

INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING ON THE SOCIAL WELL-BEING OF GEN Z STUDENTS IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS IN KISII COUNTY, KENYA.

*Leonida Nyangweso Orwaru*

Student, School of Education, Moi University, Kenya

*Dr. Catherine Simiyu*

Senior Lecturer, Department of Educational Psychology, Moi University, Kenya

*Dr. Fransisca Mbutitia*

Senior Lecturer, Department of Educational Psychology, Moi University, Kenya

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**Abstract:** Social media has enabled people to communicate freely with anyone around the world. Today, social media generally impacts people's daily lives and Gen Z students in particular. The study was undertaken in tertiary institutions in Kisii County, Kenya with the purpose of establishing the implication of social networking on the social well-being of Gen Z students. The study's main objective was to; determine the influence of social networking on the social well-being of Gen Z students in tertiary institutions in Kisii County, Kenya. The study adopted Pragmatic paradigm and employed a convergent parallel mixed methods approach that was guided by both Uses and Gratifications and Social Network theories. Data was generated from a sample of 396 Gen Z students that was derived by use of the formula for calculating samples by Yamane from the targeted student population of 36,820. It also included 5 deans of students from five out of 10 tertiary institutions. The participants were selected through probability sampling that entailed stratified multistage and simple random for the students. For the deans of students, purposive sampling design was employed. A pilot study was conducted to ensure reliability of the instruments. The reliability was estimated using Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha which was above 0.743 from 5 items. Additionally, quantitative data was analyzed by descriptive statistics. The descriptive statistic method was employed for getting the frequency, mean and percentage. The findings of the study showed that Gen Z students were actively involved in social networking with different motives for engagement. They also access different types of content through various platforms some which may be socially useful and some harmful to their well-being. Findings from the study indicate the need for parents, caregivers, universities and college administration to guide the Gen Z students on online social networking and help them identify its positive and negative influence. Doing so will help them adopt healthy digital habits leading to positive social outcomes. It also recommends the incorporation of social wellness and digital counseling into student support systems, establishment of peer mentorship initiatives to strengthen real-life social bonds and development of gender-responsive social media awareness campaigns.

**Keywords:** Social media; Social well-being; Gen Z; Tertiary institutions; Social networking

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the pervasive influence of social networking platforms has significantly impacted the lives of individuals across generations, particularly among the Generation Z cohort. With the advent of digital technology and the internet, this cohort has grown up in a world where social networking sites serve as integral components of their daily lives. The implications of this phenomenon extend beyond mere communication and networking; they delve into the intricate fabric of social wellbeing, especially in the context of tertiary education institutions. This generation is characterized by their lifelong exposure to digital technology, making them proficient in both real and virtual worlds. They are highly adaptable to technology, value education, aspire to higher education, and are drawn to entrepreneurship. However, their heavy reliance on digital technology has drawbacks, including potential challenges in physical interaction and information literacy deficits (Ariffin et al., 2024).

## 2. Statement of the Problem

Social networking platforms have become central to the daily lives of Generation Z students in tertiary institutions, offering convenient ways to interact, share content, and stay connected. In Kisii County, like in many parts of the world, students use platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook for social engagement. However, studies show that while these platforms can expand students' social circles, they may also disrupt real-life social connections. Many students spend extended hours online, often prioritizing digital interactions over face-to-face relationships, leading to reduced physical socialization with peers and family. This heavy reliance on virtual socialization can diminish students' capacity to build meaningful in-person connections, weakening their overall social integration.

Despite the popularity of social media among Gen Z students in Kisii County, there is limited research on how these platforms affect their social well-being. Much of the existing literature has focused on academic impact or usage trends, overlooking how digital interactions shape students' friendships, social habits, and offline relationships. Some studies indicate that while social networking offers opportunities for social support, excessive or unbalanced use can contribute to social withdrawal and detachment from real-life communities. This highlights the need to better understand the relationship between online engagement and the quality of students' social lives in tertiary institutions.

