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Word Count: 4997

Candidate Number: 6164

Does social media empower Generation Z?

Introduction

As a seventeen-year-old attending public high school, social media is a part of my everyday routine. I know about, the boy who won the basketball game last night, the girl who committed to college already the girl who got pregnant just a little too early, the boy who came out of the closet, and the boy who was cyberbullied into depression. Social media exposes me to situations happening in the same city as me and even ones happening all over the world, but is this a good for my generation? When I am on social media, I see a large quantity of negative comments, posts, and have seen cyberbullying firsthand. Yet, in this political climate (a presidential election in America and a pandemic) I also see many movements that expose people- including myself- to issues in our country that need to be brought to justice. I have witnessed instances where social media users fight together for causes such as the #BlackLivesMatter movement.

Many of Generation Z are still in school and have not found their place in society, which is why many conditions defining them are still being argued today. Many generational experts argue the name of this generation and the cutoff year. Among the terms for Generation Z was “iGen” which was coined by Dr. Jean Twenge. Other terms include “Homeland Generation,” “Multi-Generation,” and “Post-Millennials.” Although there are many debates on who is a part of this generation, I will define it as people who were born between 1995-2012 and call them, Generation Z. This includes 74 million Americans, which is estimated to be 24% of the population, are a part of Generation Z (Twenge, 2018).

Growing up, many called my generation lazier and more entitled than the ones before us and blame it on social media and technology. Many of my peers have had similar experiences. As a member of Generation Z, and a constant user of social media, I wanted to seek the truth.

Shockingly, about seven in ten Americans have social media (Pew Research Center, 2020). Social media is defined as “Websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking” (Oxford University Press, 2020). Some people consider social media

most of the internet, but in this paper social media will be specified to certain apps. These apps include Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Snapchat, WhatsApp, Reddit, and other applications specifically on mobile smart phones.

I aim to discover if the use of social media of Generation Z affects them. I will investigate if social media empowers Generation Z through its benefits or hold them back through its negative effects. “Empowers” will be defined as making Generation feel stronger and confident while “holds back” will be defined as keeping them from moving forward to a better life than previous generations. I will break down this topic into two methodologies: individual and community health. The individual health lens will be about how social media affects a member of Generation Z on a more specific level. The community health will focus on how social media affects most of Generation Z.

It is essential to understand that every member has a different experience with social media, and everyone has their own experience. The best way to describe this is “just because there is an average difference doesn’t mean that everyone in the generation is exactly the same” (Twenge, 2018). Because it is impossible to analyze the data as individuals, the information presented will be averages of members in Generation Z.

Individual Health

Less Social Interaction

With social media sites like Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok, people have access to millions of people with a single post, picture, video, or tweet. However, spending so much time on social media and technology is affecting social interaction happening within the generation. One database called Monitoring the Future, which asks questions to 12th graders since 1976 and 8th and 10th graders since 1991, measured the average teen spends their time. Since social media is a relatively new concept, they have only been asking questions about social media since 2008. By 2015, 77% of boys and 87% of girls used social media almost every day (Monitoring the Future, 2019). Since 2002, the percentage of 8th, 10th,

and 12th graders who hang out with friends has been cut in half, with steep declines (Monitoring the Future, 2019). Nearly one out of five high school seniors did not get together with friends in a typical week as opposed to a small 8% in past years (Monitoring the Future, 2019). This outlines that Generation Z socializes with each other through technology and social media rather than in-person.

In 2014, a study was conducted measuring social cues of preteens with and without screen time (Uhls et al, 2014). Yalda T. Uhls (the main author) spent 15 years as a senior film executive where at first glance, does not give her a background qualified to use as a source for Generation Z; however, it is viewed as a positive because it gives her an inside look on how media is created (*Faculty Page | UCLA Psychology Department*, 2020). Uhls has a PhD in psychology and her expertise centers around how media content is created and the science of how media affects children (*Faculty Page | UCLA Psychology Department*, 2020). This is important because most current youth is a part of Generation Z since the youngest members of Generation Z are eight years old. When gauging her value as an author, Yalda T. Uhls' education and devotion to her goal of creating a positive environment on media for children, makes her an expert on the connection on social media and youth.

