

Like and Subscribe to Yourself: Social Media's Influence on Undergraduate and Postgraduate Students' Identity Formation

Pavan Kumar Yanamadala*, Arifah Naaz Shaik, Vijay Arijilli, Devika Sai Lakshmi Burlagadda, Sailesh Tej Sai Sree Babu Yarra, Avinash Chowdary Chirumamilla, Karthik Satharajupalli, Rama Rao Nadendla

Department of Pharmacy Practice, Chalapathi Institute of Pharmaceutical Sciences (A), Lam, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh, INDIA.

ABSTRACT

Background: The extensive incorporation of social media into the everyday experiences of Generation Z has significantly altered their self-perception and their interactions with their environment. This transformation has generated both concern and curiosity regarding its effects on personal growth and identity formation. **Objectives:** The research investigated this trend among both undergraduate and postgraduate students by analysing their social media engagement habits and the subsequent influence on different dimensions of their overall well-being. **Materials and Methods:** A Google Forms survey was conducted with 440 students from Guntur and Vijayawada, including both genders. It aimed to assess social, mental, and physical health, focusing on sleep patterns, stress, diet, and academic performance. The data was analysed using SPSS for descriptive statistics and percentage calculations. **Results:** Research findings indicated that a significant number of students regularly engaged with social media before sleep, which interfered with their sleep patterns and heightened anxiety associated with the fear of missing out. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that social media also serve as a valuable resource for educational assistance, a medium for personal expression, and a tool for sustaining social relationships. **Conclusion:** The research reveals that social media plays a dual role in shaping youth identities, acting as both a connector and a disruptor. While it facilitates information sharing and social interaction, overuse can harm mental and physical health. These findings underscore the need for strategies that encourage balanced social media use, maximising benefits while reducing risks.

Keywords: Social Media, Millennial, Students, Academic Performances, Mental Health, Qualitative Research.

Correspondence:

Dr. Pavan Kumar Yanamadala

Assistant Professor in the Department of Pharmacy Practice, Chalapathi Institute of Pharmaceutical Sciences (A), Lam, Guntur-522034, Andhra Pradesh, INDIA.
Email: pavan.yanamadala@gmail.com

Received: 03-07-2025;

Revised: 12-09-2025;

Accepted: 25-11-2025.

INTRODUCTION

It is possible to make the case that using social media to search for solutions, avoid loneliness, and facilitate conversation is beneficial.^[1] But what about the risks to one's health, the reduction in physical activity and productivity, the unrealistic expectations, and addiction? When do the bad things outweigh the good things? One of the most revolutionary inventions in history is digitalisation, yet great power also comes with great responsibility. People are already spending several hours on social media platforms in this new era.^[2,3]

Those born between 1995 and 2012 are referred to as Generation Z or centennials. They were raised on the internet and social

media. Born at the height of technological advancement, Gen Z is the first generation to grow up entirely online. They are the generation that has always had access to social media and a wide range of digital platforms. They can maintain their connection to all kinds of self-expression, which is said to have had a role in their increasingly progressive perspectives. Their self-expression frequently reflects this propagation of variation, setting them apart from earlier generations.

All citizens have access to Internet services through the Digital India program. It is now more convenient to pay for internet fees thanks to significant cost savings. Consequently, the internet has evolved into a necessary component of a family.

Along with the growth in internet service accessibility has come an increase in the tendency to use social media. Nowadays, social media is widely used in our society, and users of all ages like using it to pass the time. This social media platform is particularly well-liked by India's youth population. Social media makes it



ScienScript

DOI: 10.5530/ajbls.20251528

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simple to conduct many tasks, such as conversing and exchanging ideas.

According to Yadav and Rai (2017),^[4] Generation Z, characterised as digital natives, demonstrates distinct patterns in media consumption, emphasising the importance of curating their digital identities and engaging in immediate communication.

