectively. This aligns with previous research indicating that excessive screen exposure can lead to mental fatigue, distractions, and reduced cognitive control.
Suggestion: Encourage balanced screen time, promote structured work/study schedules, and provide education on the cognitive effects of prolonged device use.

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Overall implications — The rejection of both null hypotheses indicates that social media usage patterns have a broad and measurable influence on both individual mental well-being and relationship dynamics within Generation Z. These findings highlight the importance of fostering balanced digital habits, encouraging device-free interactions during meals and gatherings, and promoting awareness about the potential psychological costs of excessive online activity.

9. Conclusion

The present study sought to explore the association between social media usage patterns and their impact on psychological well-being and interpersonal relationships among Generation Z in Gujarat. The analysis conducted using Microsoft Excel and the Chi–Square test, revealed multiple statistically significant associations that highlight the complex ways in which social media engagement influences mental health and social dynamics.

The findings confirm that excessive or poorly managed screen time can contribute to sleep disturbances, reduced concentration, increased feelings of loneliness, and heightened pressure regarding physical appearance. These outcomes are consistent with global research, suggesting that prolonged exposure to digital content, particularly during late-night hours, disrupts circadian rhythms, fosters unhealthy social comparison, and creates overstimulation that hampers mental rest.

From a relational perspective, the study indicates that frequent social media use during meals and family gatherings weakens communication and bonding with parents and siblings. The results underscore the displacement effect, wherein time spent on devices replaces meaningful face-to-face interactions, leading to reduced relationship satisfaction. Interestingly, validation stress was found to be unrelated to gender, indicating that the pressures of online approval are experienced equally across male and female users. Moreover, the paradoxical observation that individuals who use social media "to stay connected" still report loneliness reflects the limitations of online interaction in meeting deeper emotional and social needs.

Both hypotheses proposed in the study were supported, showing that social media usage patterns have a measurable and multifaceted impact on both psychological and relational well-being. The implications of these findings extend to educators, parents, policymakers, and mental health professionals, who can play a pivotal role in promoting digital literacy, balanced technology use, and device-free social spaces.

In conclusion, while social media remains a powerful tool for connectivity and self-expression, its overuse or misuse can compromise mental health and weaken interpersonal relationships. This calls for proactive measures such as awareness campaigns, structured offline activities, and the integration of digital well-being education into school and college curricula. By fostering healthier online habits, it is possible to maximise the benefits of social media while mitigating its negative consequences for the emerging generation.

10. Limitations and Future Scope

1. **Geographical Limitation** – The study sample was restricted to Generation Z participants from Gujarat, which limits the generalisability of findings to other states or countries with different cultural, educational, and social media usage patterns.
2. **Sample Size** – With 122 respondents, the sample size is relatively small, reducing the statistical power and limiting the ability to detect smaller effects or associations.
3. **Sampling Method** – Purposive sampling was used, which may introduce selection bias, as participants with greater interest in the topic or higher social media usage may have been more likely to respond.
4. **Self-Reported Data** – The study relied on self-reported responses, which may be influenced by recall bias, social desirability bias, or misinterpretation of questions.
5. **Cross-Sectional Design** – Being cross-sectional, the study captures only a snapshot in time, making it impossible to establish causality between social media usage and the observed psychological or relational outcomes.
6. **Limited Variables** – The study focused on specific psychological and relational indicators; other important factors such as anxiety, depression, academic performance, and offline social skills were not included.
7. **Technological Scope** – The research analysed overall social media use but did not differentiate between specific platforms or content types, which may have varying impacts on mental health and relationships.
8. **No Longitudinal Data** – The absence of longitudinal tracking means that the long-term effects of social media usage patterns on well-being could not be assessed.
9. **Contextual Factors Not Considered** – Factors such as family structure, socio-economic status, and pre-existing mental health conditions were not controlled for, which might influence the associations found.
10. **Statistical Limitations** – Although the Chi–Square test was appropriate for categorical data, additional statistical methods such as regression analysis could provide deeper insights into predictive relationships.

Future Scope:

1. Expanding the study to include participants from different states or countries to enable cross-cultural comparisons.
2. Increasing the sample size to improve the reliability and statistical significance of the findings.
3. Using random sampling techniques to minimise bias and improve representativeness.
4. Incorporating longitudinal research designs to examine changes in behaviour and well-being over time.
5. Including additional psychological variables such as anxiety, self-esteem, and academic motivation.
6. Analysing platform-specific effects (e.g., Instagram vs. LinkedIn) to identify which platforms have more positive or negative impacts.
7. Considering socio-economic and family background variables to understand contextual influences on social media effects.
8. Using mixed-method approaches, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews or focus groups, to gain richer insights.
9. Applying advanced statistical models, such as regression or structural equation modelling, to predict outcomes and examine mediating factors.
10. Designing and testing intervention programs (e.g., digital detox campaigns, device-free family hours) to evaluate their effectiveness in improving psychological and relational well-being.

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