In the study, there were two groups of participants: one class went throughout the day with their normal screen time activities (including social media) and another class went to a five-day outdoor education camp that prohibited any screen time (Uhls et al, 2014). They then tested them on nonverbal social cues and emotions using faces subtests of the second edition of the Diagnostic Analysis of Nonverbal Behavior and scenes without audio from the Child and Adolescent Social Perception Measure (Uhls et al, 2014). The children were required to state which emotion the faces/actors were evoking (Uhls et al, 2014).

The children were required to take both tests two times: before and after the experiment. The results showed that the experimental group's mistakes average from the first test to the second test changed from 14.02 to 9.41 and the control group mistakes went from 12.24 to 9.81 (Uhls et al, 2014).

This outlines that time off screens improved the children's score. The more the students spent off screen the better they were able to interpret human emotion and understand social behavior. Although this study focuses on screen time in general, it does say the average participant spent 4 ½ hours on any type of media which includes apps that were mentioned before. When assessing how screen time affects youth, it shows that social media contradicts its own name by depriving children of social skills showing that social media holds back Generation Z.

Mental Health

To move forward, it is essential to build off the assertions in the last reason (less in-person interaction) instead of seeing mental health as a separate issue. In this section, mental issues will include depression and anxiety. One of the biggest voices regarding the discussion of Generation Z and social media is Dr. Jean Twenge. Besides her writing, the best articles I found was her work being cited. Twenge is a professor of psychology and has written many publications ranging from generations to social psychology including the book, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy- and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood* which I reference often. When evaluating the importance of this, her experience in psychology shows she is qualified to study generational differences. She has studied generational shifts reaching back to the 1930s and focuses on what differs a generation from the previous generation and why. Twenge's expertise in both generational evolution and social psychology makes her a critical voice to analyze the effects of social media on Generation Z over time.

In order to see if social media empowers or holds back Generation Z through mental illnesses, it is important to know if mental illness is an issue. Twenge wrote,

The screening test shows a shocking rise in depression in a short time: 56% more teens experienced a major depressive episode in 2016 than in 2010... And 60% more experiences severe impairment (Twenge, 2018).

This quote shows that current youth are suffering more than in the past which raises the question “is social media the issue?” Twenge debates that social media is in fact causing the rise in mental health issues. She goes on to say that since teens spend less time with each other in person and more on social media, life satisfaction had a “cataclysmic shift downward” (Twenge, 2018). This amplifies how important in-person social interaction is since it not only affects their social skills, but also their mental health. The decline in face-to-face interaction has also made Generation Z feel lonelier even when they are connected to each other on social media. Social media shows an individual what people are doing since they are constantly updating their lives, however; the connection does not make Generation Z feel any less lonely. The numbers show “a stunning 31% more 8th graders and 10th graders felt lonely in 2015, than in 2011, along with 22% more 12th graders” and 48% more girls in 2015 than 2010 felt left out on social media and a 27% increase for boys from 2010 to 2015 (Twenge, 2018). This information hints that social media exposes people to events they are not attending. This feeling of loneliness has contributed to the rise of mental health issues in Generation Z. Not only are there mental health issues in Generation Z, but it reached “all-time highs” in 2016 on every mental health indicator (Twenge, 2018). Twenge states, “iGen [Generation Z] is on the verge of the most severe mental crisis for young people in decades” (Twenge, 2018). This clearly shows that Generation Z is suffering drastically because of social media. Twenge argues that this sharp increase in mental illnesses happened exactly when smartphones became common and in-person interaction decreased and says this is not a coincidence since “spending more time on social media and less time on in-person social interaction is correlated with depression” (Twenge, 2018). Assessing this argument, social media is not just holding back generation z, but destroying their mental health.

Educational Help

On the other hand, some experts declare that social media empowers Generation Z. Besides the exposure to so many different people around the world, social media also exposes people large quantities of new information. Many educators are searching for ways to implement social media in the classroom. Social media has the potential to supplement traditional learning approaches.