Today's youth spend a lot of time on social media platforms to chat, check updates, and, most commonly, find entertainment. An observational study by Grover & Kaur (2016)^[5] indicates that social media platforms significantly alter individuals' self-image and profoundly influence the immediacy and depth of their interpersonal relationships in the real world. The main reason why people use this is that it's so accessible anywhere in the world. Despite this, the activities have had a significant impact on society, particularly on young people.

Social media has grown so popular over time that a lot of academics are now interested in researching the development of social media platforms and the benefits and drawbacks they have for society. Social media platforms have proven advantageous in numerous fields; however, certain ones have grown more difficult to manage.^[6]

A regional study (Kokilapriya, 2018)^[7] has underscored the relationship between heightened screen time resulting from social media engagement and the subsequent disruption of social behaviours and educational focus, especially within semi-urban and rural areas of India. A study by Hou *et al.*, (2019)^[8] indicates that prolonged exposure to screens can lead to addictive tendencies, hindering the psychosocial development of young individuals.

This study is conducted to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of social media use, the effects of social media on mental and physical health, the phenomenon of social media addiction in Generation Z, and the effects of social media on students' academic performance.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A Google form-created questionnaire that was distributed via email and social media profiles, served as the study's instrument. The purpose of the questionnaire was to gather input from the students regarding the study's analysis. The questionnaire was designed in a way that made it easier to comprehend how social media use affects a few different areas of life, including diet, stress, sleep, and mental health. It also helped to examine the effects of social media, both good and bad, on one's mental, physical, and social health and determined whether or not Gen-Z has a dependency on social media.

This study will investigate how social media use affects young people's well-being, with a focus on Gen-Z. How social media

communication affects young people's psychosocial well-being is an essential issue that this study aims to address.

The Study hypothesises that it's reasonable to assert that social media is educating young people about healthier lifestyle choices. The quick source of information and entertainment for young people's interests is probably social media. It's feasible to state that social media greatly aids young people in their educational endeavours. It's legitimate to say that young people are making good use of social media.

The young people of two well-known cities namely Guntur and Vijayawada in Andhra Pradesh respectively, make up the study's population. 440 Undergraduate and Postgraduate students were chosen at random from the aforementioned demographic, including both males and females. The sample was drawn from across the young population. Data interpretation and analysis were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. To evaluate the data and present the data in an appropriate format, all of the obtained data were entered into an SPSS sheet. Percentage analyses were also carried out.

The primary approach of the study led to the selection of the quantitative analysis style. Undergraduate students were given fifteen questions in the formulated Questionnaire Form. All of the queries focused on their use of social media and how it influences and affects them. The students' use of social media and the advantages and disadvantages of it for their personal and academic lives were covered in the fifteen questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data obtained indicated that 14-year-olds in four separate cities started making use of social media. Eighty-seven per cent of students in the 14–21 age range have at least one social media account, and 26 per cent have multiple accounts. Students are using several social media accounts as they get acquainted using them. When asked what their primary objectives were for using social media, the majority of high school students replied that they mostly used it for enjoyment and to stay in touch with friends.

The data illustrated in Table 1 highlights that the utilisation of social media significantly influences health-related behaviours, often in a detrimental manner. This adverse effect is particularly pronounced among males and younger students, affecting various aspects such as dietary choices, sleep quality, physical health, and mental well-being. A discernible trend indicates that both undergraduates and secondary school students exhibit heightened susceptibility to these negative outcomes. Such findings imply that excessive engagement with digital platforms may disrupt essential health practices and compromise psychological well-being during critical developmental stages in education.

Table 2 indicates that a significant number of students view themselves as dependent on social media, while a smaller group remains ambivalent about their usage. Additionally, there is a notable incidence of emotional distress indicators, including the compulsion to present an idealised self and engage in lifestyle comparisons, particularly among postgraduate students. These findings suggest a profound psychological strain associated with the management of one's online persona, highlighting the capacity of social media platforms to exacerbate detrimental self-evaluations and feelings of inadequacy.

