



Teenage Psychology of Generation Z

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Abstract

Generation Z (born ca. 1997–2012) has grown up as fully digital natives and faces unique psychological and social conditions. This paper synthesizes recent global research on Gen Z adolescents' psychological traits, digital behavior, socio-cultural influences, and mental health trends. Data from peer-reviewed studies and large surveys show that Gen Z teens experience unprecedented levels of stress, anxiety, and loneliness, in part due to constant digital engagement. At the same time, they exhibit positive trends such as openness to therapy, social activism, and value-driven identities. We employ a mixed-methods approach, reviewing qualitative evidence (literature, expert interviews) and quantitative data (global surveys, mental health reports) to identify key factors affecting Gen Z well-being. Our findings highlight (1) distinctive personality and social values (collaborative, pragmatic, diversity-valuing); (2) pervasive digital connectivity with associated FOMO and social comparison stress; (3) elevated rates of anxiety and depression relative to past cohorts; and (4) strong engagement in social causes (e.g. climate activism) even while reporting eco-anxiety. In discussing these challenges and strengths, we offer practical recommendations for educators, parents, policymakers, and mental health professionals: fostering digital resilience, open communication about mental health, and support systems tailored to Gen Z's needs. Our comprehensive review underscores that understanding Gen Z's complex psychology is critical for guiding them toward well-being in a rapidly changing world.

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Introduction

Generation Z (Gen Z) — commonly defined as those born roughly between 1997 and 2012 — is the first cohort to reach adolescence fully immersed in ubiquitous digital technology. They are often characterized as digital natives who “grew up in a world where everything is connected to the internet”. This constant connectivity has shaped Gen Z’s development in unprecedented ways. Researchers note that Gen Z’s worldview has been framed by rapid technological change, global connectivity, and exposure to worldwide events (economic shifts, climate change, and the COVID-19 pandemic). Psychologically, Gen Z has been described as pragmatic, collaborative, and value-driven, with strong emphasis on diversity and social justice. At the same time, multiple studies signal a generation-wide mental health challenge: Gen Z teens report anxiety and depression at rates far above those of previous cohorts.

Multiple sources document rising stress and mental health issues among today’s youth. For example, US national data show adolescent depression rates nearly doubled from 2009 to 2019. A recent literature review found “anxiety is substantially more prevalent in Generation Z...than in any of the past three generations”. Gen Zers themselves express high concern: 84% believe mental health is a national crisis and Gen Z youth are “over 80% more likely to report dealing with anxiety or depression compared to older generations”. Such findings suggest that Gen Z teens are experiencing unique pressures. Many experts attribute this rise to factors like academic pressure, social media exposure, and socio-political instability.

Given these distinctive characteristics, this paper addresses key aspects of Gen Z teen psychology: their characteristic traits, digital behaviors, social/cultural influences, and mental health trends. We review recent global studies, peer-reviewed literature, and survey data to describe how Gen Z’s psychological profile differs from Millennials or Gen X. We also highlight both the challenges they face (e.g. anxiety, FOMO, digital dependence) and their strengths (openness to mental health help, civic engagement). Finally, we offer practical recommendations for supporting Gen Z from the perspectives of educators, parents, policymakers, and mental health professionals. Our interdisciplinary approach synthesizes

qualitative narratives and quantitative findings to provide a comprehensive picture of Gen Z adolescent psychology in a global context.

Literature Review

Defining Generation Z and Core Traits

Scholars generally mark the start of Gen Z around 1997. Some variation exists, but we adopt the Pew Research definition (born 1997–2012). Gen Z is noted for being highly diverse demographically (racially, ethnically, culturally) and inclusive of gender and sexual identities. Educational and media environments have emphasized authenticity and social justice; accordingly, Gen Zers are described as caring about others and seeking community. Stanford research characterizes them as “self-driven, collaborative, and diverse-minded” who value flexibility, authenticity, and pragmatic problem-solving. They tend to be independent and entrepreneurial, but also collective in outlook. For example, a Stanford psychologist notes Gen Z youth often focus on making a difference together: they strive for a diverse community and show concern for inherited issues like climate change, while remaining pragmatic about solutions.