A study which aims to figure out the benefits social media can have on the classroom was conducted in two undergraduate courses offered at Mzuzu University (Chawinga, 2017). This study followed similar procedures to past research, but fixed certain issues such as increasing sample size from 22 to 64 students (Chawinga, 2017). This is important because the study is more valid if the results are visible across a wider range of demographics. The author of this study conducted in two phases where “students were asked to create blogs and Twitter accounts followed by tweeting and blogging” in the first phase, and then the author “analyzed tweets by students in addition to distributing a questionnaire to students” (Chawinga, 2017). The author ensured their class was the only ones using the hashtags (the symbol # followed with a phrase regarding a specific topic) #DL and #IRL (Chawinga, 2017). The professor/author also set standards on how his students were supposed to use Twitter and blogs for the classroom (Chawinga, 2017). When evaluating the importance of this study, it shows the standards the author put in place ensured that the results of the study were valid and are applicable to the topic of social media and Generation Z.

As said above, the study was conducted in university classrooms. Following the age qualifications for Generation Z (1995-2012), these students are a part of it even though the study does not specify it. In the study, the professor created a Twitter account for the purpose of his classroom and asked his students to do the same and required them to follow the hashtags (#DL and #IRL) to ensure the students were able to follow the class conversations (Chawinga, 2017). This also allowed for a direct connection between the professor and his students. Aside from the Twitter accounts, blogs were used intended to have another form of communication between the students to help them prepare for exams. At the end of the 12-week period, there were 9000 student tweets where the “least Twitter having tweeted 20

times and the highest Twitter with 320 tweets” and “well over 500” blog posts (Chawinga, 2017). This information shows that the students took this task seriously.

The students at the end took a questionnaire about the experience and it was found that 52% of participants for Twitter and 47% for blogs strongly agree “helped learn from friends without relying on the lecturer” (Chawinga, 2017). This exemplifies that social media in the classroom brought students together and allowed for collaboration without the professor’s assistance. The study also found that 51.6% believed “Twitter allowed students to get instant response through alerts of their phone ringtones” and 46.9% found “on blogs students got a summary of what they learnt in class which helped them to understand the concepts better” (Chawinga, 2017). This indicates social media allows students to depend solely on the information that occurs during class time. Social media gives a direct connection to the lecturer and other students which creates a community to better understand tasks given. When evaluating the importance of this, social media lets Generation Z reflectively think and collaborate with others which empowers them academically. Social media pushes Generation Z with intellectual empowerment into the direction of their future.

When dissecting the methodology of the individual health argument, it is important to understand why I chose these experts. Dr. Jean Twenge informed about the mental health epidemic in Generation Z was the most influential voice in her field. Dr. Yalda Uhls and Winner Chawinga were chosen because of their first-hand experience in conducting experiments. While researching the individual health, I chose not to do primary research of social media because of the subjectivity and privacy issues that occurred. Therefore, using studies conducted by experts brought standardization which was essential in concluding the discussion of social media empowering Generation Z.

Overall, social media *holds back* Generation Z’s individual health. Social media exposes an individual to information and connects people to others. This allows for an individual to reach out and connect them to peers which gives room for reflective thinking. Assessing the connection, social media

benefits the individual academically. Even though social media can help Generation Z academically, the costs are too high. The dramatic increase in the mental health crisis of individuals in Generation Z and the decrease in in-person interaction is too drastic to ignore showing that social media prevents an individual from moving forward.

Community Health

Narcissism/Entitlement

Before Generation Z, are the millennials who some call entitled or narcissistic. Some people use the term “snowflakes” to describe how they feel they are individually unique, like real snowflakes. Since Generation Z follows the millennials immediately, it is important to view their trends and analyze the comparisons from their predecessors. Narcissism, as defined by W. Keith Campbell is “a dimensional personality trait that consists of a grandiose self-concept as well as behaviors intended to maintain this self-concept in the face of reality.”

