



THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ALGORITHMS ON MENTAL HEALTH, SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR, AND DIGITAL IDENTITY AMONG GENERATION Z

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ABSTRACT

Social media has undergone a dramatic transformation in how it is being used by generation Z; how they communicate, and their psychological experience as users. In digital settings, users are more and more encountering some content via social media algorithms, with which they interact and from which they experience emotional impact. This research aimed to examine how social media algorithm affects the mental health, social behaviours and digital identity development of Generation Z. The collected data were pre-processed and analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and evaluation techniques based on regression analysis to analyze the relationship between algorithm-driven social media usage and psychosocial outcomes in Generation Z. The results showed that excessive use of personalized social media content was statistically significantly correlated with anxiety, emotional exhaustion, depression, fear of missing out (FOMO), and online validation dependency of the users belonging to Generation Z. Algorithmic recommendation systems also shaped social interactions, use of online platforms and the building of digital identities via engagement, or content exposure. The research additionally showed that the heavy users experienced emotional burnout, cyberbullying victimization, problems with privacy, and decreased face to face social interaction due to excessive social media use. In the meantime, social media also enabled younger people to share their knowledge of social issues, participate in culture and communication, and utilize digital media. The study concluded that algorithm-based digital environments can greatly influence users' psychological well-being and their social relationships in the Generation Z. The results highlight the need for digital literacy, ethical design of algorithms, mental health awareness and policy interventions for creating healthier online spaces in modern-day digital society.

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1. Introduction

Digital technologies and social media have greatly changed how young people communicate, construct their identities, interact socially and behave. Generation Z, also known as the Millennial Generation, are the first generation to have been born into an environment that was fully wired. Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and YouTube have become everyday realities for the GenZ, impacting not only social relationships and engagement in learning but also their social awareness and mental health. In the last 20 years, the way social media has developed has led to changes in how people communicate and how they participate online, especially among younger audiences who are more active in algorithm-driven online environments (Kullolli & Trebicka, 2023). As artificial intelligence and recommendation algorithms continue to pervade social media platforms, this digital content has been further driving individual experiences, emotions, and social practices (Arkhipova & Janssen, 2024).

While social media offers avenues for connection, creativity, and self-expression, the body of evidence is increasing that excessive online curation of content can result in harmful psychological responses from users of Generation Z. Anxiety, depression, Fear of Missing out (FOMO), social comparison, emotional exhaustion, cyberbullying and digital addiction are some of the issues that have arisen due to excessive social media use. Research has shown that social media use is likely to have a significant impact on depression and emotional instability among population groups of Generation Z, particularly in digitally connected settings (Bhat et al., 2024). Social media has also been termed as an “emotional and mental roller coaster” for users of Generation Z as they witness a constant flow of validation online, digital comparison, and emotionally rich content (Kannan & Kumar, 2022). The social media messages and online interactions that younger people experience are increasingly impacting their emotional, mental and even spiritual health (Hayes, 2021). Moreover, in the post-pandemic era, the cultural dimension of digital technology has led to an increase in issues that affect self-esteem, anxiety and fear of social exclusion among online users who are socially active (Owen & Daniels, 2025). In recent years, there has been a further focus on the effects of social networks on mental well-being and psychological fragility in digitally dependent societies (Ndindeng, 2025).

Recommendation systems and social media algorithms, which are powered by artificial intelligence, are a key factor in shaping the nature of content viewed, interacted with and emotionally reacted to by users. Algorithmic systems are engineered to maximize engagement with content, meaning that content that is emotionally stimulating, and personalized, can potentially lead to addictive forms of digital engagement and psychological vulnerability for young people and adolescents. Therefore, the connection between AI exposure of content, social media bias, and mental health is a crucial interdisciplinary research field (Chang et al., 2025). The use of algorithmic recommendation systems has been found to affect the social practices of individual users and collective social groups of Generation Z, affecting their online behaviour, cultural practice and patterns of digital interaction within various societies (Arkhipova & Janssen, 2024). Concerns about social media addiction and algorithmic manipulation have also been brought to the legal and policy level due to its potential effects on adolescent mental health and digital safety (Costello et al., 2023). The connection between social media use, issues of privacy and psychological health among the Generation Z has also evolved into an emerging topic in the academic sphere of research on digital society (Ramon Saura et al., 2025).