As demonstrated in Table 3, a significant majority of students utilise social media primarily for leisure activities, fostering connections with their peers, and expressing their identities. Although there are educational and professional incentives for its use, these are not as prevalent. While many students identify advantages such as enhanced communication abilities and the ability to connect with peer networks, a smaller proportion acknowledge improvements in self-esteem or mental health. This complexity illustrates that social media can serve as both a beneficial resource and a source of psychological strain, contingent upon the context of its use and the individual's coping strategies.

As illustrated in the Figure 1, it has been noticed that WhatsApp is the most commonly used Social Media App among the Study Population with the most common reason for staying in touch with friends, and family, and also being an active member in groups and channels for Online Shopping and Sharing educational Materials with the classmates, followed by Instagram and Snapchat for maintaining the daily track of the activities that their friends have been doing and mainly for entertainment purpose.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study was to ascertain how Gen Z views social media and how it influences their perceptions of their bodies, lifestyles, and well-being. The survey discovered that the majority of young people have an addiction to sending emails, monitoring social media, scrolling through Instagram reels, and watching

videos just before bed. This habit keeps them up late at night and disrupts their sleep cycle. FOMO, or the fear of missing out, is a typical explanation for the excessive usage of social media before bed. It is a reaction to this conundrum, marked by an insatiable need to be aware of everything that other people are doing and experiencing. According to research conducted by institutions such as the Mayo Clinic (2022),^[9] regular engagement with digital content may exacerbate symptoms of anxiety, depression and disrupt sleep patterns among adolescents.

The study also made note of how younger generations' eating habits have been negatively impacted by excessive social media use, as they have been accustomed to the idea of "Diet Culture." It alludes to a system of thinking that prioritises shape, thinness, and attractiveness over well-being and health. Furthermore, the idea normalises negative self-talk, emphasises calorie restriction, and categorises particular foods as "good" or "bad." People who have been exposed to "diet culture" messaging have been socialised to think that dieting and being slim are not only signs of health, but also that one person is morally superior to another. People are both motivated and demotivated to exercise and work out when scrolling through social media.

A qualitative research (Netsweeper, 2022)^[10] indicates that engaging in unrestricted digital activities during academic hours can significantly diminish both learning retention and cognitive focus.^[11] highlights that excessive engagement with social media can negatively affect adolescents' abilities to solve problems in real-life situations and manage their emotions effectively.

The youth were inspired to work out by social media posts regarding fitness, such as pictures of friends working out or dressing for the gym, checking into new gyms, or sharing their fitness-related successes. On the other hand, some people's body image was negatively impacted by reading fitness blogs. They felt self-conscious about their weight as a result of these posts. The primary focus of the study was on Generation Z's digital well-being, namely, how being online affected their emotions, mental health, and physical health. When social media was the only means of communication and socialisation during the period of social alienation, it had a very favourable effect. Users

Table 1: Impact of Social Media on Diet, Sleep, Physical, and Mental Health by Demographics.

Indicators	Health Area	Positive Impact (%)	Negative Impact (%)	No Impact (%)	Total Respondents (n=440)
Male	Diet	30.25	42.85	26.89	238
Male	Sleep	39.49	47.47	13.02	238
Male	Physical	31.09	68.90	-	238
Male	Mental	26.05	73.94	-	238
Female	Diet	50.00	37.12	12.87	202
Female	Sleep	39.10	51.48	9.40	202
Female	Physical	46.53	58.41	-	202
Female	Mental	40.09	59.90	-	202