One of the loudest voices on the discussion of narcissism within specific generations is W. Keith Campbell. He has worked closely with Jean Twenge in past years studying narcissism and individualism through the generations and is a professor of psychology. His PhD from the University of North Carolina exemplifies his strong education in psychology will be an insightful voice on narcissism within Generation Z. Despite having little experience with Generation Z, his arguments on the connection of social media and narcissism, and his expertise on studying generational trends, makes him a valuable expert.

A study conducted in 2019 with Campbell as the leading author/experimenter. They investigated “emerging adults” which they defined as ages 18-25 (besides the participants aged 25, this group includes members of Generation Z) because they “are most likely to be exposed to messaging that they are narcissistic and entitled via web platforms, which makes the design of the current studies intuitive” (Campbell et al, 2019). The focus of the study is how emerging adults “think about

stereotypes about their age-group and labels, how they react to being labeled the most narcissistic and entitled age-group, and whether all of these reactions are influenced by individual levels of trait narcissism and entitlement” (Campbell et al, 2019).

One thing to acknowledge about the study is that even though the focus is “emerging adults”, they measure people from all age ranges and split the averages based on age category. Each age category was required to answer what they believe is the “overconfident,” “entitled,” and “narcissistic” age group (Campbell et al, 2019). With an average between 60%-70% in each age category, the data shows all age categories, including themselves, believe adolescents and young adults (Generation Z) are the most narcissistic and entitled (Campbell et al, 2019). The data also showed that they believed adolescents/young adults were the most confident with the average of 70%-80% believing so (Campbell et al, 2019). This proves the reason the authors chose to focus on Generation Z because the exposure to social media might have an impact on their narcissistic tendencies. In the article, they explained “generally speaking, narcissism and entitlement are not viewed as socially acceptable traits, and are instead often considered abrasive, caustic, or harmful” (Campbell et al, 2019). Connecting this back to the question of social media empowering Generation Z, it is shown social media is not only holding back Generation Z but hurting them with toxic traits.

Another study questioned Elon University students (many of whom are members of Generation Z) about their social media habits. They found that 75.3% of respondents checked their social media profiles more than five times a day (Wickel, 2015). They also found that 97.8% determined the popularity of someone through the number of “likes” and 90.2% reported they post pictures on social media just to receive “likes” (Wickel, 2015) This outlines the issue with social media and why people believe it brings out narcissistic tendencies. These “likes” create a toxic environment where people want everyone to see “me.” In the final assessment, social media may not

be holding back Generation Z through narcissism and entitlement, but it is not moving them forward and away from the true entitlement generation: the Millennials.

Cyberbullying

Since social media allows all types of people to be exposed to different people, it allows for a major issue: cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is exactly what the name states; cyber as in technology/internet and bullying as in name calling and rumor spreading.

A lead expert on this topic is Monica Anderson. She earned her master's degree in communication, culture, and technology which allows her to understand technology and analyze the cultural aspects of it such as age or generational trends. Anderson is an Associate Director of Research at Pew Research Center where she focuses on technology with social media and its impact on teenagers. Even though her research does not involve the direct affect cyberbullying has, her education and expertise in studying social media effects makes her perfect to discuss the role social media plays in Generation Z.

Anderson wrote an article on research her she conducted with the Pew Research Center. They found “59% of U.S. teens have been bullied or harassed online” (Anderson et al, 2018). They also found “42% of teens say they have been called offensive names online or via their cellphone...[and] 32% of teens say someone has spread false rumors about them on the internet” (Anderson et al, 2018). These statistics displays the downside of social media. Social media gives people a platform to be exposed to the hatred of others and fear no repercussions since they hide behind the black mirror. Another statistic they found was that 16% “have been the target of physical threats online” (Anderson et al, 2018). As addressed in the mental health lens, cyberbullying leads to causing anguish in individuals mentally, but this fact shows their physical safety could be at risk. Overall, the information from this study shows that many teenagers (Generation Z members) have suffered through social media, but there is a factor that makes teens more susceptible to cyberbullying: their usage. In the study, they mention about 45% of teens say

they are online constantly, and these users are more likely to face online bullying (Anderson et al, 2018).

