

## SOCIAL MEDIA, GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES AND DIGITAL WELL-BEING: NEW SOCIAL CHALLENGES IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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**ABSTRACT:** *The paper examines the psychosocial effects of social media use among young people, emphasizing intergenerational differences in communication, emotional expression, and digital well-being. The research is based on an online survey conducted within the Erasmus+ Blended Intensive Programme “The impact of social media addiction on young people” in May 2025, involving students from five European countries. The results show that participants from Generation Z spend an average of one to five hours per day on social media (mainly TikTok and Instagram), primarily for entertainment and social interaction. Respondents report common experiences of anxiety, comparison, and difficulties in expressing emotions online, while also demonstrating awareness of the need for digital balance. The findings highlight the necessity of interdisciplinary approaches to address the social and emotional challenges of the digital age.*

**Key word:** *social media; digital well-being; generational differences; digital communication.*

### Introduction

In the digital era, social media has become one of the most influential social spaces where identities are formed, relationships are built, and patterns of communication are shaped. It is not merely a technological tool but a social environment that structures people’s daily routines, emotions, and interpersonal connections across the globe. Particularly sensitive to this influence is the younger generation, growing up in conditions of constant connectivity, continuous notifications, and an ever-present need for digital visibility.

The transformation introduced by social media affects not only individual behavior but also broader social and intergenerational dynamics. Generations that grew up before the digital revolution tend to perceive online communication as an external extension of reality, whereas Generation Z and the youngest representatives of Generation Alpha experience it as a natural continuation of real life. This difference creates a kind of *communication gap* between generations - not only in the way information is exchanged, but also in the ways emotions are expressed, trust is built, and identities are constructed.

Over the past decade, numerous studies have emphasized both the positive and negative effects of social media. On the one hand, these platforms

create new opportunities for social connection, self-expression, and participation in communities that transcend geographic and cultural boundaries. On the other hand, they are associated with a number of psychological risks such as anxiety, social comparison, fear of missing out (FOMO), reduced concentration, and emotional exhaustion (Przybylski et al., 2013; Twenge & Campbell, 2018).

In this context, the concept of digital well-being has gained growing importance. It draws attention to the need for conscious and balanced use of digital technologies that support, rather than undermine, personal and social development. Recognizing the fine line between *connectedness* and *dependency* has thus become one of the most pressing challenges of the twenty-first century.

The present paper explores the psychosocial effects of social media use among young people, emphasizing intergenerational differences in communication, emotional expression, and the perception of digital well-being. The research is based on a survey conducted within the Erasmus+ Blended Intensive Programme “*The Impact of Social Media Addiction on Young People*” (Alba Iulia, Romania, May 2025), involving students from five European countries.

The main objective of the study is to identify trends in young people’s digital behavior and to

analyze their emotional experiences related to the influence of social media. The leading research questions are:

1. How do different generations perceive and use social media?
2. What psychological and social effects are observed in cases of excessive social media use?
3. To what extent are young people aware of the need for digital balance, and what strategies do they apply to achieve it?

Addressing these questions has practical significance not only for the social sciences but also for education and social work, which must adapt to the new realities of digital communication.

### Theoretical Framework

Understanding social media as both a social and psychological phenomenon requires an interdisciplinary approach that integrates perspectives from sociology, psychology, communication studies, and education. The present study is structured around three conceptual dimensions: intergenerational differences in digital behavior, transformations of communication and identity in online environments, and psychological effects of excessive social media use.

#### *Intergenerational Differences in Digital Behavior*

The generational theory formulated by Strauss and Howe (1991) offers an analytical framework for examining the social and cultural characteristics of distinct age cohorts. Each generation, they argue, is shaped by a specific historical and technological context that defines its values, motivations, and modes of interaction.

In the digital era, these differences acquire a new dimension. The Millennials (1981–1996) grew up during the transition from an analog to a digital world and often demonstrate a more critical attitude toward technology, whereas Generation Z (1997–2012) represents the first fully “digital-native” cohort that perceives the Internet and social media as an inherent part of everyday life.

The youngest group, Generation Alpha (after 2013), is growing up in a world where artificial intelligence and algorithmic mediation are already deeply embedded in daily routines.

According to Marc Prensky (2001), this divide can be described through the concepts of digital natives and digital immigrants. The former intuitively adopt technology and integrate online environments into their everyday behavior, while the latter adapt gradually and often experience uncertainty or skepticism toward them. This divide helps to explain part of the communication gap between generations - such as the misunderstanding of digital codes, emojis, slang, and the dynamics of online interaction.

#### *Digital Communication, Identity, and Social Presence*

Social media not only transforms the way information is exchanged but also reshapes how individuals construct identity and belonging. Classical communication models, such as the one developed by Shannon and Weaver (1949), conceptualize communication as a linear process of message transmission from sender to receiver. In the digital environment, however, this model has evolved into a multidirectional, dynamic, and interactive system in which participants simultaneously create, disseminate, and interpret content.

According to Short, Williams, and Christie (1976), the concept of *social presence* describes the degree to which people perceive others as real and emotionally accessible in digital communication. Reduced social presence-for instance, in text-based interactions-can lead to misunderstandings and lower empathy, whereas visual and audio elements (video, emojis, live conversations) enhance the sense of connection.

At the same time, Walther (1996) developed the so-called *hyperpersonal model* of computer-mediated communication, according to which individuals often form more intense emotional bonds online than in real life, precisely because they can control how they present themselves. This explains why social media can simultaneously create a sense of closeness and generate emotional tension when expectations are not met.

Sherry Turkle (2011) further argues that digital communication produces an “*illusion of connection*”, in which people may feel socially active while, in reality, experiencing emotional isolation. This duality-being simultaneously connected and lonely-characterizes contemporary digital culture.

