

The Effect of Excessive Usage of Social Media Platforms on the Relationship Between Millennials and Gen-Z

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Abstract

This thesis examines the impact of excessive social media usage on interpersonal relationships between Millennials (born 1981–1996) and Gen Z (born 1997–2012). Sixteen individuals participated, comprising eight males and eight females from both generations, providing a balanced perspective. An interview was conducted with individuals from both generations, comprising a sample size of N = 16 (8 males and 8 females), to gauge a balanced approach between the two generations. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions. Interviews were transcribed, and a thematic analysis was conducted to identify patterns across the dataset. As a result, six themes emerged: Educational Institutions Incorporate Moral Dimensions, Role of Social Media in Daily Life, Primary Reason for Using Social Media, Face-to-Face Interaction, Communication Gap, and Online and Offline Relationship. This study's conclusion shows that excessive usage of social media has deepened generational divides, created tension and disconnected between Millennial and Gen Z. This study adds to the continuing conversations, particularly, communicative gaps, emotional depth, and bridging the gap requires conscious efforts to balance online and offline interactions, alongside incorporating moral dimensions in education to foster healthier relationships and digital habits.

Keywords: Gen-Z, Interpersonal Relationships, Moral Dimension, Communication Gap.

Introduction

In an era where everyday interactions are dominated by digital communication, social media has emerged as a potent force influencing how people connect, communicate, and express themselves. Generation Z (born 1997–2012) and Millennials (born 1981–1996) are two of the generations most affected by this digital environment. Teens who spend more time on social media and screens are more likely to be unhappy, lonely, and depressed, impacting their ability to form deeper, more meaningful relationships. Jean M. Twenge – In her book *iGen* (2017). This study, with an emphasis on communication and emotional connection, examines how excessive social media use affects the interpersonal relationships of Millennials and Gen Z. We are tempted to think that our little 'sips' of online connection add up to a big gulp of real conversation, but they do not. Evolving in the digital age has left us talking more but communicating less (Abbasi et al., 2019; Lashari et al., 2023). The study examines a sample of 16 participants, comprising 8 males and 8 females, representing Millennials and Gen Z, to provide a balanced viewpoint. Participants discussed their opinions and experiences on social media's influence on their lives through a methodical interview approach, revealing clear generational trends. According to research, 75–85% of Gen Z participants prefer visually

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stimulating platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat, and use social media primarily for entertainment and instant communication (Imran & Lashari, 2023; Fayaz et al., 2023).

On the other hand, 65-75% of Millennials use social media to keep informed, network professionally, and maintain relationships. Remarkably, 68% of Millennials and 78% of Gen Z participants acknowledged feeling emotionally detached during in-person conversations, indicating that both groups experienced severe emotional estrangement. "The social media services we are using are not only competitive for our time but designed to reduce our capacity for deep focus and relationships", Cal Newport (2019).

According to the study, excessive social media usage exacerbates generational divides and communication gaps, creating stress and emotional distance between Gen Z and Millennials. Thus, this argument adds to current debates over the necessity of striking a deliberate balance between online and offline interactions. Incorporating moral education about digital use may help bridge these generational divides, leading to healthier relationships and a more profound sense of emotional connection in a rapidly changing digital world. It also highlights the significance of forming digital habits based on emotional awareness. "Social media has become a primary arena for self-expression and identity exploration among Gen Z, but its superficial interactions often lack the empathy and understanding crucial for nurturing interpersonal relationships", Finkelhor et al. (2020).

Problem Statement

A widening communication gap and a sense of emotional alienation in face-to-face connections between Millennials and Gen Z have been exacerbated by their overuse of social media. Millennials typically use social media for networking and informational purposes (Khalid & Raza, 2023; Khan & Siddiqui, 2022), whereas Gen Z mainly uses it for amusement and visual-based interactions. Generational divisions and strained interpersonal interactions have resulted from these differences in social media usage patterns. To promote healthy relationships, this study aims to investigate how these disparate digital habits impact the emotional depth and communication quality between Gen Z and Millennials, emphasising the importance of maintaining a balance between online and offline interactions.