Another key trait of Generation Z's interaction with social media is the formation of their digital identities. The world of the Web is becoming a space in which individuals develop, transform and share their identity with others via self-curated digital media, interaction, and visual representation. Digital identity is closely tied up with the validation in online space, getting recognition from a peer group and belonging to a group in algorithm-driven space among the Generation Z (Kollárová & Niklová, 2025). But the need to keep up idealised online identities can also lead to emotional exhaustion, psychological suffering and anxiety over identity among young internet users (Kamraju, 2025). The increasing importance of the problem of cyberbullying and online harassment among Generation Z social networking platform users also exacerbates these difficulties and may have severe psychological consequences. (Hardiyanto et al., 2024).

However, social media can also be used to raise awareness, engage in activism, learning and culture by the younger generation. Because of their interactive digital involvement and swift dissemination of information, social networking platforms have helped raise awareness among the Generation Z about social and political issues (Lakshmi et al., 2024). Digital literacy, educational communication and mental health awareness are also relevant topics of discussion when it comes to Generation Z, AI and an online media environment (Krumsvik, 2024). The current literature, however, is still divided on the synergistic effect of social media algorithms on mental health, social behaviour and formation of digital identity among users of Generation Z. The aim of the present study was to investigate how the algorithm of social media influences the psychological well-being, behavioral practices and digital identity construction of the Generation Z in the current digital society.

Research Objectives:

1. To examine the influence of social media algorithms on the mental health of Generation Z users.
2. To analyze the relationship between social media engagement and social behavior among Generation Z.
3. To evaluate the role of digital platforms in shaping digital identity construction among Generation Z individuals.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

A quantitative research design was used in the present study to investigate the effects of social media algorithms on mental health, social behavior and digital identity of Generation Z users. Data collection and analysis of social media use patterns, algorithmic engagements, psychological experiences, digital behavioral practices were done in a cross-sectional survey based approach. The quantitative design was chosen as it enabled the relationships between the social media exposure and psychosocial outcomes of the participants belonging to Generation Z to be evaluated systematically.

2.2 Dataset Collection

The present study used the data sets that are available in the publicly accessible repository in the context of Generation Z social media use and digital lifestyle behavior (Zahid, 2023). The main data source was data related to social media use, screen time, content engagement, emotional reactions, frequency of online use and digital behaviors of Generation Z users. Further supporting information in the areas of mental wellness, digital habit and psychological wellness were also included to enhance the analytical structure of the study. Pre-processing, including duplicate records removal, incomplete information and lack of consistency in records, was performed to enhance the quality of the data for the analysis.

2.3 Sample Selection and Participant Characteristics

The data sample was mostly Generation Z (18–27 years old). The participants were active social media users with different academic, social and digital backgrounds. Pre-processing and validation procedures were carried out to make it reliable and suitable for statistical analysis, before the final choice of analytical data. For the analysis of behavioral trends and the nature of online interaction, the following demographic variables were taken into consideration: age group, gender, average daily screen time, preferred social media platforms and degree of engagement with social media.

2.4 Data Preprocessing and Variable Categorization

The obtained data were preprocessed and classified prior to statistical analysis. Analytical bias was minimized by detecting and excluding missing data and inconsistent answers. The variables related to mental health outcomes, social behavior, the frequency of online interactions, emotional reactions, comparisons with others, experiences of cyberbullying and digital identity practices were grouped into structured categories. The indicators of social media algorithm exposure were the frequency of contents recommended, interaction with personalized feed, amount of time spent interacting with the content and repetitive consumption of the content.

2.5 Statistical Analysis

The relationship between social media algorithms and psychosocial variables of Generation Z was analyzed by descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Frequency distribution, percentage analysis, mean values, and standard deviation were used to describe the participant's characteristics and social media usage trends. A correlation test was also conducted to assess the relationship between content exposure in the algorithm and mental health parameters like anxiety, emotional exhaustion, social comparison, and depressive tendencies. To measure the prediction of social media engagement and algorithmic interaction on digital identities and behaviors of the participants, regression analysis was used. Comparative analysis was also conducted to reveal the differences in the psychological response and social behaviors of the participants regarding their level of usage of social media

3. Results

3.1 Demographic Characteristics and Social Media Usage Patterns

The analyzed data was mainly of the Generation Z people whose age was in between 18-27 who were active on social networking platforms daily. Descriptive analysis showed that an appreciable percent of the population had more than four hours of social media use each day, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube and Snapchat being the most popular platforms among them. The most common way of accessing digital media was via mobile, with a social media platform. Personalized media suggestions, short videos, popular media, and personalized feeds were frequently seen with the participants. The analysis also showed that the intensity of using social media was found to be positively linked to the continuous engagement with the Internet and repeated behavior of using contents. Those who reported using social media more per day also had more interaction with algorithm-recommended content than users who were less exposed to social media.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics and Social Media Usage Patterns of Generation Z Participants