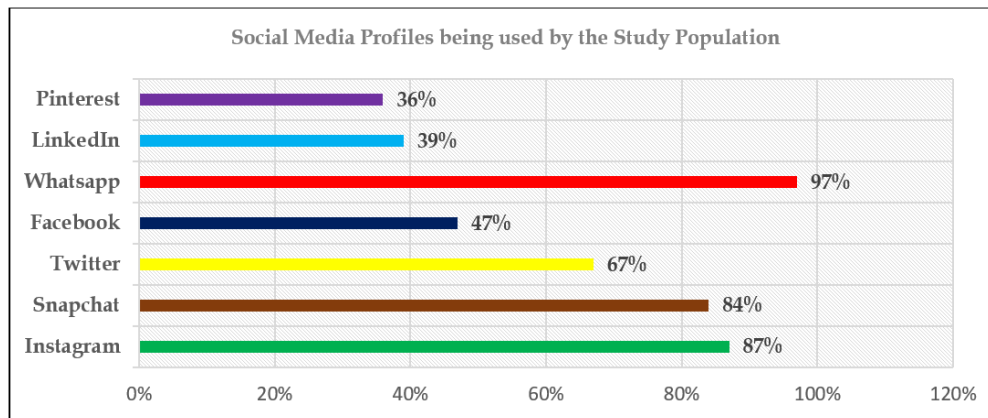


Figure 1: Demonstrating the Social Media profiles being used by the Study Population.

Table 2: Social Media Addiction and Emotional Impact by Educational Level.

Education Level	Addicted (%)	Pressured to be Perfect (%)	Comparison with Others (%)	Anxious/Insecure (%)
Secondary	58.26	64.34	75.65	60.00
Undergraduate	49.23	68.02	74.61	64.46
Postgraduate	53.12	75.78	73.43	57.81

have met people through social networking that they might not have otherwise met. For those who might be introverted, these platforms are frequently a means of making friends. It can assist many in reducing feelings of depression and loneliness. By exchanging ideas and experiences, technology has also enabled people to massively spark societal change. People stay on these websites for as long as possible because of features like endless scroll and algorithms that present content linked to their interests. Like any passion, people ruin their health and give up a lot of time to use social media. Generation Z is becoming more and more insecure due to social media.

Low self-esteem and even eating problems can result from having a bad body image. These young adults are frequently inundated with pictures and videos of influencers who seem to lead flawless lives. They could feel depressed and alone when their own lives don't measure up. As a result, Gen Z feels pressured to be flawless, which has led to a desire for cosmetic surgery among younger women and a widespread desire to change their gender. These people spend so much time online that they frequently experience information overload, which causes uncertainty and a lack of solid proof.

Paradigm Treatment (2021)^[12] conceptualises excessive use of social media through the lens of addiction, drawing comparisons to substance-related dependencies by illustrating how both phenomena stimulate the brain's reward pathways. One of the worst repercussions of Gen-Z's propensity for cyberbullying is the development of narcissistic behaviour, which includes

Table 3: Primary Uses and Benefits of Social Media Use Among Students.

Use/Benefit Area	Agreed (%)	Disagreed (%)
Interacting with strangers	59	41
Academic Purposes	47	53
Recreation & Individualisation	87	13
Maintaining Contact with Friends	98	2
Uploading Photos & Videos	94	6
Latest info (Movies/Sports)	79	21
New Places, Food, Lifestyle Info	93	7
Enhancing Professional Skills	51	49
Communication Skills	64	36
Portfolio for Job Search	74	26
Peer Networking	79	21
Enhancing Self-esteem/ Wellbeing	41	59
Staying Up-to-date	87	13
Building Communities	84	16

an excessive need to share images of oneself and a belief that life events have no significance if they are not shared online. Research conducted by Shepherd's Hill Academy (2022)^[13] has highlighted that the effects of cyberbullying and the incessant tendency to compare oneself to others can lead to enduring psychological damage, significantly impacting an individual's sense of self-worth.

CONCLUSION

According to this study, excessive usage of social media platforms for messaging, image and video sharing, comments, and other purposes has been observed. Nearly half of the people in the sample are covered by this average. This demonstrates that they use the internet to communicate with their pals on social media networking sites, ignoring their primary focus on study and research-related tasks.