Research Question

Q 1: How does social media impact each generation's approach to maintaining relationships?

Q 2: How could educational institutions incorporate moral dimensions into digital literacy to promote healthier online and offline relationships?

Literature Review

This analysis examines how both generations have become increasingly dependent on social media and how this has impacted the quality of in-person relationships. According to research by Alter (2017) and Weinstein (2017), reliance on social media leads to fewer offline contacts and shallower connections. "Phubbing" (phone snubbing) is becoming increasingly common among Millennials and Gen Z during face-to-face conversations, which can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and annoyance. Although both groups use social media, Gen Z is more dependent on it, which has been connected to a harder time building and sustaining deeper offline interactions. As a result of differing expectations and the additional challenge of balancing digital and in-person relationships, interactions between Millennials and Gen Z may suffer.

According to research on the psychological impacts of social media use, excessive use of social media causes anxiety, depression, and a decline in life satisfaction among both Millennials and Gen Z. Because they grew up in a digital world where social approval is frequently based on metrics like likes and followers, studies. (Shensa et al, 2017) Moreover, Vannucci et al. (2018) highlight that Gen Z is especially susceptible to stress related to social media. Although they

are subject to these stresses, millennials are more robust because they frequently have stronger offline support systems. Because Gen Z's mental health issues impact their interaction patterns and expectations, this disparity in psychological well-being affects how each generation interacts with others and may strain interactions between generations (Lashari & Umrani, 2023; Lashari, Umrani, & Buriro, 2021).

According to research, understanding the relationship dynamics between Gen Z and Millennials requires an understanding of social media self-expression and identity building (Lashari et al., 2023). Gen Z uses social media not just as a social tool but also as a venue to shape their identities, curating their brands from an early age, according to research by Lee et al. (2020) and Yang and Robinson (2021). Since they started using social media later, millennials are typically more circumspect in how they portray themselves online. Because Millennials may perceive Gen Z's propensity for self-curation and brand-building as excessively performative or inauthentic, this disparity in the creation of digital identities can strain relationships across the generations (Lashari et al., 2023). Consequently, these views may lead to conflict and miscommunication in relationships between generations.

It has been demonstrated that social media platforms influence communication patterns, with various platforms encouraging distinct forms of expression. Gen Z's inclination towards visual storytelling and short-form communication has been influenced by their desire for rapid, image-based communication on platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, according to studies by Rosen et al. (2018) and Rideout and Robb (2019). Conversely, millennials tend to prefer Facebook and LinkedIn, using these sites for more in-depth text-based communication (Abbasi et al., 2019). Due to varying expectations and degrees of familiarity with different digital communication platforms, this communication style difference has raised the possibility of conflict in cross-generational interactions.

This review of the literature examines research on how Gen Z and Millennials utilise social media to fulfil emotional needs, particularly in friendships and family relationships. According to research, Millennials, who frequently use social media to network and stay in touch, value in-person contacts more than Gen Z, which may prefer online interactions due to their strong ties to digital culture (Abbasi et al., 2019; Lashari et al., 2023; Lashari & Umrani, 2023). According to research by Twenge et al. (2019) and Hampton et al. (2020), Gen Z is more likely to feel lonely and less satisfied with real-life relationships, as they tend to rely more heavily on virtual connections. This generational shift illustrates how the excessive use of social media has led to divergent perspectives on emotional connection, potentially causing miscommunications and eroding ties between the two groups.

Research Methodology

We have employed a qualitative research design in this study to gain a rich and in-depth understanding of the impact of excessive social media usage on interpersonal relationships between Millennials (born 1981 – 1996) and Gen Z (born 1997 – 2012).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 16 individuals, comprising eight males and eight females from both generations, providing balanced perspectives. Open-ended questions were asked of the participants. The sample size was 16, and an interview was conducted with individuals from both generations: 8 males and 8 females. One male and one female from Gen Z were Pakistani TikTokers, and two females from Millennial were professional American TikTokers. Twelve TikTokers of them (six males and six females) from both generations were in the age group of 25 to 42 years. Eleven interviews were conducted in English, whereas five interviews were conducted in Urdu, which were subsequently translated into English prior to the coding process.