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age Group	18–21 Years	412	41.2
	22–24 Years	356	35.6
	25–27 Years	232	23.2
Gender	Male	468	46.8
	Female	512	51.2
	Other	20	2.0
Daily Social Media Usage	1–3 Hours	186	18.6
	4–6 Hours	472	47.2
	More than 6 Hours	342	34.2
Most Used Platform	Instagram	398	39.8
	TikTok	286	28.6
	YouTube	214	21.4
	Snapchat	102	10.2

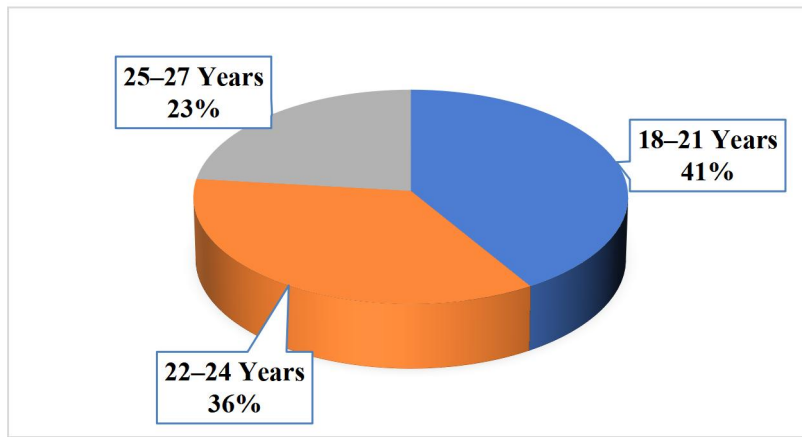


Figure 1. Demographic distribution and social media usage patterns among Generation Z participants.

3.2 Impact of Social Media Algorithms on Mental Health

The statistical analysis showed that there was a significant correlation between algorithm-driven social media use and negative mental health effects in the use of social media among Generation Z. Those who had a higher engagement level had more experiences of anxiety, emotional exhaustion, stress, fear of missing out (FOMO), and depressive tendencies. Content personalized algorithmically facilitated a sustained, social comparison as well as emotional reliance on online validation. The participants also showed strong links between experiences of cyberbullying and emotionally-burdened responses, together with exposures to emotionally triggering content. People who saw a lot of idealised lifestyles and comparisons with their looks and viral social trends on social media gave a lower self-esteem rating and higher emotional instability ratings in comparison. After controlling for other factors, there was also a correlation between increased engagement with algorithmically recommended content and the increase in psychological distress and decrease in emotional well-being.

Table 2. Impact of Social Media Algorithms on Mental Health Indicators

Mental Variable	Health	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Correlation with Algorithmic Exposure (r)	Significance (p-value)
Anxiety		4.12	0.84	0.69	<0.001
Emotional Exhaustion		4.05	0.79	0.72	<0.001
Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)		4.31	0.76	0.75	<0.001
Depressive Tendencies		3.88	0.81	0.66	<0.001
Self-Esteem Reduction		3.74	0.88	0.63	<0.001

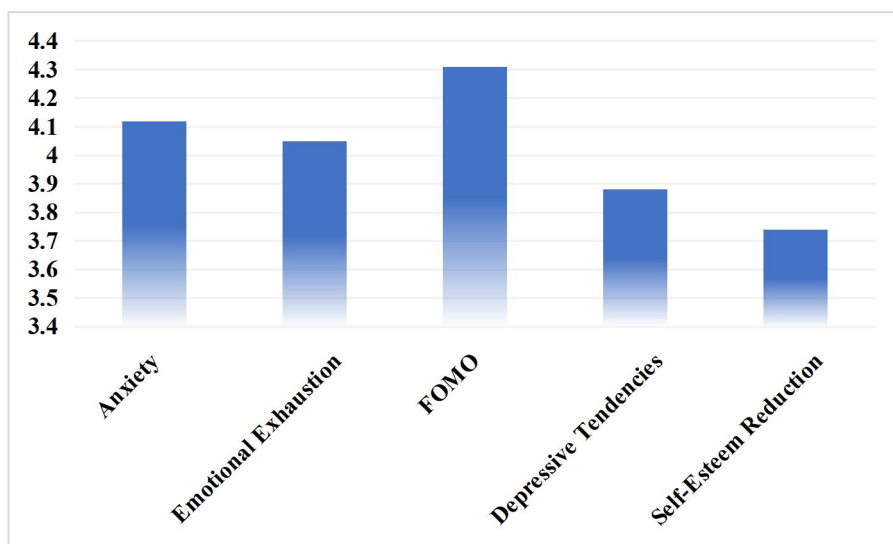


Figure 2. Association between algorithmic exposure and mental health indicators among Generation Z users.

