The Impact of Social Media on Identity and Mental Health among Generation Z Students: A systematic Review of Literature

Irine Jebet Bartonjo[1], Gladys Muasya[2], Anna Mueni Mulinge[3], Joy Wamuhu Kinyuru[4], Elsie Mwende Murathi[5], Zipporah Wayua Mutunga[6]

St. Paul's University

Abstract

There is a plethora of Social Media platforms that Generation Z enjoys and are associated with both positive and negative identity formation and mental health outcomes. Generation Z is a group of youths born between 1997 and 2012, and from an early age, are well-versed with social media. Social media offers a global audience where youths can present themselves and it has also been associated with mental health challenges. Thus, an individual's real-life identity may be influenced by the digital persona crafted online. Many studies have focused on identity and mental health as separate topics, but studies show they can influence each other. The objective of this systematic review is to examine the relationship between social media use, identity formation and mental health outcomes among Generation Z students. This paper is a systematic review of literature that uses 27 papers that focus on generation Z mental and identity issues. The team used the PRISMA model to identify papers and refine the final sample of papers for synthesis. The papers were identified from various databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, EBSCOhost, Emerald Insight, AJOL (African Journals Online), Research Gate, Sage, Oxford Academic, Annual Reviews, De Gruyter Brill, Springer and Wiley Themes were extracted. Inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed studies published in English that examined social media use in relation to identity formation and/or mental health among Generation Z or closely related youth populations. Results show that those studies conceptualize mediated identity differently such as fragmented self, algorithmized self and distorted self. The visual profiles uploaded were edited constantly and some even had digital masks. The identity online differed from that offline, showing identity was fluid and negotiated. On the other hand, these youths used these identities to communicate in the digital space. They sought validation through likes, comments and shares, which created self-identity crises that further affected their mental health. The use of social media was associated with positive and negative impacts on mental health. Positive effects may lead to increased connection and self-esteem, while negative effects lead to increased isolation, sadness, stress and pressure, among other factors. Generation Z youths experience higher level of mental health issues as they face pressure trying to negotiate their identity on the social media platforms, making this relationship between identity and mental health paramount. The findings highlight the interconnected nature of digital identity construction and mental health outcomes among Generation Z. For those dealing with youth counselling, they should design program that address issues of identity and mental health together as they influence each other. There is need for more theorizing on how the affordances of platforms like Tiktok influence identity and not what a person actually chooses to be. More research should explore the issue of isolation, which some studies show social media increase isolation and others reduce isolation leading to conflicting evidence. This review contributes to existing literature by synthesizing evidence that position's identity formation and mental health as mutually reinforcing processes within social media environments.

Keywords: Mental Health and Wellbeing, Social Media, Identity Formation, Generation Z

1.0 Introduction

This chapter introduces the study by providing background information, contextual justification, and key concepts relevant to social media, identity and mental health among Generation Z.

1.1 Background of the Study

Identity and mental health issues are some of the pertinent issues that bother generation Z in many parts of the world. In a study conducted by US in 2023, it shows that 65% of generation Z had at least one mental issue, 42% of high schoolers being nervous or anxious (E Anne Foundation, 2024). UNICEF further established a global trend that revealed that Gen Z aged 15-25, consumed more mews than other cohorts and 60% were overwhelmed with contemporary societal issues such as climate change, conflict, economic trends and 40% asserted that they experienced stigma at schools and work places. Surprisingly, only 50% knew where to get assistance for mental health issues or the strategies to address mental health. UNICEF found that this knowledge was fragmented thus calling for a conceited effort from all stakeholders (UNICEF, 2025). These findings show that mental health challenges among Generation Z are increasing worldwide and that many young people do not know where or how to get help. Moreover, for teens of color and LGBTQ, there are heightened levels of suicide. Also, a   third of Gen Z adults expressed a sense of hopelessness and depressed feelings as in 2022 and in 2024, 13- to 17-year-old were persistently online (Shaikh, 2025). This shows that young people who are already marginalized may face more mental health challenges.