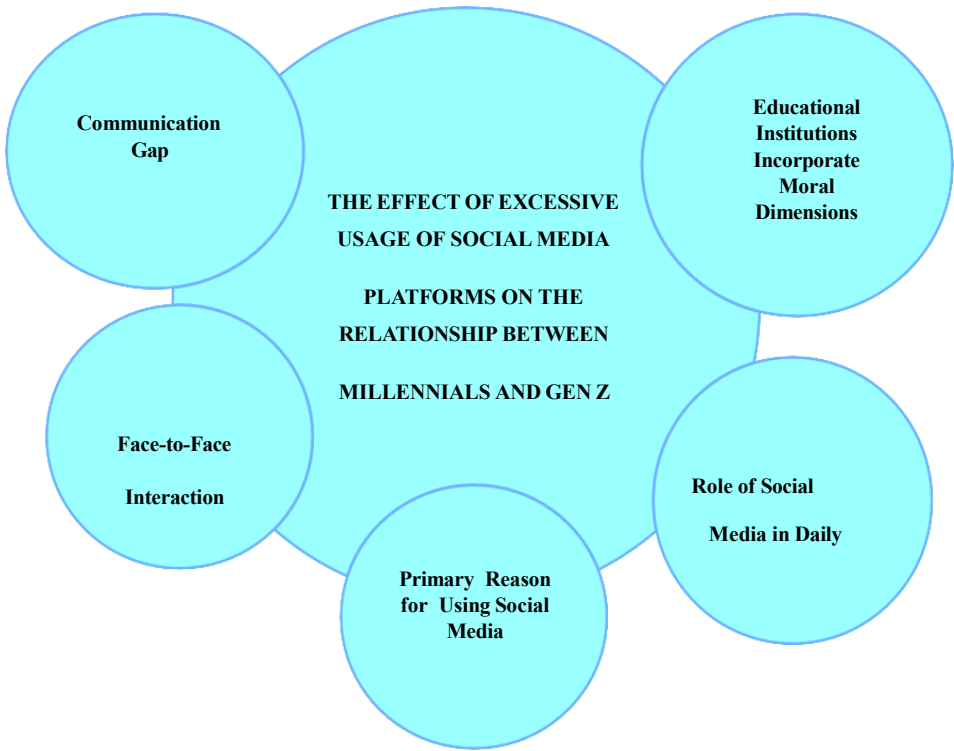
The interviews were conducted through both email correspondence and face-to-face interactions, with responses recorded in written form. While some participants responded in

Urdu, which was subsequently translated into English, most interviewees communicated directly in English

Findings

As a result of the thematic analysis, six themes emerged across the dataset. “Educational institutions incorporate moral dimensions”, "role of social media in daily life", "primary reason for using social media", "face-to-face interaction", "communication gap", "online and offline relationship."

Figure 1: Thematic Map



Findings

This section presents the thematic analysis of interviews conducted with participants from two generational cohorts, Millennials and Generation Z, further categorised into students, parents, professional netizens, and social media influencers. The themes emerging from the data highlight generational perceptions regarding moral education, the role of social media, primary motivations for its use, the importance of face-to-face interaction, communication gaps, and the balance between online and offline relationships.

Educational Institutions Incorporating Moral Dimensions

A dominant theme across responses was the belief that educational institutions should integrate moral and ethical dimensions into their curricula, particularly within the domain of digital literacy. Many Millennials expressed dissatisfaction with the current state of moral instruction in Pakistani educational settings. A Millennial student remarked:

Educational institutions are not cooperating in the moral dimension; however, they can teach digital literacy with a focus on empathy and respect, incorporating lessons on effective communication and moral dilemmas related to social media.

Similarly, a Millennial parent emphasised the absence of formal instruction in ethical digital conduct:

I never see that any Pakistani educational institution [is] teaching ethical or moral usage of social media. They could incorporate emotional dimensions into digital literacy by fostering students' empathy, awareness and communication skills, helping them build online and offline relationships.