This creates the solution that the best way to stop this problem, is to lower their social media usage.

Yet, the issue with social media is not just about *being* cyberbullied. The Cyberbullying Research Center surveyed over 25,000 students since 2002 regarding online issues of cyberbullying. They found that “13% admitted to cyberbullying others at some point in their lifetimes” (Cyberbullying Research Center, 2015). This brings to light how cyberbullying affects community health rather than individual health. Yes, the numbers show that an enormous amount of Generation Z is being cyberbullied, but there is a mutual dynamic in cyberbullying. Assessing this information, it shows that social media is the reins holding back Generation Z from dashing into a kinder future.

Economics

Social media has not only changed Generation Z, but Generation Z uses social media to change others. One way Generation Z does this is economically. Generation Z is about 40% of the population which means producers, brands, and businesses should understand how to sell to them because they are the future and will continue to buy products (Fromm, 2021).

One expert who addresses marketing and economic trends caused by each generation is Jeff Fromm. Jeff Fromm is a writer for Forbes and is known as the “millennial and gen z marketing guy” (Forbes, 2021). This means that he is known for analyzing and speaking on economic trends of certain generations. Fromm has written a book called *Marketing to Gen Z* which talks about how brands and businesses should sell to Generation Z (Forbes, 2021). He earned his economics degrees from an Ivy League university (Forbes, 2021). When evaluating his importance, his experience in economics and studying generational trends makes him a vital source in understanding how Generation Z has changed the economy. Jeff Fromm not only uses his own research to support his arguments, but also interviews important people such as CEO of Verizon’s consumer groups.

In an interview with Oliver Wright, global lead for consumer goods, Fromm found that half of Generation Z will buy from companies who put purpose and meaning after profit (Fromm, 2021). In a similar article by Jeff Fromm, it was found that Generation Z's trust in business is 46% compared to a 56% from past years (Fromm, 2021). This connects with social media because it informs Generation Z on brands and businesses message/purpose. This means that social media informing Generation Z allows them to form their own opinions which changes how businesses have been selling. In the same interview with Oliver Wright, he used the example of Michelle Phan to demonstrate how social media affects economic trends. Michelle Phan, who has 9 million followers on YouTube, used Twitch (a video gaming streaming platform) to combine video games and beauty products (Fromm, 2021). While she was playing video games and viewers were watching, website links to promote the launch of Em Cosmetics' new Daydream Cushion Foundation were exposed to viewers as well as commercial breaks (Fromm, 2021). After this happened, it was found 278% more units were sold compared to previous launches (Fromm, 2021). The increase in sales reveals that social media exposes Generation Z to products which changes how brands should/would sell to consumers.

In another interview, Jeff Fromm discusses how to connect to Generation Z with Victoria Sakal, Managing Director of Brand Intelligence at Morning Consult. Sakal mentions how “trust-building qualities—openness, transparency, and authenticity” are more important to Generation Z because “they see through canned communications” (Sakal, 2021). This outlines that Generation Z wants trust in the brands they buy from and when not given, they are able to detect it with the help of social media. Generation Z can and will use social media for “cancel culture [where someone/brand is ostracized on social media for doing something bad], boycotts activated through social media, and even pranking the president” (Sakal, 2021). In this quote, Victoria Sakal clearly states how far Generation Z can go to make sure brands and businesses are being ethical. In the final assessment, it shows that social media gives Generation Z a voice to form their own opinions and use it as a spotlight to call brands and businesses out

on their wrongdoing. Overall, social media gives Generation Z the power to correct what their predecessor generations could not.

Internet Activism

Whether it be a post, a picture, or a profile picture change, someone on social media is always trying to spread awareness to others. For example, Patrisse Cullors who is a best-selling author, artist, activist and one of the co-founders of the Black Lives Matter movement, utilizes the potential of social media. #BlackLivesMatter was founded in 2013 forming an online community that would battle and support the black community. This outlines that Cullors helped progress her social justice agenda with social media. When evaluating the importance of this, it shows her first-hand experience with using social media for the benefit of others makes her a valuable expert on internet activism.