Digital Behavior and its Psychological Impact

Technology use is a defining aspect of Gen Z psychology. Nearly all teenagers have constant online access: for instance, 95% of US teens report smartphone access. Current Pew surveys indicate that over 90% of teens go online daily, and almost half are online “almost constantly”. These numbers have roughly doubled since 2014–2015. Gen Z adolescents also spend many hours a day on social platforms: roughly a third use at least one social media site almost constantly. In qualitative interviews, researchers find that Gen Z’s digital habits far exceed those of older generations; teenagers today commonly multitask on multiple devices and platforms simultaneously.

This immersion in digital media has complex psychological effects. On the positive side, social media allows Gen Z to build communities, find like-minded peers, and express identity. As one study notes, social media use can help young people connect and express themselves: many Gen Z respondents feel it makes them more creative and connected. Online platforms have provided support networks that are especially valuable for marginalized youth. However, this connectivity

also brings risks. Gen Z social media use is strongly associated with “fear of missing out” (FoMO): the compulsion to stay continuously updated and connected. FoMO is linked to anxiety and reduced well-being. One large-scale study notes that “excessive screen time and the constant need to stay updated” (i.e. FoMO) correlates with declines in Gen Z well-being. Indeed, Gen Z teens frequently report anxiety and envy when exposed to curated lives on social media. In one survey, youth cited social media as contributing to poor body image and emotional stress. Psychological research confirms that constant comparison and the pressure to present an ideal self-online can fuel anxiety and reduce self-esteem.

Alarmingly, Gen Z adolescents are “more likely than their older counterparts to report feeling negative mental health effects from social media use”. Factors such as online harassment, cyberbullying, and addictive app designs (with algorithms rewarding engagement by emphasizing sensational or emotionally triggering content) contribute to stress. As one expert notes, current algorithms “drive engagement by exploiting emotion”. Gen Z teens, however, remain prolific social media users; many cannot imagine social or educational life without it. Researchers warn that the generation’s digital dependence could underpin broader mental health trends.

Mental Health Trends

Anxiety, Depression, and Stress

Gen Z adolescents exhibit markedly high rates of anxiety and depression compared to past generations. Multiple sources describe Gen Z as an “anxious generation”: for example, a narrative review found that anxiety prevalence in Gen Z teens is higher than in any of the previous three generations. Population data support this: a U.S. study reported that the proportion of adolescents experiencing depression nearly doubled from 8.1% in 2009 to 15.8% in 2019. In other words, one in seven US teens now meets criteria for depression, up from one in twelve a decade earlier. Parallel trends are documented worldwide (WHO reports ~14% global prevalence of adolescent mental disorders, with anxiety and depression leading).

Survey evidence highlights Gen Z’s high distress levels. In a 2021 global poll, 46% of Gen Z (and 41%

of Millennials) said they felt “stressed or anxious” most or all of the time. A McKinsey study similarly found that 25% of Gen Z respondents reported “more psychological distress,” roughly double the rate in older cohorts. For instance, CDC data show 57% of high-school-age Gen Z girls felt persistently sad or hopeless in 2021, versus 35% of Millennial girls in early 2000s. Gen Z mental health difficulties often coincide with other problems: emergency room visits for self-harm and overdose among teens have surged in recent years, and youth suicide rates have climbed for the first time in decades.

Generational Identity and Well-Being

Despite the challenges, Gen Z also displays positive attitudes toward mental health. They are significantly more willing to talk about and address psychological issues than older groups. In one international survey, Gen Z youth overwhelmingly recognized mental health as a top concern (84% called it a crisis). Gen Zers report being very comfortable seeking help: one report found that 87% are comfortable discussing mental health, and over half have tried professional therapy at some point. A recent review concluded that “Gen Zers are more likely to report feeling negative effects... but they are also more open to seeking therapy and discussing their mental health”. Indeed, about 2 in 5 Gen Z teens now attend therapy regularly, reflecting a cultural shift toward destigmatizing mental health care.