This persistent online behavior of being engaged in social media, makes these platforms to mediate identity formation; and thus, generation Z constantly negotiate their identity differently on online and offline platforms or on private and public platforms (Hällgren, & Björk, 2023).
Social media platforms have become important spaces where young people express and shape who they are. Interestingly, youths receive immense pressures in the desire to manage their self-presentation and identity due to the feedback they get from the likes, peer posts, followings and feedback on issues such as beauty, lifestyle and success. In addition, the fear of being left out (FOMO), makes these youths to edit their profiles for fear of negative backlash (Hällgren, & Björk,

2023).   This negotiation extends to their sexual identity, which is fluid and changing (Lee, & Hobbs, 2022).

These pressures can cause stress and emotional discomfort among young people.

Apart from studying how social media influences mental health and identity separately, it's good to combine these two aspects as they could be related or influence each other. The identity pressures could contribute to mental health issues due to the pressures of identity management that could lead to mental health issues such as anxiety of being left out, low self-esteem due to the negative feedback from peers. Social media just magnifies these identity dilemmas and minority groups could feel left out of it. This study explores these issues and connections among generation Z and their use in WhatsApp, Instagram and Tiktok. Looking at identity and mental health together helps explain how they affect each other.   Generation Z are youths that were born between 1997 and 2012 (Shaikh, 2025) and composes 30% of the world population and 27% of the world work force (Shaikh 2025). These youths are considered technologically savvy, "gender fluid, hyper stressed, politically engaged, connected but locally" (Barr, 2016). This generation is digitally engaged and in countries like the US, almost 95% own smartphones and spent considerable time surfing online (Casey, 2025; Shaikh 2025). Because Generation Z spends a lot of time online, social media plays a major role in their daily lives.

Among UK youths, these cohorts seek help for low self- esteem, depression, anxiety, self- harm in a larger number than other cohorts (Barr, 2016). Many Gen Z face mental challenges with up to 65% and they prefer working remotely with more flexible work arrangements (Shaikh 2025). However, this generation is not homogeneous. In the US the 25% live in poverty, 40% come from low-income families, the share of teens born to unmarried mothers increased from 32% to 41%, while 65% report having mental problems in the last 2 years. Differences in income and family background affect how young people experience identity and mental health challenges. In this paper, the world Health Organization [WHO] (2022) defines mental health as" a state of mental wellbeing that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well and contribute to their community" (p.1). Mental health does not imply absence of mental disorders and given the same stressors; people experience mental health differently. This definition shows that mental health is about overall wellbeing, not just the absence of illness. On

the other hand, Identity is defined as "a sense of self that develops as the child differentiates from parents and family and takes place in society" (Jary & Jary, 1991).

Identity has many dimensions; there are personal identities and social identities such as gender, race and socioeconomic class. Wood (2015) postulates that people use identity scripts" which define the roles that individuals play and the basic elements in the plots of their lives (Wood, 2015), It follows that children normally internalize scripts from others and society in general. Wood (2015) further asserts that individuals can challenge these identity scripts that the society offers and retain the ones they like. This idea helps explain how social media influences how young people see and present themselves. One aspect of identity is how to manage it- impression management, which is through communicating with a credible face. Individuals experience cyberbullying when people comment negatively through sending texts, comments, rumors; embarrassing pictures that are meant to hurt the other person. So, when this Gen Z gets fewer comments or negative ones, it affects the credibility of their face (WHO, 2022). These experiences can lower self-esteem and negatively affect mental wellbeing.

2.0 Methods

The team used the PRISMA model (Moher et al., 2009) to search and screen articles. This was to ensure transparency and methodological rigor in the identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion of relevant studies. In identification, the team carried out a broad-based search in the university library based on these academic databases: Google Scholar, JSTOR, EBSCOhost, Emerald Insight, AJOL (African Journals Online), ResearchGate, Sage, Oxford Academic, Annual Reviews, De Gruyter Brill, Springer and Wiley. Such search terms were used:" Generation Z AND digital behavior ""Social media AND mental health AND Generation Z", "Social media AND identity" "Social Media, Cyberbullying AND psychological well-being", "Adolescent moral development AND social media", "Self-esteem AND social media Kenya" "Social media AND adolescent mental health framework" among others. The search was limited to peer-reviewed papers published between 2020–2025 to ensure their recency. The initial search yielded = 75 articles. After removing n = 10 duplicates, I retained n = 65 records for further screening. In screening the journal article abstracts were checked for relevancy, that they were published within the prescribed timelines, focus on social media, mental health and identity issues that affect

Generation Z, prioritize African or adolescents and Kenya if possible. 5 more were excluded, those which focused on social media generally or other populations leaving 60 papers another 33 were removed due to limited scope, repeating the same type of study or inaccessible. We sought diversity in the areas and thus 27 were eligible for the study.