3.3 Influence on Social Behaviour and Digital Interaction

The results showed the high influence of the social media algorithm on the behaviour practices and online interaction of Gen Z people. In addition, those who had received highly personalized content feeds also had higher rates of digital participation and increased frequencies of online communication, and depended more on social networking sites to fulfill entertainment, information and social validation needs. Extended online usage and repeated digital behavior combined with the algorithmic elements of engagement (such as auto-playing, content suggestions, notifications) made for a perfect storm. The research also revealed that social media platforms played a significant role in social awareness and social involvement in social issues among the Generation Z users, who actively engaged in education and activism related to social issues, cultural trend, or public discussion via digitally curated feeds. However, excessive online socializing was also associated with decreased levels of in-person socializing and increased levels of digital isolation among some users.

Table 3. Influence of Social Media Algorithms on Social Behavior and Online Interaction

Behavioral Variable	Low Usage (%)	Moderate Usage (%)	High Usage (%)
Online Communication Frequency	24.3	42.7	33.0
Participation in Social Discussions	18.6	48.1	33.3
Dependence on Social Validation	12.4	39.5	48.1
Reduced Face-to-Face Interaction	20.7	36.2	43.1
Exposure to Cyberbullying	14.9	37.8	47.3

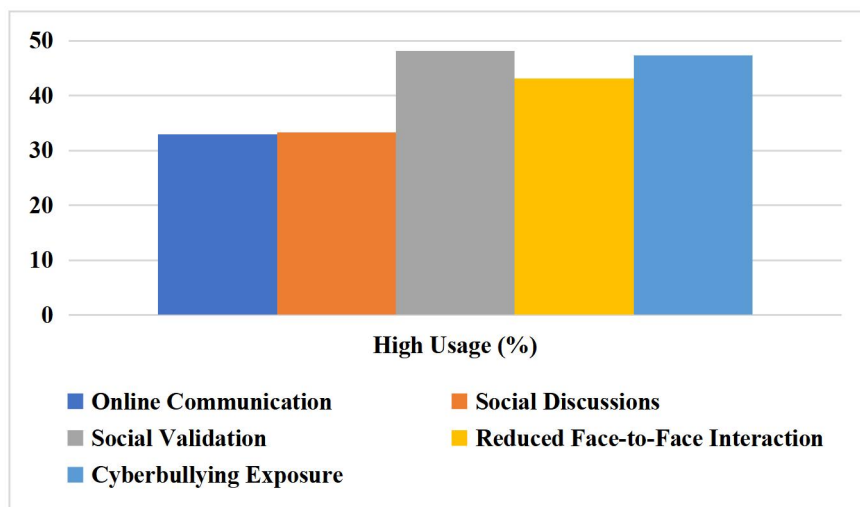


Figure 3. Influence of social media algorithms on social behavior and online interaction patterns.

3.4 Digital Identity Formation and Online Self-Representation

The findings revealed that social media algorithms were crucial in the digital identity building and self-representation of social media users. It seems that participants even changed their online attitude, content posting methods and personal presentation strategies based on their performance according to likes, comments, shares, and the number of followers. A need for social acceptability and the need for visibility online were factors in constructing idealised online identities on social media. More-concerned individuals were more exposed to algorithmically amplified content, and were more concerned about managing their image online, getting validation from peers, and getting accepted by peers. Many of the most active social media users experienced emotional exhaustion and psychological stress from keeping up the "show. Emotional exhaustion and psychological pressures were common issues reported by the higher-engagement social media users related to maintaining the "show. The comparative analysis also suggested a link between participants' online

engagement and a greater reliance on online validation to maintain self-esteem and identity. In conclusion, the results indicated that social media algorithms had significant effects on the mental health, behavior, and digital identity among Generation Z. The findings showed the increasing psychosocial effects of algorithmic digital environments in today's society.

