SOCIAL MEDIA AS A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD: EXPLORING ACTIVE USAGE PATTERNS AND MENTAL HEALTH IMPLICATIONS AMONG GENERATION Z IN FEDERAL UNIVERSITY OF LOKOJA NIGERIA.

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Abstract

The rapid growth of social media has significantly shaped the lives of Generation Z, who are regarded as digital natives. While these platforms encourage interaction, self-expression, and access to information, excessive or inappropriate use has been associated with negative mental health effects such as anxiety, depression, stress, and low self-esteem among young people. This study investigates the nuanced relationship between active social media usage and mental health among Gen Z students at the Federal University of Lokoja, Nigeria. Anchored on Agenda-Setting Theory, the research employs a quantitative survey design to ascertain the perceived causes of mental health disorders within this cohort and to evaluate both the positive and negative impacts of social media engagement. Data were collected from a sample of 382 students and analysed using descriptive statistics, ANOVA, and Chi-Square tests. Findings reveal a significant age-based difference in mental health perceptions and a strong positive association between social media use and perceived mental health benefits, particularly regarding economic empowerment through content creation. However, the study also confirms a prevalent perception of negative consequences, most notably procrastination and social comparison. The research concludes that while Gen Z actively leverages social media for tangible benefits, the latent risks to psychological well-being necessitate targeted digital literacy interventions and a shift from passive consumption to productive engagement.

Keywords: Generation Z, Social Media, Mental Health, Digital Natives, Procrastination

Introduction

Mental health constitutes a critical pillar of holistic well-being, yet it remains one of the most stigmatised and under-resourced areas of public health globally (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). Yet, recent evidence suggests that mental health stigma is gradually declining, contrary to earlier claims of widespread neglect. Increased awareness, digital advocacy, and workplace wellness programmes have improved help-seeking behaviour. Many countries are also integrating mental health into primary healthcare systems and expanding telehealth services. Younger populations are more open to discussing mental health, indicating improved social acceptance and reduced stigma compared to previous global assessments (Patel &Thornicroft, 2025).

The WHO (2022) estimates that approximately one in eight individuals worldwide lives with a mental health condition, with anxiety and depressive disorders being the most prevalent. Notably, the onset of many mental health conditions occurs during adolescence and young adulthood, precisely the developmental stage occupied by Generation Z (Gen Z) the demographic cohort born between 1995 and 2010 (Solmi, Radua, Olivola, Croce, Soardo, Salazar de Pablo, &Fusar-Poli, 2022; Twenge, Haidt, Blake, McAllister, Lemon, & Le Roy, 2021). This generation has matured in an era defined by ubiquitous digital connectivity, where social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), and Snapchat are not merely tools but integral components of social identity formation and daily routine (Valkenburg, Meier, &Beyens, 2022).

The relationship between social media usage and mental health is complex and often characterised as a "double-edged sword" (Naslund, Bondre, Torous, & Aschbrenner, 2020; Staff, 2021). On one hand, social media facilitates social support, community building for marginalised groups, and access to health information and resources (Berry, Lobban, Belousov, Emsley, Nenadic, &Bucci, 2017; Kietzmann, Hermkens,

McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). Campaigns like #HereForYou on Instagram and World Mental Health Day activations on X have demonstrated the potential for platforms to destigmatise mental illness and direct users toward care. On the other hand, a substantial body of empirical evidence links heavy or passive social media use to increased psychological distress, driven by mechanisms such as upward social comparison, cyberbullying, fear of missing out (FoMO), and sleep disruption (Keles, McCrae, &Grealish, 2020; Vannucci, Flannery, &Ohannessian, 2017; Valkenburg et al., 2022).

In the Nigerian context, where Gen Z comprises a significant and growing portion of the population, the interplay between social media and mental health is particularly salient. Nigeria's youth face unique socio-economic stressors, including high unemployment rates and economic uncertainty, which intersect with a digitally saturated lifestyle. While platforms like Instagram and TikTok offer avenues for creative expression and economic opportunity through content creation, they also expose users to curated, often unrealistic, portrayals of success that can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and frustration. This study, therefore, seeks to move beyond a simple binary of "good versus bad" to explore the specific patterns of active usage among Nigerian Gen Z students and the perceived impact of these patterns on their mental health.