Psychological research identifies both risk and protective factors among Gen Z. Many Gen Z adolescents exhibit internal strengths: high resilience and extraversion predict better well-being. A cross-cultural BMC study found that social support and personal resilience strongly boost Gen Z teens’ well-being. Extraverted Gen Zers tend to engage more socially (even online), which correlates with higher satisfaction. Conversely, high FoMO and problematic screen use were associated with lower well-being. These patterns suggest interventions: bolstering peer and family support, and building coping skills, can mitigate Gen Z’s tech-related stress.

Social and Cultural Influences

Gen Z’s socio-cultural environments shape their psychology. This cohort came of age during major global events: the Great Recession’s aftermath, school shootings,

and climate change activism. Many have experienced the pandemic during formative years, losing traditional schooling and social rituals. These factors contribute to a sense of uncertainty and urgency in Gen Z. For example, climate change poses a looming existential threat; studies show that Gen Z social media users often feel anxious and overwhelmed by climate news – about 69% say climate content on social media makes them anxious (compared to ~46% of Gen X). Paradoxically, Gen Z is also the most climate-active: roughly one-third took climate action (donations, protests, volunteering) in a recent year, far above older adults. This reflects a trait of Gen Z: they respond to concerns with engagement, consistent with their collective mindset.

Cultural diversity and inclusion shape Gen Z values. Growing up with more multicultural influences, they generally embrace equality and social justice. Many report being comfortable challenging traditional norms (gender, sexuality, race) and expect institutions to do so too. Educational influences often emphasize social-emotional learning; peer culture rewards activism. This fosters high engagement but can also create pressure to “make a difference.” Additionally, Gen Z is heavily influenced by global media and can be cynical about traditional structures: distrust of authority and a sense of alienation have been noted. Some analysts label them “the loneliest generation,” partly due to the fragmentation of social ties through digital communication.

Key Challenges and Strengths

Challenges: The literature converges on several key psychological challenges for Gen Z adolescents. Foremost is the mental health crisis: high anxiety, depression, and emotional distress often linked to constant social media exposure. Fear of Missing Out, cyberbullying, and sleep disruption from screen time are identified stressors. Social disconnection is another issue: even though Gen Z is hyper-connected online, many feel isolated in person. Stanford researchers note Gen Z young adults report lower overall happiness and are “hesitant about interacting with one another” in our polarized, online world. This social withdrawal may underlie rising loneliness and mental health symptoms. Academically, Gen Z teens face intense pressure, competitive college environments, and uncertainty about future jobs which can

heighten stress.

Strengths: Importantly, Gen Z also shows positive trends. They are more open to mental health care than previous generations. Many Gen Zers actively seek therapy and self-help, and normalize discussing emotional struggles. Activism is a generational strength: taking action on issues like climate change or equity seems to give many youth a sense of agency. Their adaptability to technology means they can leverage apps and online communities for support – indeed, Gen Z is more likely than older adults to use digital wellness tools and teletherapy. Personality-wise, this cohort is pragmatic and solution-focused, which can help them cope. A portion are resilient: surveys find that their openness and support networks can buffer stress. In sum, while Gen Z faces unprecedented pressures, they also demonstrate resilience, creativity, and willingness to address problems directly.

Methodology

This study used a mixed-methods approach combining systematic literature review with analysis of existing survey data. First, we conducted a comprehensive literature search in databases (e.g. PsycINFO, PubMed, Scopus) for articles on “Generation Z”, “adolescent mental health”, “social media”, etc., with a focus on publications since 2020. We included peer-reviewed studies, public health reports (WHO, UNICEF, CDC), and reputable surveys (Pew Research, McKinsey, Deloitte, Gallup). Second, we performed a qualitative content analysis of the identified sources. Key themes (digital behavior, mental health trends, socio-cultural factors) were extracted and synthesized. Third, we analyzed quantitative findings from large-scale surveys and studies. For example, we compared prevalence data from CDC Youth Risk Surveys and UNICEF youth surveys. Finally, expert perspectives were integrated by reviewing interviews and reports (e.g. Stanford research news) to contextualize findings. No new human subjects data were collected; instead, this is an integrative review and secondary analysis.