However, perspectives differed among respondents from diverse cultural contexts. A Millennial participant, both an American TikToker and parent, acknowledged the presence of moral teachings in schools but raised concerns about inclusivity, "yes, moral teachings are implemented in schools, but criticisms include the potential for moral instruction to reflect a narrow set of cultural or ideological beliefs, which might not align with the diverse backgrounds of students."

From a professional standpoint, both Millennial and Gen Z netizens have emphasised the importance of integrating digital ethics into curricula, highlighting the growing prevalence of misinformation and the need to promote respect and integrity in online spaces.

Role of Social Media in Daily Life

Participants across generations recognised social media as an integral part of daily routines, serving both personal and professional purposes. For some, such as a Millennial student, it functioned primarily as a social and informational space, "social media feels like a part of daily life where I connect with friends, learn about trends, and share updates."

Gen Z students broadly framed their usage around entertainment and trend-following, whereas Millennial parents emphasised the platform's role in facilitating school correspondence and family communication. Professional respondents from both generations emphasised the business benefits of social media, citing its effectiveness in attracting clients and promoting market engagement.

Primary Reason for Using Social Media

The motivations for using social media varied considerably. Millennials often cited maintaining social connections and brand promotion, while Gen Z respondents emphasised entertainment, trend awareness, and content creation as key priorities. For example, a Gen Z TikToker stated, "getting up to date with trends, managing my blogging account, staying in touch with friends and their life updates."

Meanwhile, a Millennial business owner explained, "the primary use of social media is to promote my brand, engage with customers, and drive sales through targeted marketing and networking."

Face-to-Face Interaction

The importance of in-person communication emerged as a cross-generational theme, although the perceived necessity varied among different generations. Many Millennials viewed face-to-face interaction as essential for building relationships and establishing trust, particularly in educational and business contexts. Conversely, some Gen Z participants considered it less critical, citing the efficiency of digital communication as a reason. Notably, one Gen Z student remarked, "it is essential, as it impacts face-to-face relationships in a way that we have already caught up online, so we do not have much of a personal life to discuss in person."

Communication Gap

The analysis revealed notable differences in communication styles between generations. Gen Z favoured short-form, visual communication through platforms like TikTok and Snapchat, whereas Millennials often preferred more text-heavy interactions. A Millennial parent

observed, "though communication styles differ—as older generations prefer details and longer patterns, and younger generations prefer short and precise communication—we are indeed facing face-to-face communication gaps."

Some participants highlighted that reliance on digital communication could lead to misunderstandings, especially when tone or intent was lost in text or curated visual content.

Balancing Online and Offline Relationships

Both generations acknowledged the importance of striking a balance between online engagement and in-person connections. Suggested strategies included setting boundaries for screen time, scheduling offline activities, and using social media to facilitate real-world interactions. A Millennial student proposed, "to balance online and offline interactions, set specific times to unplug and hang out in person. Plan activities where phones are put away to foster deeper connections."

Similarly, a Gen Z professional recommended leveraging online platforms to drive offline engagement through events and meet-ups, reinforcing the complementary relationship between digital and physical interactions.

The findings illustrate that while Millennials and Gen Z share a common acknowledgment of social media's pervasive role in modern life, their priorities, communication preferences, and perceptions of moral education differ significantly. Across both cohorts, there is consensus on the need for educational institutions to address digital ethics, a recognition of social media's utility for connection and commerce, and an awareness of the importance of striking a balance between online engagement and offline relationships. However, generational differences in preferred communication styles and the perceived importance of face-to-face interaction present ongoing challenges for cross-generational understanding.