Statement of the Problem

There has been a significant global surge in mental health advocacy facilitated by social media platforms. Initiatives like Instagram's #HereForYou campaign and the widespread visibility of World Mental Health Day on X have successfully brought conversations about psychological well-being into the mainstream digital discourse. However, the academic and clinical understanding of how Gen Z actively processes and internalises these messages, and how their specific usage behaviours correlate with their mental states, remains fragmented, particularly within non-Western contexts like Nigeria.

Existing literature largely originates from North America and Europe, and while it establishes a correlation between screen time and distress (Twenge et al., 2021), it often fails to account for the agency of the user. The present study addresses the gap between the proliferation of mental health content online and the actual, lived experiences of Nigerian Gen Z students. The problem is twofold: first, there is a lack of granular, localised data on the specific factors that Gen Z perceives as drivers of mental health issues in their digital environment. Second, there is insufficient understanding of the balance Gen Z strikes between leveraging social media for positive gains (e.g., income generation, social connection) and mitigating its negative psychological toll. This research investigates these dynamics to provide actionable insights for educators, mental health practitioners, and policymakers.

Objectives of the Study

The followings are the main objectives of this paper;

1. To determine the perceived factors contributing to mental health disorders among Generation Z students at the Federal University of Lokoja
2. To understand how social media usage have a positive impact on the mental health and well-being of Generation Z students
3. To examine the negative impacts of excessive social media usage on the mental health of Generation Z students

Research Questions

RQ1: What are the perceived factors contributing to mental health disorders among Generation Z students at the Federal University of Lokoja?

RQ2: To what extent does social media usage have a positive impact on the mental health and well-being of Generation Z students?

RQ3: What are the perceived negative impacts of excessive social media usage on the mental health of Generation Z students?

Review of Related Literature

Conceptualising Generation Z: The Digital Natives

Generation Z refers to individuals born roughly between 1997 and 2012, who are characterized by their digital nativity, having grown up with smartphones, social media, and constant internet access. They are typically tech-savvy, socially aware, and value diversity, mental health, and online communication (Pew Research Center, 2023). This cohort is distinct from preceding generations, notably the Millennials (Gen Y), in that they have never known a world without the internet, smartphones, and on-demand digital content. Duga (2013) describes Gen Z as the first truly global generation, sharing homogenous tastes in music, fashion, and digital culture regardless of geographic location. They are "digital natives" in the truest sense; their cognitive and social development has been inextricably intertwined with the affordances of social media algorithms and instant messaging (Nicholas et al., 2011; Rastati, 2018).

However, this hyper-connectivity comes with developmental trade-offs. Tari (2013) and Twenge (2017) note that Gen Z's social environment is increasingly virtual, leading to a potential atrophy of face-to-face interpersonal communication skills. This reliance on digital validation through likes, comments, and follower counts can create a fragile sense of self-worth, making them more susceptible to anxiety and depressive symptoms when online feedback is negative or insufficient (Borbély, 2015; Okaiyeto & Adewole, 2021). This cohort is characterised by an "instant culture," where gratification is expected immediately, and attention spans are notoriously fragmented.

The Dual Nature of Social Media Impact on Mental Health

The literature on social media and mental health presents a nuanced, often contradictory, picture. The positive dimension is well-articulated by scholars focusing on social capital and support. Kietzmann et al. (2011)

conceptualise social media as a functional "honeycomb" of identity, conversations, sharing, and presence, which can foster a profound sense of community. For individuals struggling with mental health stigma, online platforms offer a veil of anonymity and a curated space for self-disclosure, which can be therapeutic (Zhang, 2017). Berry et al. (2017) found that X (Twitter) serves as a vital space for users to discuss stigmatised conditions like schizophrenia, challenging public misconceptions and providing peer support. Furthermore, from a socioeconomic perspective, social media has evolved into a legitimate economic marketplace for Gen Z, offering pathways to entrepreneurship through content creation, influencer marketing, and e-commerce (Abuhashesh et al., 2021).