Patrisse Cullors understands the potential Generation Z can have on society, which is why she wrote the book, *When They Call You A Terrorist: A Story of Black Lives Matter and The Power To Change The World*, to “inspire a new generation of activists to organize, mobilize, and fight for their future” (Cullors, 2018). This clearly shows the faith she has in Generation Z to create change in the world. According to a report done by YPulse, she is correct. They found 55% of 15-18 years olds have been a part of Black Lives Matter protests in some way, including social media (*This Is How Gen Z & Millennials Have Changed Activism*, 2020). They also found 62% of younger people believe their voices are heard more online than offline (*This Is How Gen Z & Millennials Have Changed Activism*, 2015). This information showcases Generation Z use social media as a platform to advance equality. When assessing the connection to Generation Z and social media, it is shown that Generation Z uses social media as a spotlight to expose critical issues.

One of Generation Z’s most influential voices on internet activism is Greta Thunberg. Thunberg is an 18-year-old Swedish activist who is passionate about stopping the increase in climate change. At 15 years old she started a school strike for 3 weeks to “protest against the lack of action against the climate

crisis” (Fridays For Future, 2021). When the COVID-19 pandemic occurred, it was unsafe for people to gather, which is why Thunberg started the #DigitalStrike movement in April 2020 where people posted pictures of themselves holding a sign and posted it using the hashtag #ClimateStrikeOnline (*This Is How Gen Z & Millennials Have Changed Activism*, 2020). This further explains social media is used to unite people to fight for a cause. When the pandemic stopped the normal activism, Generation Z and others found a new form of activism in social media and how much power it holds. Social media exposes Generation Z to new information and teaches them how to make the world a better place for everyone. When evaluating the importance of social media and Generation Z, it is the weapon used to fight unjust issues in the world. Social media is the tool that aids resilience in unusual circumstances.

Altogether, social media *empowers* Generation Z through its community. Expert Jeff Fromm defends this through the changes Generation Z has caused to the economy and activist Patrisse Cullors sees firsthand what Generation Z is capable of. When splitting the lenses on the community side of the argument, it was valuable to not only use quantitative data, but qualitative from experts who are trained to notice the trends occurring. Researchers Keith Campbell and Monica Anderson dispute this by arguing that the cyberbullying and narcissism social media brings is the downfall for Generation Z. However, Social media brings a sense of belonging and a community for Generation Z. Strangers online come together and unite for a cause to make a difference in this world and are succeeding in changing it. It would be ignorant to forget the negative effects of social media on Generation Z such as cyberbullying and narcissism, but it would be irresponsible to not address the beauty it can bring through its community.

Conclusion

As a member of Generation Z, I firmly believed that social media empowers my generation. However, I knew that I needed to fairly research both sides of the argument. When I decided to break up the paper into individual health and community health, it was difficult to find negative effects of social media on community because I so strongly believed that social media only empowered Generation Z. Once I opened my mind to finding the negative effects of social media, I found how dangerous it could be

to an individual. Social media held back Generation Z through its narcissistic effects and mental health issues, and I thought the mental health issues were by far the biggest problem social media can bring out in Generation Z. When I continued my research on the mental health issues, I thought that there would be nothing as serious to combat this issue. Even though social media does help Generation Z academically, I believed that my final opinion would be that social media *holds back* Generation Z. Yet, it was not that simple. When I researched the community health side of the argument, I found that Generation Z had found a way to work together even though they were all apart. Together, Generation Z has fought for transparency in companies, the #BlackLivesMatter Movement, the #MeToo Movement, racial justice, LGBTQ+ justice, and so many other problems that are being battled. Knowing this, I concluded that I was not expecting when I started this paper. I found that social media holds back the individual health but empowers the community health of Generation Z. Overall, social media might hurt the individual, but it greatly empowers the community of Generation Z which will allow them to light the torch for the future.