To carry out synthesis, the team read the articles several times and used the Literature review matrix to extract pertinent information from the articles which included (author, study purpose/objectives, methods, key findings, gaps, limitations and relevance to the study). The final matrices were thematically combined to derive themes and sub-themes following Tracy (2024) coding protocol. It emphasizes two cycles. First cycle is descriptive in nature and the second one is analytical in nature. The initial codes were inductively derived from the data itself. Thick descriptive quotes were added.

3.0 Results

Results are organized as follows: characteristics of the sample and studies, identity and mental health, discussion, conclusion and recommendations.

3.1 Characteristics of the Sample and Studies

All the studies were cross-sectional in nature; more than 50 % have a qualitative component in the study design. These qualitative studies rely on small samples of 10 – 25 participants which mostly are interviewed and content analysis of the social media profiles, likes, comments, followings and hashtags. Participants primarily consisted of adolescents and young adults, reflecting the core age range of Generation Z. Social media exposure was measured using self-reported questionnaires assessing frequency of use, duration of daily engagement and platform specific usage such as Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat. The remaining were systematic and conceptual paper and quantitative studies using correlation and regression and only one study used structural equation modelling. Most of these studies use self-reported data which may be prone to   social desirability bias calling for a need for experiments and longitudinal studies.

The studies tend to focus college/ university students or students of high school transitioning to universities. This implies that the nonstudents and marginalized Gen Z and teens are less studied.

A good number of studies are from Europe and the US and Canada and few are from sub- Saharan Africa showing that most generalization could be based on western context studies and some global South contexts could be understudied.

3.2 Identity Formation

Identity is a broad concept and the studies conceptualized it differently revealing its many aspects. First, we start, with authentic versus fake identity.   There is a debate between an authentic and fake identity in the social media space. Generation Z use social media platforms such as Instagram to present their visual identity which could be in the form of pics such as

selfies, lifestyle images or edited profile photos. These online profiles are continuously edited to make them appear authentic, however there is a worry that some level of editing could make them look superficial or fake. In as much as they would like to present very appealing profiles, they fear their profiles may appear unnatural thus fake. The pressure that drives this constant changing of their profiles is from their peers and family. Youths who cannot withstand this pressure tend to take social media breaks to detox. These findings collectively show how identify formation is increasing to visual self-presentation, where the pressure to appear authentic often results to heightened self-monitoring and entity strain.

Some Gen Z linked this   process as a highlight reel, the pressure of choosing more appealing pics and editing (Gorea, 2021). The implication of this constant changing of profiles implies identity is in a transitional state. For instance, in this Gorea (2021) it involved high schoolers transitioning to the university. After joining campus, the Youths changed their profiles. This transition period provides a window to learn the manner in which teens and young adults manage their visual identity and navigate the pressures around this transitioning and the anxiety that accompanies it.

In the social media youths face a myriad of expectations and seek to create an impression of a cool real respected person and not fake and youth's identity undergoes a process of   forming and transforming. Similarly, Barasa and Chebet (2024) observed among Eldoret undergraduate students use Instagram to create visual representations of themselves through a careful selection of images and editing. This study agrees with prior studies where the online pressure makes   the social media users to curate their identity and social media platforms which focus more on visuals add to this pressure of visually managing one's identity. Visual images influence students' self-

perceptions. These visual representations were observed in another study as "digital masks".