Discussion

The results of the interviews indicate that Gen Z and Millennials utilise social media in distinct ways. Between 65% and 75% of Millennials prioritise networking, online business, staying informed, and maintaining connections. Parents need to update their educational content, but 75% to 85% of Gen Z primarily utilise visual-based platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat for entertainment, staying up to date with trends, managing social media accounts, and instant communication. Similar findings were revealed in the studies conducted by McKinsey Health Institute Survey (May 22, 2023), "highlights generational differences in the use of social media networks (Nazeef et al, 2024) with Gen Z experiencing more negative mental health effects, including poor body image and self-esteem, compared to Millennials." Despite these variations in usage, there is an alarming resemblance between the two groups: The fact that 78% of Gen Z and 68% of Millennials report feeling emotionally disconnected from in-person connections indicates a growing communication gap. Similar findings were revealed in the studies conducted by YR Media (2023) "the report highlights a divide among Gen Z and Millennials, with many spending more time socialising online than in-person. Despite acknowledging the preference for face-to-face connections, a significant portion relies on digital platforms due to convenience and accessibility."

According to the study's findings, Millennials and Gen Z are becoming more tense and disconnected due to excessive social media use. Similar findings were reported in studies published by the International Journal of Indian Psychology (2022). A comparative study on the impact of social media shows higher FoMO levels and passive consumption patterns in Gen Z compared to Millennials. Although effective for communication, visual-centric platforms often lack the depth of face-to-face conversations, which can lead to emotional detachment. Millennials may have fewer opportunities for meaningful offline contact due to the shift from conventional networking to digital spaces. To promote a healthier and more cohesive

intergenerational relationship, our findings emphasise the need to strike a balance between digital and in-person encounters. Similar findings were revealed in the studies conducted by Facilitating Global Connections (2024). Millennials and Gen Z can easily connect with people across the globe, broadening their perspectives through shared cultural insights, language exchanges, and collaborative learning opportunities. This fosters an inclusive and global mindset among younger generations.

Conclusion

The study concludes by highlighting the different social media usage patterns of Gen Z and Millennials, which represent their respective priorities and preferences. Gen Z prefers visually focused sites like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat, and primarily uses social media for entertainment and instant communication (Khalid & Raza, 2023; Abbasi et al., 2019). On the other hand, Millennials value platforms that prioritise information and functionality for networking, online commerce, staying informed, and maintaining relationships (Khan & Siddiqui, 2022; Lashari et al., 2023). With 68% of Millennials and 78% of Gen Z experiencing feelings of detachment, the survey reveals a concerning trend: excessive social media use has contributed to emotional disengagement and a communication gap in face-to-face encounters. These results highlight how social media contributes to the widening of age gaps and the escalation of interpersonal conflict. A diversified strategy is needed to address these issues. Fostering digital literacy and emotional intelligence while striking a balance between online and offline interactions (Hussain & Malik, 2020) is crucial for bridging the communication gap. The negative consequences of excessive social media use can be lessened by incorporating moral education and encouraging both generations to adopt healthy digital habits. Ultimately, Millennials and Gen Z can overcome these obstacles through deliberate efforts to foster meaningful interactions, thereby opening the door to healthy digital participation and closer intergenerational ties.

Recommendations

The results of the present study showed that a blend of qualitative insights and real-world examples effectively illustrates how social media usage affects Millennials and Gen Z differently. By focusing on platforms that promote learning, networking, and mental health awareness, Gen Z can utilise social media as a tool for progress. Feelings of alienation can be lessened by avoiding passive consumption and allocating time to productive and active pursuits. Emotional ties are strengthened, and loneliness is fought by striking a balance between online and in-person socialisation.

In light of the results of the study, we make the following recommendations:

- **Work Together on social media Projects:** Promote cooperation and common interests by working together on projects like writing family stories or maintaining a blog or vlog that appeals to both generations.
- **Encourage Mental Health Awareness:** To encourage healthy online practices, advocate constructive social media usage and inform one another of its dangers.
- **To preserve trust and privacy in relationships,** be careful about what and how much you publish on social media.

Both Gen Z and Millennials can optimise social media's positive effects while minimising its drawbacks by adopting thoughtful usage practices. By adopting new media and following Gen Z patterns, millennials can stay connected and foster greater intergenerational understanding. They should strike a balance between online and offline contacts, prioritising in-person connections for deeper relationships while focusing on meaningful digital engagement. Furthermore, establishing sensible limits on screen time might serve as an example of responsible usage for future generations.

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