Table 4. Digital Identity Formation and Online Self-Representation Among Generation Z Users

Variable	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Online Self-Presentation Concern	4.28	0.73	High
Dependence on Likes and Comments	4.11	0.81	High
Privacy Concern	3.96	0.76	Moderate to High
Identity Modification for Online Acceptance	3.84	0.88	Moderate
Emotional Pressure from Online Image Management	4.07	0.79	High

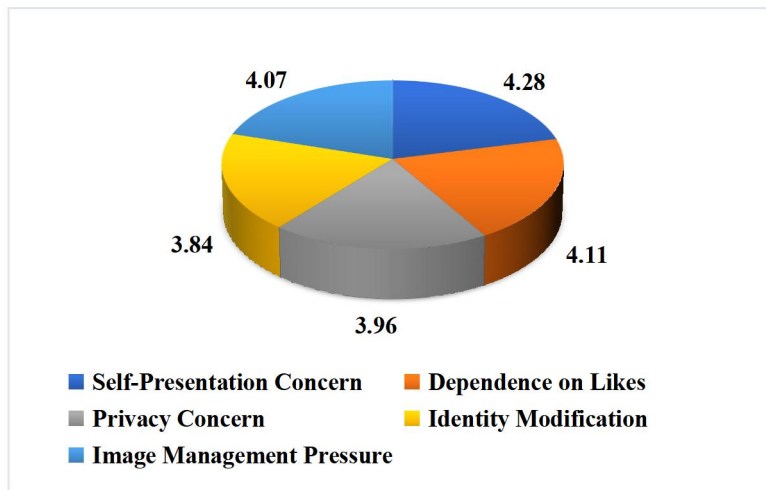


Figure 4. Digital identity formation and online self-representation among Generation Z users.

4. Discussion

The results of the present study showed that social media algorithms have a significant impact on the mental health, social behavior, and digital identity of people using social media who belong to the "Generation Z". Many young people rely on algorithmically produced digital environments to communicate, access information, and build social connections, changing the way they interact in these spaces. The reliance on algorithmically curated digital environments has altered how young people communicate, access information, and build social relationships. The findings showed that a strong relationship between the longitudinal exposure to personalized content recommendations and anxiety, emotional exhaustion, fear of missing out (FOMO), and depressive tendencies of the Generation Z participants was found. These are similar results reported in recent studies that have looked at the relationship between artificial intelligence, social media bias, and mental health among Gen Z users (Chang et al., 2025). With the increasing integration of AI recommendation systems in social media platforms, there has been a growing concern over emotional vulnerability and psychological dependence among adolescents and young adults.

The study also pointed out the influence of the social media algorithm on the online behaviour and social interactions of Generation Z. Individuals who were exposed to the more customized feeds experienced more engagement with digital and longer time on social networks. The results are consistent with the previous studies that consistently showed that algorithmic recommendation systems have a strong impact on social practices, behavior patterns, and online participation in the context of different generations and cultures (Arkhipova & Janssen, 2024). Social media sites have

become more than just communication channels, and are now spaces that govern users' attention, emotions, and social interactions via algorithmic personalisation features.

One of the most important findings of being over-exposed to social media is mental health issues. Emotional well-being was negatively correlated and psychological distress was positively correlated with the level of exposure to emotionally stimulating content. Also, the studies focusing on social media use and depressive symptoms in Generation Z users have recorded similar findings (Bhat et al., 2024). Along with this, social media overuse has also been reported to cause emotional fatigue and psychological disorder among the younger generation in digitally interconnected societies (Kannan & Kumar, 2022). The findings are also consistent with the general debate about the influence of social media on mental well-being and emotional fragility in today's digital society (Ndindeng, 2025).

Other negative psychological impacts on participants were attributed to cyberbullying, comparison culture and validation pressures on the internet. Users who used the media and social media a lot found high levels of anxiety and emotional insecurity that were heightened by exposure to idealized life content and socially competitive online environments. Very active users experienced high levels of anxiety and emotional insecurity due to exposure to idealized lifestyle content and socially competitive online environments. A similar study in the past has also found that cyberbullying is one of the factors that affects mental health and emotional stability among Generation Z people in the context of social networking (Hardiyanto et al., 2024). Social comparison can therefore be algorithmically reinforced and perpetuated among younger users' unrealistic notions of success, beauty and social acceptance, which can lead to problems in self-esteem and to emotional burnout.