## 3. Research Objective

- 1.) To determine the influence of social networking on the social well-being of Gen Z students in tertiary institutions in Kisii County, Kenya.

## 4. Theoretical Review

This study employed Social Network Theory (SNT) and Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) to explore how Gen Z students in tertiary institutions use social networking platforms to build and maintain social relationships. Social Network Theory highlights how individuals form connections—both strong and weak ties—within digital environments like WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok. These platforms serve as spaces where students can create online communities based on shared academic or personal interests. Such interactions foster a sense of belonging and support systems that can enhance students' social well-being.

The theory emphasizes that Gen Z students often form clusters of like-minded peers, such as classmates, former schoolmates, or club members, creating social structures that mirror real-life social circles. These networks are not just digital connections but channels of consistent communication, feedback, and mutual support. The study found that these connections allow students to sustain social interaction, build trust, and receive affirmation from peers, all of which are key ingredients of positive social well-being.

On the other hand, Uses and Gratifications Theory reveals that Gen Z students actively engage with social media to fulfill social needs such as interaction, companionship, and identity validation (Jafar & Mehrad 2016). They join chats, subscribe to interest-based pages, and participate in group discussions that foster social engagement. The theory helped uncover that students do not use social media passively; they strategically use it to connect with others, express themselves, and integrate into various online communities. In doing so, social networking becomes a powerful tool in sustaining social relationships and enhancing their overall social well-being (Abbas et al, 2019).

## 5. Literature Review

Social identity is usually analyzed in the context of social belonging (Journal et al.,2023). A characteristic feature of social belonging is the building of social connectedness. The media and communication media are increasingly being seen as part of these factors. Additionally, the lack of real contacts, the extensive use and the time spent on the Internet create a digital world, often illusory, in which the formation of identity is mainly based on the feedback of users on sites such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Generation Z have grown up developing relationships through social networks, so their level of social interaction is most certainly positively associated with the actual use of social media.

According to Chatzoglou et al.,( 2020), Generation Z use social network sites because they wish to be part of an online community, as they do in real life (social identity). Moreover, another main incentive for using SNSs is the social interaction they offer. More specifically, users enjoy the interaction between community members (social networking) and the fact that they have the chance to develop their social identity.

According to Tolstikova (2023), the value basis of socialization of Generation Z is self-expression. It is assumed that social networks, often used by Gen Z (especially Instagram) have had a significant impact on this process. He describes Self-expression as socialization "at arm's length", and only outside the postulated personal space for generation Z the usual process of socialization begins, including empathy, mutual assistance, career. He further posits that the Internet and virtual space have a more significant impact on socialization than is commonly thought. The Internet affects the system of values, the nature of communication, and the way people work and learn.

Furthermore, the internet makes people more intelligent and lonelier at the same time. In relation to this study, this literature affirms that Social media plays a crucial role in managing and maintaining relationships, particularly in the context of long-distance interactions whereby Gen Z link with people from all over the world. Again, the nature of social media and all its happenings, online interactions can sometimes lead to misunderstandings and miscommunication therefore affecting the way Gen Z manage their relationships both online and offline. This could imply that the online interactions can contribute to or detract Gen Z students from their social well-being.

Abdalla and Hassan (2019) in their study in Algeria on social networking sites new “face” of communication opined that the strong growth of information and communication technologies is a challenge. The study sought to re-examine the social methodologies by analyzing electronic identity with its characteristics. They discussed how social media substituted the real world communication. They found out that social networks in real society within a virtual space and stated that we can replicate all our everyday actions and interactions with others in a virtual space. Likewise, the youth and in particular the Gen Z students in colleges relate very well with this replication. Additionally, they argued that since social networking through the various social networking sites provides many services to users enabling them to create an identity that they use for themselves while online for communicating with others. College students are very privy to this and the content of their communication consists of messages, links, friendships, pictures and videos.