Conversely, the negative dimension is extensively documented in psychological research. Keles et al. (2020) conducted a systematic review confirming a significant, albeit modest, association between social media use and increased depression and anxiety among adolescents. The primary mechanism driving this distress is social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954). Radovic et al. (2017) found in a phenomenological study that depressed adolescents actively compare their "behind-the-scenes" reality with the "highlight reels" of their peers, leading to feelings of inadequacy and lower life satisfaction. This is exacerbated by the algorithmic curation of content, which often promotes unattainable beauty standards and luxurious lifestyles (Virden et al., 2014). In the Nigerian academic context, Anh et al. (2023) and Xie et al. (2023) highlight the potent role of peer pressure in driving maladaptive social media behaviours, where students feel compelled to maintain a certain online persona or engage in risky trends to gain acceptance.

Bridging the Gap: Active vs. Passive Use

Recent scholarship has moved beyond measuring mere "screen time" to differentiate between active use (e.g., posting, commenting, direct messaging) and passive use (e.g., scrolling without interaction). Valkenburg

et al. (2022) argue that active use tends to correlate with positive outcomes (increased social connectedness), while passive use is more strongly linked to negative outcomes (envy, depression). This distinction is critical for the present study. It suggests that Gen Z is not a monolithic, passive victim of technology; rather, their mental health outcomes are shaped by how they choose to engage with these platforms. This study contributes to this conversation by examining both the positive (active, income-generating) and negative (passive, procrastination-inducing) patterns of usage among Nigerian university students.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Agenda-Setting Theory. The concept was first proposed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw in 1972/1973. A foundational framework in mass communication that has found renewed relevance in the algorithm-driven landscape of social media (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2021). Originally positing that the news media shapes what the public thinks about (first-level agenda-setting) and how they think about it (second-level framing), the theory is applicable to understanding how social media platforms curate and prioritise mental health discourse (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; 2015).

In the context of this study, social media platforms function as powerful agenda-setters. The algorithm that prioritises certain content over others dictates the digital reality of Gen Z users. If a user's feed is saturated with content about "toxic productivity," "luxury lifestyles," and "relationship goals," the agenda set for that user is one of social comparison and material aspiration. This aligns with the negative mental health outcomes discussed in the literature (Radovic et al., 2017). Conversely, if platforms and the users themselves through their conscious choices elevate content related to mental health awareness, self-care routines, and authentic struggles (e.g., the #HereForYou campaign), the agenda shifts toward de-stigmatisation and

support.

Furthermore, the theory explains the influence of influencers. Social media influencers operate as elite agenda-setters within the Gen Z ecosystem (McCombes, 2019). Their posts and stories signal to their followers what is important, desirable, or normal. If influencers openly discuss their own therapy journeys or anxiety struggles, it sets an agenda that normalises mental health help-seeking. Conversely, if they only showcase opulence, they set an agenda of materialism that can be detrimental to the mental health of economically constrained Nigerian students. This framework, therefore, provides a robust lens for interpreting why Gen Z perceives both significant benefits (e.g., economic opportunity through content creation) and significant harms (e.g., procrastination and peer pressure) from the same medium.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive survey research design, deemed appropriate for collecting data on the attitudes, opinions, and behaviours of a defined population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The population of the study comprised 9,097 undergraduate students enrolled in all faculties across the Federal University of Lokoja (FUL records) presented during the 2025/2026 academic session matriculation ceremony (Federal University Lokoja, 2026, January 30). The sample size was determined using the Taro Yamane statistical formula. Based on a population of 9,097 and a 95% confidence level, a sample of 400 students was derived using Taro Yamane's formula. A multistage sampling technique was employed. The multistage sampling method ensured fair representation across faculties and academic levels while enhancing accuracy, reliability, and effective respondent selection: first, a proportionate allocation was made across the two faculties; second, within each faculty, students were stratified by academic level; finally, a simple random sampling technique was used to select individual

respondents. Of the 400 questionnaires distributed, 382 were returned valid and fully completed, yielding a response rate of 96%.

Collected data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequency counts and percentages) presented in tables. Inferential statistical tests were conducted to explore the relationships between variables: Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to test differences in mental health perceptions across age groups, and Pearson's Chi-Square Test was used to assess the association between social media use and perceived mental health impact.