The results also highlighted that digital identity creation is becoming more and more relevant among users of Generation Z. Social media are becoming increasingly platforms for the development of "curated" online identities shaped by user engagement and algorithmic visibility metrics. Social media are becoming more and more a platform where people develop "curated" online identities based on engagement metrics and the algorithm's visibility. Participants indicated changing the way they behave online and how they present themselves on the internet based on likes/comments/followers. The same has been pointed out in research on the digital identity and self-representation of the members of Generation Z (Kollárová & Niklová, 2025). The rise of collective, online self-portraits and digitally-mediated identity performance, especially among young users, is a development that has been facilitated by TikTok and visually oriented social media platforms (Stahl & Literat, 2023). Other studies, related to the study of women's self-presentation on TikTok, have also revealed the impact that digital identity construction has on algorithmic online spaces (Ezquerro Fernández & Bonales Daimiel, 2024).

Other privacy-related issues and self-disclosure practices were also significant factors in the study of Generation Z users' social media experience. Personalized advertising systems and algorithmic recommendations shape consumers' behavior, as well as interpersonal communication and emotional vulnerability, and willingness to share their personal information online. Previous research also showed that anxiety, social isolation and reference group dynamics are important determinants of the self-disclosure behavior and perceptions of privacy among the Generation Z social media users (Rózsa et al., 2024). Such algorithmic personalisation is becoming more commonplace in the commercial landscape and thus has significant ethical and psychological implications for privacy of data and the manipulation of emotions.

The research also uncovered that social media serve as a venue for the younger generation to be socially aware, active, and involved in culture at the same time. The participants interacted with the content of educational, political and social issues through their personalized feeds and online communities. It has also been found that social media plays an important role in shaping the awareness of the generation Z about social issues and social discussion in digitally connected societies (Lakshmi et al., 2024). But an over-digitalization was also linked to a decrease in face-to-face interaction and changes in social values among younger consumers. Other studies on social values and their changes among digitally active generations also highlighted the changing nature of social values and interpersonal relationships due to the use of social media (Susiang & Ghofur, 2024).

The results also indicated that long-term digital interactions could have an impact on emotional attachment and inter-personal dependency among younger consumers. Adolescents in Generation Z have reported that their attachment styles and emotional communication have shifted due to their exposure to Social Media and digitally mediated interactions (Nicolas, 2020). Youth may also be exposed to sexually inappropriate, substance-related and socially risky behaviors online, which could have further impacts on behavioral attitudes and psychological development (Kanhari et al., 2023). The concerns highlight the need for algorithm-driven social media environments to be subject to policy interventions, digital literacy education and mental health awareness programmes to alleviate the negative psychosocial impacts of these environments.

Despite the findings of the present study, the authors note that a more comprehensive analysis of these data sets would have been possible had the study focused on primary qualitative data and on introspection. Longitudinal study, qualitative interviews, and cross-cultural comparative studies could yield greater understanding of the long-term psychosocial impacts of algorithmic digital environments in the future. Despite this, the current study adds to current humanities and social science debates, as it shows the newly related areas of Artificial Intelligence, social media algorithms, mental health, and digital identity in Generation Z groups.

5. Conclusion

The present study was able to show that social media algorithms have a significant impact on the mental health, social behavior, and digital identity development of social media users of Generation Z. Digital environments algorithmically shaped led to increased anxiety, emotional exhaustion, depression tendencies, social comparisons and reliance on on-line validation amongst younger people. The use of social media was further amplified by personalized content suggestions and by constant exposure to highly engaging digital media, leading to prolonged social media use and repetitive online interaction patterns. The results also revealed that Social Media has increasingly become a forum where young people in Generation Z create their digital identity, display themselves and engage in society. Social media metrics such as likes, comments and followers' interactions in the online environment were found to influence behavioural actions and emotional responses of users. Awareness building regarding educational, cultural and social issues was achieved through social media, while overuse of social media was correlated with privacy concerns, cyberbullying, emotional burnout, and reduced offline social interaction. The study pointed out the growing relevance of artificial intelligence and algorithmic systems in the digital society today and their impact on the psychosocial lives of the younger generations. The findings demonstrate the importance of digital literacy, mental health awareness, ethical algorithms design and recommendations for policies that promote mental wellbeing of Generation Z users online. Qualitative research and long-term observation of social and psychological consequences of algorithm social media interaction may also provide some additional insights into the long-term effects of such interactions. Overall, the study contributes to the ongoing and existing humanities and social science discussions related to the dynamic relationship between algorithms, users' behaviour and mental health in the digital era of algorithmic communication.

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