Throughout, we cited only high-quality sources: for definition consistency, we adopted Pew’s Gen Z boundaries. The analysis identifies both patterns (from quantitative results) and explanatory factors (from qualitative sources). This hybrid method allows a broad

yet detailed portrait of Gen Z teen psychology.

Analysis / Findings

Digital Connectivity and Behavior

Our analysis confirms that Gen Z's daily life is dominated by digital media. Nearly all Gen Z teens use smartphones and have round-the-clock internet access. Compared to older cohorts, Gen Z adolescents spend more time alone online and much less in face-to-face interaction. In one global survey, 92% of U.S. teens used online services daily, and about 45% reported being online "almost constantly". This constant connectivity influences their cognitive and social patterns. For instance, academic and social tasks are often multitasked with social media streams, which may reduce attention spans and increase FOMO (fear of missing out).

Social media apps are central to Gen Z's socialization. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat are used by the majority of teens; around 58% of US teens use TikTok daily, and half use Instagram or Snapchat every day. This high usage correlates with mixed psychological effects. Positively, many Gen Z teens report that online communities help them express identity and find peer support – for example, minority youth often rely on social media for connection. As one source observes, social media "can build communities around creative output," which some adolescents find uplifting. Tech-savvy Gen Z also uses wellness apps more than older adults, indicating a proactive stance to mental health.

However, our findings underscore the negative impact of digital dependency. High-profile surveys report that Gen Zers are especially prone to negative feelings from social media. One McKinsey study found Gen Z is "more likely than other generations to cite negative feelings about social media," and these youths also reported poorer mental health. Interviewees in various studies expressed anxiety and loneliness exacerbated by constant online comparison. In short, the digital environment acts as a double-edged sword: it provides connectivity and information (useful for activism and awareness), but also exposes teens to relentless social comparison, cyberbullying, and addictive feedback loops. These factors contribute to pervasive FoMO, as younger people feel compelled to stay continuously plugged

in lest they "miss out" on social events or peer activities.

Psychological Traits and Identity

Gen Z's psychological profile includes several noteworthy traits. Both qualitative and quantitative sources describe Gen Z as highly self-reliant yet team-oriented. They crave authenticity and purpose in their work and relationships. The generation tends to be skeptical of traditional authority but optimistic about personal agency. For example, many Gen Z teens believe their actions can impact social issues; UNICEF reports that one-third want a leading role in helping peers cope with stress and anxiety.

Personality research, though still emerging for this cohort, suggests typical Gen Z adolescents score relatively high on extraversion and openness (relative to older cohorts). Indeed, the BMC study we reviewed found extraversion positively predicted well-being: teens who are outgoing and social, even if mostly online, reported greater life satisfaction. Gen Zers also appear more externally expressive, often using social media as a stage for identity exploration. Traits like conscientiousness and agreeableness can buffer stress if they translate into strong social bonds. One study found that Gen Z members with high narcissism were more prone to social media addiction and lower self-esteem, illustrating how personality interacts with digital habits.

In terms of generational identity, research indicates Gen Z teens see themselves as part of a cohort with shared values. They are described as extremely diverse and inclusive, often embracing causes of equity. This contrasts with the slightly more individualistic "Millennial" stereotype. Paradoxically, some studies hint Gen Z feel less personally connected despite being socially conscious. Stanford's research suggests young adults worry that others don't want close connection, which undermines their happiness. So while Gen Z teenagers desire community and purpose, their medium of interaction (screens) can hamper deep social bonds.

Mental Health Patterns and Trends

The convergence of these factors is evident in Gen Z's mental health statistics. As one international review summarized: "Gen Z has the highest levels of anxiety

and depression of any generation”. Our analysis of recent data confirms alarming trends. According to CDC youth surveys, about 42% of Gen Z high-schoolers in 2021 reported prolonged feelings of sadness or hopelessness – nearly half again as high as the rate among similar- aged Millennials in the early 2000s. U.S. national surveys of adolescents reveal large increases in suicidal ideation and self-harm over the past decade.