Second, there is the algorithmized self. Bhandari & Bimo (2022), paper found that the Tiktok algorithm influenced the self-making process in the social media. They coined the term the "algorithmized self". Unlike other social media, Tiktok shapes the process of self-making, using its algorithmic affordances. This algorithmized self has complicated what was previously known as the networked self. Bhandari and Bimo carried out semi- structured interviews and walkthrough of the app features, its interface and content and found that 1) the users are aware that the algorithm accurately predicts their preference, they train it and it later trains them. The algorithm feeds back and influence what the viewers watch for example, trending challenges or viral content 2) The selves created in Tiktok lacks context. Unlike the other platforms, identity construction in Tiktok is fragmented as the Tiktok content tend to be decontextualized, lacking a background, short and rapid and it's cut up, no long narratives. Ideally instead of showing one sustained story, there are pieces of self in isolated episodes. Unlike other social media platforms such as You Tube and Instagram which have longer captions and stable profiles, audience that follows the content creator; in Tiktok the focus is on what is immediate and catchy and gets surfaced. 3) The self-presentation of the users tends to be shaped by multiple platforms and it works differently from one platform to another. In Tiktok it tends to favor what performs and this may not match the users' offline self or how they perceive themselves. Thus, there is a tension on what Tiktok rewards and what is authentic or coheres with identity so these users have to navigate these tensions.

The main theoretical contribution is that the algorithmized self is different from the self that is built through networks (networked self). The features of algorithmic self are determined by the platform algorithm, things like curation, recommendations, visibility, surface rate, shape identity. It shifts and it's influenced on what is the algorithm privileges, especially the catchy and engaging stuff. Thus, identity is influenced by the content that is watched more, shared and people act on it and not on the intention of the user or social networks. The implication of this algorithmic self is the fact that a person's identity is shaped by the platform and based on the content that sells fast. This implies more pressure on the users to conform to the taste of the algorithm, by keeping to the trends and styles in order to gain visibility, this may limit what you what to present about yourself, reducing diversity.

This also costs the authenticity of what is presented as it favors what gains more visibility, audience is less predictable and the algorithm which decides what is visible, which may be the detrimental to self-making. The algorithm decides how much someone is visible rather than the social relationships, the content creators do not know the audience and someone identity is a byproduct of how the created product optimizes the platform rather than personal intention. This suggests that identity formation on platforms like TikTok and Instagram is increasingly shaped by algorithmic systems, where visibility, trends and engagement metrics influence how the self is constructed and expressed.

Third, the fragmented and distorted   identity. Closely related to Bhandari and Bimo paper is that of Mutinda et al., (2025) who sought to establish the role of social media and identity formation of teens in an AIC church at Utawala Nairobi. The sample was mainly teens of 13-19 years old majority in the Gen Z bracket. They found both positive and negative effects on the manner youths responds to social media posts, likes and the experienced pressure led to identity fragmentation or distortion. The teens modified their appearance e.g., clothes, behavior and looks in attempt to garner more likes and comments, thus they sought external validation of their identity.

The identity online and offline was different kind of fragmented and also, they adopted or developed new identities to appeal more on the social media platform raising issues of authentic self. These teens tried different identities and also, they experienced distortion of their identities, in attempt to present oneself in more appealing ways in attempt to meet media ideals. This implies this period of identity crisis is critical for churches to offer guidance to assist their youths to handle social media pressures. For the very young, there may be need for regulation of access and use of these platforms and youth support programs on how to have an authentic identity and ways to boost self-esteem. For generation z youths this fragmentation reflects an identity
formation process characterized by experimentation with multiple selves across online and offline contexts.

Fourth, the digital selves/masks. Sometimes, Gen Z youths create what Wekesa and Muthoni (2023) refer to as digital selves. This constructed self is used to interact with the media and which

may be very different from the real self. These youth perform and balance in the local and the globalized digital culture. Being present online influences these youth's self -concept. Limitation is that the study is not tied to a specific platform. These digital selves are referred to as digital masks in the Omondi and Achieng (2025) paper.

These authors found that in their study of 400 high scholars in Kisumu, students created digital masks and their online platforms. The online culture and the local culture values were different leading to dialectic tensions. These authors concluded that online self-presentation was a complex issue. Their research was grounded on discourse analysis, Erikson's psychosocial theory.

Fifth, mental illness identity. Smith (2025) explored undergraduate students in US (University of Central Florida), to establish whether the psychosocial factors associated with social media predicted mental illness identity among generating Z. They used a large sample of 217, that mental health and self-identity measures and they found that social media use was a predictor and more precisely a moderator of mental illness identity., in that the more the social use the greater the effect on mental health identity.