Their average usage of the internet is between 30 and 60 min. However, since users spend more than 2 hr a day on social media, the real results can exceed this time limit. Without question, the two primary risk factors for social media addiction are its ease of use and its quick rewards. People are so dependent on their phones that when they are taken away, they become agitated, restless, and for some, even stressed out. First off, accessing social media is quite simple. All you have to do is pick up your phone, swipe to unlock it, and then press to open the apps. This applies to both Facebook and Instagram. They become thrilled when they see a notification that someone liked one of their photos or left a positive comment.

Social media networking will remain a significant aspect of daily life due to the rise in internet usage and technological advancements. Social media is a huge communication space where boundaries are quickly disappearing, and data access is becoming increasingly important. This will still have an impact on what Generation Z, and young people in particular, do in this global community. Regrettably, this is now harming young people's psychosocial and academic behaviour. Therefore, when used appropriately, it will improve both.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study does, however, have certain shortcomings that might restrict how broadly applicable its conclusions can be. For instance, the study's small age range of participants may limit how broadly the findings may be applied to older people. Furthermore, their socioeconomic situation was not disclosed in the study, which could affect how they interact with social media. The study's authors suggest extending the age range of participants to include older persons and a more diverse demographic sample to enhance the consistency of future research. To increase the accuracy of the results, gathering data on the social media sites used and socioeconomic position may be helpful.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Under the direction of Dr PKY, this collaborative research project's idea has been meticulously developed to guarantee a thorough comprehension of the subject matter. The study's methodology, which was primarily developed by ANS and STSSBY, provided the structure for its execution. VA and DSLB

led the data collection activities. The comprehensive research that ACC and KS carried out was essential for obtaining insightful conclusions. Each author contributed their knowledge and perspectives to the inquiry, which was a team effort. The original manuscript was drafted predominantly by PKY; all authors then carefully reviewed and edited it to make sure it was accurate and coherent. In the end, RRN oversaw and supervised the research study to guarantee its integrity and excellence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors express their sincere gratitude to Prof. Rama Rao Nadendla, Principal and Professor, Chalapathi Institute of Pharmaceutical Sciences (Autonomous), Lam, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh, India, for his constant guidance, supervision, and encouragement throughout the study. The authors also extend their thanks to Dr. Hepzibah Rani Gidla for her valuable assistance in statistical analysis and data interpretation and to the management of Chalapathi Institute of Pharmaceutical Sciences for providing the necessary facilities and academic support to carry out this research work.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare there are no competing interests among themselves.

FUNDING

The authors affirm that they have not obtained any financial assistance or funding with the execution of this research, the authorship of this work, or the publication of this article.

ETHICAL STATEMENT

Ethical Approval of this study is not necessary.

ABBREVIATIONS

UG: Under Graduate; **PG:** Post Graduate; **FOMO:** Fear of Missing Out; **SPSS:** Statistical Package for Social Sciences; **SNS:** Social Networking Sites; **Gen Z:** Generation Z; **n:** Sample Size.'

SUMMARY

This study explored the multifaceted impact of social media usage on the identity formation, mental health, and lifestyle patterns of undergraduate and postgraduate students. Using a structured Google Forms survey with 440 participants from Guntur and Vijayawada, the analysis revealed that while social media fosters connectivity, self-expression, and academic collaboration, excessive use contributes to anxiety, disturbed sleep, and concerns about body image. The findings emphasise the dual nature of social media as both a constructive and disruptive influence on student well-being, underlining the importance of promoting balanced and mindful digital engagement among youth.

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Cite this article: Yanamadala PK, Shaik AN, Arijilli V, Burlagadda DSL, Yarra STSSB, Chirumamilla AC, *et al.* Like and Subscribe to Yourself: Social Media's Influence on Undergraduate and Postgraduate Students' Identity Formation. *Asian J Biol Life Sci.* 2025;14(3):728-33.