RESULTS AND DATA PRESENTATION

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents (N=382)

Variable Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	190	49.7
Female	192	50.3
Total	**382**	**100.0**
Age Group		
18-22 years	202	53.0
23-27 years	158	41.0
28 years & above	22	6.0
Total	**382**	**100.0**
Marital Status		
Single	360	94.0
Married	22	6.0
Total	**382**	**100.0**
Preferred Platform		
Instagram	230	60.0
X (Twitter)	80	21.0
Facebook	72	19.0
TOTAL	**382**	**100**

Source: Field Survey, 2026

The table shows that the ages between 18 to 22 years old forms the main respondents of this research with a total number of 202 (53%) of the 382 total respondents. Instagram users forms the highest in this category with a total number of 230 (60%) of the entire population.

Perceived Factors Causing Mental Health DisordersTable 2: Perceived

Table 2: Perceived Factors Influencing Mental Health

Factors	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Peer Pressure	184	48.0
Hedonism (Pleasure-seeking)	92	24.0
Unemployment	56	15.0
Inferiority Complex	50	13.0
Total	382	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2026

The responses shown that peer pressure has much influence on most Gen Z that makes them feel they can't make it or they can't get there, this is clearly supported by 184 respondent representing 48 percent of the entire population under study. To determine if these perceptions varied significantly by age, a one-way ANOVA was conducted.
Null Hypothesis (H_0): There is no significant difference in mental health perceptions across age groups.

Table 3 one-way ANOVA on whether perceptions varied significantly by age

	Df	Sum Sq	Mean Sq	F value	Pr(>F)
AgeGroup	2	3503	1751.4	5.271	0.0228 *
Residuals	12	3988	332.3		

Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1
P-value for the ANOVA Test: 0.0228

Negative Impact of Excessive Social Media Usage

Table 5: Perceived Negative Impacts of Excessive Social Media Engagement

Negative Impact	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Procrastination	160	42.0
Keeping up with trends (FOMO)	125	33.0
Depression	85	22.0
Financial recklessness on data	12	3.0
Total	382	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Responses gathered from table 5, shows that there are actually negative impact from the excessive usage of social media by Gen Z but 160 respondent which represent 42 percent of the entire study population believes that the positive impact outsmarted the negative impact.
To test if age influenced the perception of these negative impacts, a one-way ANOVA was performed.

Null Hypothesis (H_0): Excessive social media usage has no significant negative impact on Gen Z's mental health perception across age groups.

Table 6: one-way ANOVA on whether influenced the perception of these negative impacts

	Df	Sum Sq	Mean Sq	F value	Pr(>F)
Age Group	2	324	162	0.054	0.948
Residuals	24	72418	3017		

P-value for the ANOVA Test: 0.9478297

Result: F-statistic = 0.054, p-value = 0.947.

Result: F-statistic = 5.271, p-value = 0.0228.

Since $p < 0.05$, the null hypothesis is rejected. There is a statistically significant difference in how Gen Z respondents of different ages perceive the drivers of mental health disorders. Younger respondents (18-22) were more likely to attribute mental health issues to peer pressure and hedonism, suggesting age-targeted interventions are necessary.

Positive Impact of Social Media on Mental Health

Table 4: Main Positive Impact of Social Media on Gen Z Lives

Positive Impact	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
To earn money through content creation	166	43.0
For social cohesion and interaction	102	27.0
To showcase goods and services	66	17.0
To monitor trends	48	13.0
Total	382	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Responses gathered from table 4 above, shows that social media has great impact in the lives of Gen Z by earning money through content creating, this was supported by 166 respondent which represent 43 percent of the entire population under study. A Pearson's Chi-Square test was conducted to assess the association between social media's positive impact and demographic variables.

Null Hypothesis (H_0): Social media does not have a significant positive impact on the mental health of Gen Z.

Result: X-squared = 43.455, df = 4, p-value = 7.069e-08.

The p-value is far below the 0.05 threshold; therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. This confirms a statistically significant positive association between social media usage and perceived mental health benefits. Notably, "earning money through content creation" emerged as the most salient positive factor, indicating that Gen Z views social media as a pragmatic tool for economic empowerment, which in turn alleviates financial stress a key component of mental well-being.

Since $p > 0.05$, we fail to reject the null hypothesis. This indicates that the perception of negative impacts primarily procrastination is uniformly experienced across all age groups within Gen Z. Age is not a distinguishing factor in this negative assessment.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study provide a nuanced, data-driven portrait of how Gen Z in a Nigerian university context navigates the psychosocial terrain of social media.