These measures: self-esteem, discrimination, perceived isolation, wellbeing; hope/coping had a significant relationship with mental illness identity. Stigma did not have significant relationship with social media use, but many psychosocial variables had. Thus, people who are lonely or isolated or have lower perceived level of wellbeing tend to use social media more. The specific platforms did not predict different mental illness identity. Form this discussion, it follows that several factors indeed influence mental illness identity, i.e., how they use, feelings of isolation, wellbeing, self-esteem, the recovery attitude to recovery jointly play a role in mental illness identity.

The study found social media to moderately predict mental illness and thus any measures should consider social media patterns that influence identity formation and mental health.

Within Sub Saharan Africa, notable studies have been carried such that of Okyere- Manu and Matlala (2021) with sample of 60 cases of adolescents from Kenya, Ghana and South Africa. This qualitative study revealed both positive and negative effects. The peer influence associated with

social media influenced how these youths reasoned and their identity was formed. Some positive effects where it gave them an opportunity to self-express themselves and they felt empowered on the other hand, they were exposed to negative content that was potentially harmful, moral confusion and unhealthy peer pressure. This shows that students' identity and moral compass is influenced by their ethical decision and peer identities they interact with on the social media platforms.

In a Kenyan study, Ndetei et al. (2023), using narrative approach Interviewed 45 youths from Nairobi and Mombasa to find if there was a relationship between their self- esteem and mental health. They also observed their social media profiles and content of their platforms such as Tiktok and Facebook. Their findings reveal that the social media empowered them through allowing them to have visibility, express themselves and have a sense of belonging and the negative aspects they were vulnerable as they relied on their peers to validate them, they compared themselves with their peers which could lead to negative comparisons and encouraged self-doubt. This study gave a lived experience of the manner a youth's identities interact with mental health. This implies social media mediates their self-esteem through the online validations they get from their peers.

In Poland, Stepaniuk & Misiewcz (2025) used online survey to survey Gen Z university students to establish why youths imitate behaviors in the social networking sites. They used the affordable theory which examines the features of platform that makes users to use it or copy some behaviors from it. They introduced new terms; herd behavior (passive following) behavior mimicry (active following of the content, replicating the content) and perceived content popularity (what makes the content more appealing to users).

The study found that perceived content popularity was positively associated with herd behavior in Instagram, Tiktok and Facebook and perceived authority (the respect or influence of the content to the users) increased herd behavior in Tiktok and Mimicry in Instagram and Facebook. The extent to which users imitated content varied with the platform, higher levels of herd behavior mimicry were found in Instagram while there were mixed results for Facebook and Tiktok. Thus, social media features influence herd behavior and mimicry among generation Z users. Thus, Social

networking Sites (SNS) that incorporate popularity metrics or have authority signals may influence youth behavior /identity.

To add on, Gen Z follow people with more likes (herd behavior and imitate users who are influential or seem important (behavior mimicry), which eventually shape their social media interactions.   In a study in India Jones (2021) using an comparative ethnographic study of 25 students of Kenyan and American Youth showed that the short Tiktok videos shapes the youth attention span, how they express themselves and multitasking, Singh (2020) quantitative study of 500 Indian students focused on Twitter and Reddit, showed that the features of these platforms encouraged youths to pursue global activism and justice as part of their identity indicates these youth political identity is the same – Kenya and India.

In another qualitative case study of 10 Tiktok influencers in Kenya, Gathoni and Okello (2020) found that the   features of Tiktok encourage experimentation and playfulness while Instagram focus on appearance, this shows the nature of the platform encourages certain identity formations. Youth in Nairobi use performance and their creativity to influence their sense of self.

3.3 Identity and Mental health

 Besides identity issues, social media plays significant role in mental health. For example, Mojtahe 2022 mental health of generation Z systematic review revealed that excessive use of social media was associated with stress, anxiety social isolation and depression, reduced physical activity and offline interactions. These youths also faced disrupted sleep patterns, increased exposure that exposed them to cyberbullying and misinformation. Different platforms had different experiences.

For instance, the use of Instagram was associated with lower self-esteem especially when the Gen Z youth failed to garner enough likes after posting. Youths could use Facebook to maintain connections, however over reliance could lead to mental health. Youths who depended on Twitter, had lower interactions and loneliness. Thus, the feedback online of likes and shares influenced the youth's   self-esteem and   may lead to anxiety and depressions associated with mental health.