They concluded that using social networks space is absent from the control of authorities giving way to violation of laws and non-respect. In turn, it gives users an incentive to practice deviant behavior. This research utilizes the uses and gratifications theory which resonates very well with the findings of Abdalla & Hassan (2019) that social networks are a refuge that provide the user with all necessary gratifications that the community has not provided. They also say that the use of the networks represents a flight from real society’s narrowness to a more welcoming and uncontrolled source of control. In relationship with this study, college Gen Zs are at home with social networking and their interpersonal relationships may be affected by this global phenomenon.

According to Parvez (2019), social networks play a major role in building, maintaining or even reviving relationships and improving teenagers learning skills. This was found out in a research conducted in India that focused mainly on the impact of SNSs on teenagers in especially in college and school student and how SNSs change their relationship pattern. In most third world countries use of the internet has been made even more accessible by mobile phones. Today people are using the internet mostly to interact on social media, they chat, message, share photos and stay in touch with friends and relatives worldwide (Parvez, 2019).

### 6. Research Design

In order to achieve the research objectives and gain deeper understanding of the implications of online networking on the social well-being of millennial and Gen Z students in tertiary institutions in Kisii County, the study utilized convergent parallel mixed methods design. This design involved combining or integrating qualitative and quantitative research as well as data in a study in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem. This is a one phase design where both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed and then compared to see if data confirms or disconfirms each other. The core assumption of this form of inquiry is that the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches provides a more complete understanding of a

research problem than either approach alone. In this design, the investigator typically collected both qualitative and quantitative data at roughly the same time and then integrated the information in the interpretation of the overall results (Creswell, 2018).

### 7. Results

The objective of the study was to determine the influence of social networking on the social well-being of Gen Z students in tertiary institutions in Kisii County, Kenya. The researcher provided the respondents with statements and asked them to indicate their level of agreement. The coding used was as follows: Strongly Disagree (SD) – 1, Disagree (D) – 2, Neutral (N) – 3, Agree (A) – 4, and Strongly Agree (SA) – 5. This study aimed to explore in detail how the social networking influence the social well-being of the Gen Zs.

**Table 1: Gen Zs’ Perceptions on the Influence of Social Network on their Social well-being**

Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean	SD
I always say no to my family and friends when using social media	41 (12.4%)	50 (15.2%)	43 (13.0%)	90 (27.3%)	106 (32.1%)	2.48	1.4
I have more friends on social media than I have in real life	42 (12.7%)	79 (23.9%)	21 (6.4%)	55 (16.7%)	133 (40.3%)	3.62	1.46
Too much use of social media keeps me aloof with my family	43 (13.0%)	55 (16.7%)	55 (16.7%)	108 (32.7%)	69 (20.9%)	2.68	1.32
When I find it difficult to handle issues, I resort to online activities	50 (15.2%)	62 (18.8%)	63 (19.1%)	68 (20.6%)	87 (26.4%)	3.21	1.42
Being online uplifts my spirits more than when with other people	58 (17.6%)	62 (18.8%)	40 (12.1%)	80 (24.2%)	90 (27.3%)	3.25	1.47

From table 1, 41 (12.4%) respondents strongly disagreed when asked whether they always say no to their family and friends when using social media. However, 50 (15.2%) respondents disagreed, 43 (13.0%) respondents were undecided, 90 (27.3%) respondents agreed while 106 (32.1%) respondents strongly agreed. The mean for this was 2.48 with a standard deviation of 1.4. This is so because majority of the respondents strongly agreed. Many Gen Z individuals often choose to spend time on social media instead of interacting face-to-face with family and friends. During the FGDs some students admitted that they found it easier to express themselves online than face to face especially when discussing very sensitive issues. One participant reflected

“When you are online, you can think before to talk but when face to face, it is real”!

This growing preference for online engagement over in-person connections reflects deeper trends like social media dependence, shifts in how young people communicate, and changes in how they build and maintain relationships (Jones, 2022).