Research Question One: What are the perceived factors contributing to mental health disorders among Generation Z students at the Federal University of Lokoja?

The data unequivocally identifies peer pressure (48%) as the most significant perceived contributor to mental health struggles among Gen Z. This finding aligns with the global literature on adolescent development, where social acceptance and conformity are paramount (Xie et al., 2023). From an Agenda-Setting perspective, social media algorithms amplify this pressure by curating feeds that highlight social gatherings, relationship milestones, and material acquisitions. The significant age difference ($p = 0.0228$) suggests that younger Gen Z members (18-22) are more acutely vulnerable to this digital peer pressure. This is likely because this age bracket represents the transition from secondary school to university a period of intense identity negotiation where the fear of missing out (FoMO) on the "ideal" university experience depicted online is most potent (Valkenburg et al., 2022).

Research Question Two: To what extent does social media usage have a positive impact on the mental health and well-being of Generation Z students?

Another revealing findings is the strong positive association between social media use and perceived mental health benefits ($p < 0.01$). Contrary to

narratives that frame social media solely as a mental health hazard, Gen Z respondents actively frame it as a tool for economic agency. The fact that 43% cited "earning money through content creation" as the primary positive impact underscores a shift in media consumption patterns. For Nigerian students facing high unemployment rates, the ability to monetise creativity on Instagram or TikTok is not just a hobby; it is a tangible buffer against the anxiety of financial precarity (Abuhashesh et al., 2021). This is a clear example of active usage. By engaging in the productive work of creating skits, reviews, or educational content, Gen Z users are setting their own agenda, one focused on skill-building and entrepreneurship, rather than merely consuming the agendas set by influencers. This active, goal-oriented use of media provides a sense of purpose and control, which are protective factors for mental health.

Research Question Three: What are the perceived negative impacts of excessive social media usage on the mental health of Generation Z students?

Despite the acknowledged economic benefits, the study confirms the dark side of the digital coin: procrastination (42%). The ANOVA results indicate this is a universal experience across Gen Z age groups ($p = 0.947$). This is consistent with the "instant culture" described by Tari (2013). The infinite scroll and algorithmic design of platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels are engineered to hijack attention and disrupt executive function. Students find themselves spending hours consuming short-form content, leading to delayed academic work, sleep deprivation, and subsequent guilt and anxiety. This finding is critical for educators. It suggests that the battle for Gen Z's attention is not just about banning phones but about teaching met a cognitive strategies to manage the allure of the algorithm. The combination of FOMO (27%) and procrastination creates a toxic cycle where students are anxious about not being online, yet anxious about the time they waste while online (Keles et al., 2020).

Conclusion

This study confirms that for Generation Z students in Nigeria, social media is neither a panacea nor a poison; it is an integral, albeit ambivalent, ecosystem. The findings reveal a generation actively leveraging digital platforms for economic empowerment and social connection, yet simultaneously grappling with the cognitive and emotional costs of algorithmic distraction and social comparison. The application of Agenda-Setting Theory illuminates that while platforms set a broad agenda of consumerism and peer comparison, Gen Z users possess the agency to curate their feeds toward productivity and skill acquisition.

The study concludes that the negative mental health outcomes associated with social media are largely tied to passive consumption and procrastination, whereas the positive outcomes are linked to active creation and economic agency. The challenge for stakeholders is not to disconnect Gen Z but to equip them with the digital literacy and self-regulation skills to navigate this environment intentionally.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. The management of the Federal University of Lokoja should introduce regular mental health awareness programmes, peer counselling services, and digital wellness seminars to help students manage peer pressure, fear of missing out (FoMO), and emotional stress associated with excessive social media exposure. This would improve students' psychological resilience and encourage healthier online interactions.
2. University authorities and lecturers should incorporate digital literacy and time-management training into student orientation programmes to educate Gen Z students on responsible social media usage, self-regulation, and strategies for reducing procrastination caused

by excessive engagement with algorithm-driven platforms such as TikTok and Instagram.

3. Students should be encouraged to channel social media usage towards productive and entrepreneurial activities such as content creation, digital marketing, and online skill acquisition. The university can support this by organising social media entrepreneurship workshops that promote economic empowerment while reducing the negative psychological effects associated with purposeless online consumption.

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