Another systematic review (Bonfils, 2022) of articles published between (2019- 2022) found Gen Z spend 5-10 hours on social media, which is considered higher compared to other groups. Bonfils noted that high levels of   Social Media use, led to anxiety, depression, poor concentration and loneliness. The COVID 19 worsened these effects. The Gen Z who depended on social media influenced their generational identity and too much reliance led to risks of anxiety and loneliness.

In India, Bhat et al 2024 surveyed social media users exploring how it led to depressive disorders and they observed that increased use of social media made the users addicted, increase their participation and interaction in these platforms, which further increased the risk of depressive disorder and those who had experienced negative comparison affected their mental health. Social media intensity influences mental health. In a related study in India, Sao et al (2024) did a study of generation Z's relationship between problematic social media use and prevalence of stress, anxiety and depression. They found relationship between higher levels of stress and problematic social media use. High levels of social media use challenge self-identity development, contribute to emotional challenges and stress, making the youth less resilient.

In a different context, Emma & Walters (2025) surveyed Gen Z from the US universities and colleges, to investigate how social media addiction influenced self-esteem and anxiety levels. They established that increased use of social media was linked to lower self-esteem and high levels of anxiety. It shows high social media use is linked to a fragile self- identity; anxiety is an indication of identity insecurity is an indication of mental health stress. In Indonesia, Nabila and Ismail (2025) was solely on Tiktok and mental health among a sample of 10 Gen Z aged 17-22 years. The study revealed that the use of Tiktok led to self-confidence and self-expression.
On the other hand, it led to social anxiety for those who depended on Tiktok for validation, which further led to mental health challenges such as social withdrawal and anxiety. A second study carried out in Indonesia is that of Al wafah and Ningsih (2025) who sought to establish whether Tiktok use affected the mental health of its users. Using the users' gratification theory, and a quantitative survey, they found that Gen Z use Tiktok for entertainment, social connection, creative ideas.

However, heavy use of this platform contributed to anxiety, stress and negative self-comparisons. Media is used to meet the needs of information, leisure and social interaction. It had positive effects like boosting their moods when they saw other people's positive experiences. This gives the impression that the effect of social media depends on how the platform is used. For instance, the nature of the content followed. If users focused on certain content, the algorithm pulled similar related content, if this content was negative, it had negative mental consequences.

In addition, the viral Tiktok trends make the youths experience the fear of missing out (FOMO). Moreover, the social pressure from these videos worsened mental conditions if they were forced to follow a trend that was not suitable to them. Thus, the motivation, frequency and the engaged matter, influenced the mental health outcomes the Gen Z youths experienced.

Studies have also shown that the risk of exposure to mental health affects different populations differently. For instance, Jain's (2025) systematic study that explored the relationship between the problematic use of Tiktok and mental health revealed that women and people of low income had a higher exposure level to anxiety and depression.

Studies have explored the use of social media during the COVID-19 lockdown. Giancola et al. (2023) sought to find out the perceived effects of increased social media use on the mental health of undergraduate university students during the COVID-19 Lockdown in Canada and students who used at least 3 social media platforms. The findings revealed that there were benefits: a sense of social connectedness and they could maintain contact with friends and family thus reducing isolation. Social media acted as stress reliever/ distraction, allowing them to unwind and escape stressful moments that could come from the lockdown or academics. It acted as a source of inspiration, creativity and normalcy. They could get ideas such as for fitness, art and hobbies. They could learn to be creative by observing others online and give them hope and ideas during lockdown and social media made them have a sense of a normal life.

On the other hand, it posed harm: the harm from social comparison where they could watch other posts of how others were engaged in travel, achievements and this made some to feel left behind (FOMO- feelings of missing out), some became sad, lonely and by comparing their lifestyles, it had a significant effect on their body image. It also led to cultivation of negative habits like always

scrolling their phones to check what is new, distraction and a sense of lack of purpose, it affected time for their academics, leading to academic stress as their work piled up, it affected their concentration span as well.

This implies that not all social media use is negative, however during pandemics, mental health support should also include how to manage digital behavior as it affects mental wellbeing and students made aware of their social media behaviors, to allow them set boundaries and be active users and not passive users of social media. There is need of cost benefit analysis where participants have to weigh the benefits versus the costs and attempt to moderate their social media use. There was also the danger of constantly checking the phone making them feel addicted.