When asked whether they have more friends on social media than they have in real life, 42 (12.7%) respondents strongly disagreed, 79 (23.9%) respondents disagreed, 21 (6.4%) respondents were undecided, 55 (16.7%) respondents agreed while 133 (40.3%) respondents strongly agreed. The mean and standard deviation for this was 3.62 and 1.46 respectively. This is so because majority of the respondents strongly agreed.

On whether too much use of social media keeps them aloof with their families, 43 (13.0%) respondents strongly disagreed, 55 (16.7%) respondents disagreed, 55 (16.7%) respondents were undecided, 108 (32.7%) respondents agreed while 69 (20.9%) respondents strongly agreed. The mean for this was 2.68 with a standard deviation of 1.32. This is so because majority of the respondents agreed. This was supported further by the findings from the focus group discussions whereby Gen Z students reported that platforms like Whatsapp helps them maintain communication with their families because they have family chat groups. Despite that, they also agreed that too much use leads to reduced physical interaction especially for those studying far from their homes. They further said that social media strengthened their friendship connections since they are able to check on each other daily and stay connected. This really reinforces offline relationships.

Additionally, one dean of students from one of the institutions observed that social media has both connected and distanced students interpersonally. He continued to say that while it facilitates communication, especially across campuses and institutions, it has also reduced the quality of face-to-face interaction.

“Many students in our institutions tend to isolate themselves even when in social settings, as they are engrossed in their phones. This has affected the development of soft skills such as teamwork, conflict resolution, and verbal communication, which are crucial both academically and professionally”. Dean of students from one institution.

Furthermore, they were asked whether when they find it difficult to handle issues, they resort to online activities. 50 (15.2%) respondents strongly disagreed, 62 (18.8%) respondents disagreed, 63 (19.1%) respondents were undecided, 68 (20.6%) respondents agreed while 87 (26.4%) respondents strongly agreed. The mean and standard deviation for this was 3.21 and 1.42 respectively. This is so because majority of the respondents strongly agreed.

Lastly, when asked whether being online uplifts their spirits more than when with other people, 58 (17.6%) respondents strongly disagreed, 62 (18.8%) respondents disagreed, 40 (12.1%) respondents were undecided, 80 (24.2%) respondents agreed while 90 (27.3%) respondents strongly agreed. The mean for this was 3.25 with a standard deviation of 1.47. This is so because majority of the respondents strongly agreed.

According to the focus group discussions, the students confirmed that social networking increased their network of friends as they made new friends online. The findings are related to the findings of Chatzoglou et al., (2020) who opined that the Gen Z students participate in online networking so that they can be part of the online community hence increasing their social capital.

*“I have made more friends due to social networking and, I catch up with them online, I check new trends, upcoming events, and my relationship with my family is even better because we can do video call and it's kind of bringing family together. Sometimes families can break little by little as people prefer to be on phone than interacting”.*

FGD 3 Group Member

A similar view was advanced during the interview with one of the deans of students who asserted that:

*“The student's engagement in online networking greatly enhances relationships and makes them stronger. At the same time, it may spoil some students because of some of the negativities they may be exposed to”.* Dean of students in one institution

## 8. Recommendation

This study focused on implications of social networking on the social- emotional well-being of Gen Z Students in Tertiary institutions in Kisii County, Kenya. Based on the findings, the researcher recommends as follows:

### 1. Incorporate social wellness and digital counseling into student support systems

Given that social networking plays a significant role in shaping students' self-perception, tertiary institutions should prioritize social wellness as part of their student support services. This can be achieved by organizing regular forums or discussions focused on the social impact of social media. In addition, institutions should provide access to digital counseling services to help students effectively cope with stress, manage anxiety, and build resilience in handling socially charged online experiences.

### 2. Establish peer mentorship initiatives to strengthen real-life social bonds

The findings revealed that many students favor online interactions over in-person relationships, often distancing themselves from family and friends. To address this, institutions should introduce structured peer mentorship programs that encourage students to form meaningful offline connections. These programs can create a supportive environment where students learn from each other how to balance their digital presence with face-to-face engagement, ultimately enhancing their social well-being.

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