Worldwide, similar patterns emerge. The World Health Organization notes that about 14% of 10–19-year-olds globally have a diagnosable mental health condition. Anxiety disorders are the most common, affecting roughly 5–6% of older teens, with depression affecting about 3–4%. Many experts consider this a global crisis: in late 2023 UNICEF and partners reported that 6 in 10 Gen Z youth feel overwhelmed by bad news and world events, and only about half know where to seek help for mental health issues. These high distress levels are especially pronounced in subgroups: gender minorities, sexual minorities, and racial/ethnic minorities in Gen Z report the highest rates of anxiety and depression.

It is important to interpret these trends carefully. Researchers caution that Gen Z’s willingness to report problems may partly reflect reduced stigma. Indeed, surveys show Gen Z is far more comfortable discussing mental health openly. Thus the apparent spike in issues may combine real increases with greater reporting. Nevertheless, the consensus is that Gen Z’s mental health burden is serious. Contributing factors include not only social media stress, but also academic pressure, societal uncertainty, and (for some) economic hardship. During the COVID-19 pandemic, isolation and missed school accelerated anxiety trends.

On the positive side, not all Gen Z teens suffer severe problems. The resilient subset of Gen Z gains from strong peer networks and supportive families. Studies highlight that social support (from friends, family, mentors) is a powerful protective factor. Many Gen Z youth develop coping strategies (e.g. mindfulness apps, peer support) that help them manage stress. Also, unlike earlier generations, they are far more likely to seek therapy or counseling. One report found 87% of Gen Zers feel comfortable discussing

mental health, and over half have used professional services. This openness can mitigate long- term issues, indicating that, with proper support, Gen Z may avoid some negative trajectories that plagued earlier anxious cohorts.

Discussion

Our review reveals that Generation Z teens stand at an intersection of rapid technological change and cultural shifts. The evidence suggests constant digital engagement shapes much of Gen Z psychology: it amplifies their connectivity and access to information, but also heightens their anxiety and loneliness. For example, the pervasive use of social media provides a sense of community but also imposes unrealistic social comparisons. These dual effects help explain why Gen Z reports both higher distress and greater mental health awareness than older groups. In contrast, Millennials grew up with the internet but not with smartphones from birth; Gen Xers and Boomers experienced their youth largely offline. For Gen Z, social media has always been a lens through which social reality is filtered, making them uniquely susceptible to its emotional swings.

A central theme is FoMO and digital dependency. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z’s leisure and social life are intertwined with screens. The literature indicates this leads to a cycle: social media use triggers FoMO and anxiety, which leads to more checking of devices, further feeding stress. This cycle may underlie some of the increases in anxiety disorders seen in youth epidemiology. Notably, one study found that even subclinical insomnia and attention problems rose in parallel with smartphone adoption. However, it is also true that Gen Z uses online tools for coping, such as mental health apps. The McKinsey report highlights that Gen Z is more likely to use digital mental health programs than older adults. Thus technology is both a source of stress and a potential support platform for them.

Another major factor is social context and global stressors. Gen Z has been raised in an era of heightened social consciousness. On one hand, their engagement in social causes (climate marches, social justice campaigns) can foster purpose and community. On the other hand, constant exposure to crises (news of climate disasters, pandemics, political turmoil) contributes

to chronic stress. The UNICEF report notes that 6 in 10 feel overwhelmed by news and events. This “headline anxiety” is relatively unique to this generation because of social media’s relentless news cycle. By contrast, older generations had more limited news exposure as kids.

Importantly, Gen Z’s generational identity appears to confer both vulnerabilities and resources. Their value on diversity and justice means they may experience cognitive dissonance or frustration when the real world falls short of ideals. Yet it also means they are more likely to challenge stigmas and seek support. The “openness to therapy” is a notable positive trend, which may not have an analog in Baby Boomers or Gen X. This generational shift suggests that mental health professionals and educators will find Gen Z receptive to interventions, provided they are culturally competent and action-oriented. For example, counselors who incorporate Gen Z’s concerns about identity and social justice may be especially effective.

In sum, while parallels exist (adolescence is always a time of emotional turmoil), Gen Z’s circumstances are novel. The interplay of digital saturation and heightened global awareness creates new stress profiles. Nevertheless, there is opportunity: their comfort with technology and activism can be harnessed for health promotion. For instance, apps and online peer groups could leverage Gen Z’s digital fluency to deliver support. Likewise, their desire for community suggests that school and youth programs which build connectedness could be very beneficial.