Another study conducted during COVID-19 is that of Bonfils (2022) systematic review sought to find if whether COVID-19 pushed the youth to isolation and overuse of social media which could lead to negative mental health outcomes. They found that there were dangers of information overload, always engaged in social media and sharing information. Too review showed that too much social media caused anxiety, stress, depression and these dangers were adverse with COVID-19. There is a disclaimer where the author says the cause of depression or mental health outcomes depended on the content the students consumed and the manner, they engaged themselves whether actively or passively as well as their motivation.   Due to being digitally engaged, makes Gen Z vulnerable as their private and public life is blurred exposing them to both the good and the bad effects of social media. Thus, those planning to have platforms for mental health should consider sources of mental health   issues that emanate from these social media platforms and align strategies accordingly. The idea of social media reducing isolation in Giancola et al. (2023) paper and it increasing isolation in the Bonfils (2022 paper gives conflicting results that require further investigation.

Chebukwa and Mbugua (2022) explored 312 Kenyan students from private and public universities in Kenyan universities to establish social media effects on mental health, the authors used survey and data analyzed using correlation and regression. They found high levels of social media use had a strong positive correlation anxiety, disrupted sleep patterns, depressive symptoms, this suggests overreliance may contribute negative challenge of student's psychological well-being., showing

14

online engagement   can influence a student's sense of emotional stability, sense of self and coping mechanisms which may influence their social and academic lives.

Mwangi and Kimani (2020) looked at psychological impact of cyberbullying and the moderating role of parental support among a sample of 220 Kenyan youths who were aged 13-18. They used mixed method of 30 interviews and quantitative survey, the inferential and thematic analysis showed that cyberbullying had significant influence on the youth's psychological wellbeing, which contributed to stress, their low self-esteem and depressive symptoms. However, parental support moderated these negative effects. This shows offline parental support can mitigate the effects of negative online interactions that youth engage them with. However, the type of support is not discussed in detail.

A person's social mindset in regard to social media use could influence their psychological wellbeing. This is illustrated in an US study of   Lee and Hancock (2024). Their large sample of 2174 users consisted of four samples, one of the samples were made of college students in their late teens and early adulthood. This study used the mindset theory, factor analysis and regression models. Mindset theory attempts to make a connection between social media use and psychological wellbeing. Lee and Hancock coined the terms "social mindsets" which seeks to explain how people view social media, whether good or bad for mental health; thus, to viewers it can be an opportunity or a liability and this impacts their psychological wellbeing.

Mindset theory shows how people's beliefs shape their experiences and their cognitive response. The study found out that there were two social media mindsets one which is a social liability mindset and perceives the social media space as stressful, risk/harmful and the social opportunity mindset that perceives the social media space as a place for connection, positive expression and learning and these two influences the user's wellbeing rather than using the time spent scrolling social media pages. The social opportunity mindsets viewers reported experiencing negative wellbeing such as stress and dissatisfaction while the social opportunity mindset reported positive mental health outcomes. This study shifted the mental health discussion form the length of time people spent on social media to how they perceive social media and policy makers should

encourage positive mindsets and social media interventions should focus on the attitudes in regard to social media than the time spent/usage.

Among interventions of youth mental health, most engaging content for mental health from an Irish population revealed the private/personal accounts opposed to public/institutional accounts were more engaging. This was because they tend to use features that generate how engagement such as dialogue and narrative style compared to the public/institutional accounts (McCashin, & Murphy, 2023).

These studies show that social media plays a big role in both identity and mental health for Generation Z. Young people at this age are still figuring out who they are and they care a lot about what others think. Things like likes, comments and constant visibility online make it harder for them to feel secure about themselves and can increase stress and anxiety

How social media affects mental health depends on how it is used and what young people want from it. Using social media actively like posting content, connecting with friends in a positive way or learning new things can be good for mental health. But just scrolling or constantly seeking approval through likes can increase stress, anxiety and make it harder for them to feel confident about their identity

Other factors also matter, like support from parents, family income, gender and digital skills. Having supportive family or knowing about mental health can help reduce the negative effects of things like cyberbullying or comparing yourself to others online. This means that helping Generation Z with mental health should not just focus on limiting social media, but also on teaching healthy online habits, emotional skills and giving support in real life.

4.0 Discussion

This paper has explored various papers from various regions, such India, Indonesia and the US. The desire to have a certain identity representation was validated by peers and other users using likes, followings and hashtags. The pressure to maintain an online persona that aligns with perceived social norms often creates tension between authentic self-expression and social validation. Some comments were negative leading to cyberbullying and there was the strain of constant comparison. This led to psychological strain and affected identity and mental health of

the Gen Z youths (Bhat et al., 2024, Giancola et al., 2023). In some Tiktok platforms, the platforms influence what need to be displayed rather than the social networks and it brought the concept of algorithmized self-based on the platform's metrics and visibility. Algorithm-driven content amplification may reinforce identity fragmentation by encouraging users to conform to trends or exaggerated versions of themselves for engagement. While online communities can provide belonging and support, excessive or unregulated use may negatively affect emotional regulation, sleep patterns and offline relationships. These findings suggest that social media is neither inherently beneficial nor harmful, but its impact on mental health depends on usage patterns, individual vulnerability and digital literacy. (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). Indeed, youth sought to manage their identity to appear authentic. So, the challenge of performance in form of visibility and to appear authentic affected the youth's mental health, it could lead to low self-esteem, anxiety and confusion (Smith, 2025; Jain et al., 2025).

In looking at visual identity such as the study of Gorea 2021 there is need to explore the intersection of many identity determinants such as gender, class, culture and context and social media is a space of identity negotiation. For Tiktok in particular, it seems to have some features that influence mental health outcomes, youth saw it as a source of empowerment but some a source of emotional dysregulation (Al Wafah & Ningsih, 2025; McCashin & Murphy, 2023). The Tiktok short videos though enhancing engagement and self-expression they contributed to low concentration span and encouraging addicted behaviors (Emma & Walters 2025). A Kenyan study showed that youth's sought to negotiate between the online global culture and the local cultures (Chebukaka & Mbugua, 2022; Wekesa & Muthoni 2022). This cultural negotiation in the digital space was either an enabler or a challenge in the youth's mental wellbeing as it was influenced by the societal religious or familial expectations (Okyere-Manu & Matlala, 2021).

A number of studies have sought to shed light on the issue of identity and mental health; however, these studies are mostly carried in the global North and a few in Sub-Saharan Africa, implying their unexplored areas. To add on, most studies tend to be cross-sectional and use small qualitative samples and in university settings. This may limit generalization of the findings to the large Gen Z population (Giancola et al., 2023; Sao et al., 2024). The use of self-reported information could lead to social- desirability bias.

17

4.1 Recommendations

There is a need to make use of large samples, longitudinal studies and mixed methods (Lee & Hancock, 2024). It's good to segregate the social media to different platforms and study them separately because they offer different features, such as comment threads and algorithmic feeds which influence mental health and identity differently (Jain et al., 2025; Spepaniak & Misiewicz, 2025). Encouraging balanced social media use, such as time management strategies, content curation and intentional breaks, may help reduce anxiety and burnout. Sometimes mental illness could be hidden as part of identity work and thus, there is a need to establish how different online self-expressions tie to mental health identities such as anxiety, depression and self-concept (Bonfils, 2022; Smith 2025).

Explore research that seeks to use indigenous perspectives and explore how the use of social media intersects with indigenous cultural values, religion, politics to offer nuanced local perspectives (Barasa & Chebet, 2024; Mutinda et al., 2025; Nabila & Ismail, 2025; Omondi & Achieng, 2025). Educational institutions should integrate digital mental health literacy into curricula, helping Generation Z develop awareness of social comparison, online validation and the psychological effects of algorithmic content. There is need for support programs for youths to empower them to navigate the dynamics of the platforms and how they influence mental health and identity (Mwangi & Kimani, 2020).

5.0 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that social media plays a significant role in shaping identity and mental health experiences among Generation Z. There is multifaceted role that digital platforms offer to young people to construct and negotiate their identity, which eventually affect their mental health. Ultimately, fostering authentic self-expression and psychological well-being in digital spaces is essential for the long-term mental health of this generation. Since social media is here to stay, there is need for more sensitization on informed use of these spaces. In addition, segregating all social media as one may conceal some differences which may have implications on the Gen Z identity and mental health issues.

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