Recommendations

Based on our findings, we offer practical recommendations for key stakeholders working with Gen Z teens:

- **Educators and School Leaders:** Integrate social-emotional learning (SEL) and digital literacy into curricula. Encourage open discussions about mental health and media use in classrooms. Schools should recognize the high stress levels Gen Z students face (nearly 74% of young people surveyed believe schools should help manage student stress). Thus, schools can provide counseling resources, train teachers to spot distress, and offer workshops on coping

with FoMO and anxiety. Promote collaborative projects to satisfy Gen Z’s community ethos.

- **Parents and Families:** Foster supportive communication about stress and technology. Given the link between parental support and teen well-being, parents should model healthy digital habits (e.g. screen-free family time) and be open about mental health. They can set reasonable limits on screen time while also encouraging offline hobbies. Importantly, validate teens’ feelings about world events and help them contextualize news to reduce overwhelm. Parents should also watch for signs of distress and seek professional help if needed; encourage therapy as a normal resource, which Gen Z teens are generally willing to do.
- **Policymakers and Community Leaders:** Invest in youth mental health infrastructure. The evidence suggests Gen Z needs easier access to care: only ~52% feel confident finding support. Policies should fund school counselors, youth mental health clinics, and online mental health platforms. Given Gen Z’s constant social media use, regulations could encourage platform designs that protect teens (e.g. privacy protections, age-appropriate content filters, screen-time reminders). Policymakers should also support programs for civic engagement, as activism outlets can boost teen resilience. Finally, adhere to WHO guidance by ensuring safe, supportive environments for adolescents (including anti-bullying programs, youth centers, and emergency hotlines).
- **Mental Health Professionals:** Adapt approaches to Gen Z’s needs and preferences. Therapists should incorporate technology (telehealth, apps) and cultural competency (sensitivity to diversity, gender/sexual identities). Since Gen Z often ties self-worth to social impact, therapy may focus on empowering them to find meaning while managing stress. Clinicians should be aware of Gen Z’s digital life: for example, consider discussing social media habits as part of therapy. Leverage Gen Z’s openness by creating peer-led support groups or gamified cognitive-behavioral tools. Training for providers should include understanding Gen Z values (collaboration, social justice); for instance, using group therapy or community projects can resonate with them.

Mental health campaigns must destigmatize care further – highlighting that seeking help is a strength aligns with Gen Z's pragmatic outlook.

- **Youth and Peers:** Empower Gen Z themselves to contribute to solutions. A surprising 1 in 3 Gen Z youth want to lead efforts in peer support and stress management. Educational and community programs can engage teens in designing mental health initiatives (e.g. peer counseling, social media campaigns promoting well-being). Encouraging youth leadership harnesses their activism and can improve uptake of positive messages within this cohort.

These recommendations, grounded in current data and Gen Z voices, aim to support this generation's psychological health holistically.

Conclusion

Generation Z teenagers occupy a unique psychological landscape. Their identity is forged by the first fully digital adolescence and exposure to rapid social change. This has yielded notable strengths—digital savvy, progressive values, and mental health awareness—but also significant challenges, chiefly skyrocketing anxiety, depression, and social isolation. Our review of recent studies shows that Gen Z has the highest reported levels of psychological distress of any American generation yet, driven in large part by social media and world stressors. At the same time, Gen Z is remarkably open to seeking help and activism; they are redefining norms around therapy and community involvement. Going forward, it is critical to address Gen Z teens' needs proactively. Education systems, families, healthcare, and policy must adapt to this generation's realities. That means incorporating technology judiciously, fostering resilience and empathy, and amplifying Gen Z's own positive initiatives. By understanding the depth of Gen Z's struggles – and their unique capacities – stakeholders can tailor support that helps these young people thrive. Future research should continue to track Gen Z's evolving mental health and identity formation as they transition into adulthood. Ultimately, acknowledging both the vulnerabilities and strengths of Gen Z psychology will be key to guiding this generation toward a healthy, empowered future.

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