### *Psychological Effects and Digital Well-Being*

In recent years, growing attention has been paid to the psychological consequences of excessive social media use. Authors such as Twenge and Campbell (2018) associate high screen time with anxiety, loneliness, and lower self-esteem.

The phenomenon of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), described by Przybylski et al. (2013), refers to the fear of missing important events or experiences, which encourages constant checking of social networks and disrupts rest and concentration.

Psychiatrist Anna Lembke (2021) introduces the concept of the *dopamine cycle*, describing how social media activates the brain's reward system in a manner similar to other forms of addiction. This creates a pattern of alternating pleasure and emptiness that sustains constant engagement and the desire for new stimuli.

In response to these challenges, the ideas of digital hygiene and digital well-being have emerged—concepts promoting the conscious and balanced use of technology. Cal Newport (2019) proposes the notion of digital minimalism—the deliberate selection of meaningful content and purposeful use of technology that supports focus and emotional stability.

In a broader perspective, Shoshana Zuboff (2019) analyzes social media through the lenses of the *attention economy* and *surveillance capitalism*, emphasizing that users' attention has become the most valuable currency in the digital marketplace. This system encourages prolonged online engagement and fosters dependence through a continuous flow of emotionally stimulating content.

Within this context, *digital well-being* can be regarded as both a social and ethical challenge—a striving to regain control over one's attention, time, and mental energy.

### **Methodology**

The purpose of the study is to analyze the psychosocial effects of social media use among young people from different European countries, with a focus on intergenerational differences, emotional experiences, and awareness of digital balance. The approach is empirical, based on mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative),

allowing both statistical generalization and interpretation of individual attitudes.

The survey was conducted in May 2025 as part of the Erasmus+ Blended Intensive Programme “The Impact of Social Media and the Digital Environment on Young People,” implemented at *1 Decembrie 1918 University of Alba Iulia, Romania*.

The study involved 26 respondents from five European countries—Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, Croatia, and Italy. Most participants were university students aged between 19 and 25, corresponding to Generation Z (1997–2012) according to the classification of Howe and Strauss (1991). The average age was 22 years; 73% were female and 27% male. All participants were active social media users who engaged with digital platforms daily.

Data were collected via an online questionnaire created in Google Forms. The survey consisted of 22 questions, divided into three main sections:

1. Demographic and generational characteristics – gender, age, country, status, self-identification by generation;
2. Digital behavior and communication – preferred platforms, time spent on social media, main purposes of use, and self-perceived intergenerational differences in communication;
3. Emotional and psychological aspects – experiences of anxiety, social comparison, difficulties in emotional expression online, strategies for digital balance, and personal advice to younger users.

The questionnaire included both closed- and open-ended items to facilitate quantitative analysis and qualitative interpretation. Participants completed the survey anonymously after being informed of the study's aims and voluntary nature.

Data were processed using Microsoft Excel, applying basic descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages). The open-ended responses were analyzed through qualitative thematic analysis, identifying recurring themes and emotional attitudes.

The research adhered to principles of academic ethics and data protection. No sensitive or identifying information was collected, and all findings are presented exclusively for scholarly purposes, ensuring respondent anonymity.

## Results

### *Demographic Profile of Participants*

The survey included 26 respondents from five European countries—Romania (4%), Bulgaria (38%), Croatia (15%), Poland (35%), and Italy (8%). Women predominated (73%), while men represented 27% of the sample. Almost all participants (88%) identified themselves as members of Generation Z (1997–2012), with only 12% belonging to the Millennial generation (1981–1996).

This confirms that the study primarily reflects the attitudes of young people born and socialized in the digital environment.

### *Social Media Use and Time Engagement*

The most popular platforms among participants were Instagram (42%) and TikTok (31%), followed by Facebook (15%), YouTube (8%), and X / Twitter (4%). These results align with global trends showing the dominance of visual and video-oriented platforms among young users.

In terms of time spent on social media, more than half (53%) reported spending 1–3 hours per day, while 31% spent 3–5 hours daily. Only 8% indicated using social media for more than 5 hours per day, and the same proportion for less than one hour.

These findings suggest that although most respondents do not spend their entire day online, social media occupies a substantial and structured part of their daily routines.

### *Motives for Use and Social Perception*

The main reason for using social media was entertainment (49%), followed by social interaction (27%) and information seeking (19%). Only 5% of participants mentioned self-expression or photo sharing as a primary motivation.

When asked whether older generations understand the way young people communicate digitally, 46% answered “Yes,” 42% said “*Sometimes*,” and 12% felt “Not understood.” This indicates the presence of intergenerational differences that serve as natural cultural boundaries rather than sources of conflict in communication practices.

### *Psychological and Emotional Experiences*

Almost all participants reported experiences related to digital tension. Among the respondents, 46% stated that they sometimes feel anxious or pressured due to content on social media, and another 46% said this happens rarely. Only 4% reported that they never experience such tension, while another 4% indicated that they feel it frequently.

Regarding social comparison, 50% of respondents admitted that they sometimes compare their lives to those of others, while 39% said they do not, which suggests partial awareness and a certain resilience to social influence.

### *Strategies for Digital Balance and Detox*

An interesting finding concerns participants’ attempts at digital detox. 58% reported having tried to disconnect temporarily from social media (31% frequently, 27% at least once), while 42% have never done so, although some expressed interest in trying. This indicates a growing awareness of the need for rest and control over digital presence.

Among the strategies for maintaining digital balance, 50% reported turning off app notifications, 27% limit their screen time, and 23% do not apply any specific strategies. These findings reveal an initial but positive tendency toward conscious self-regulation and the development of digital hygiene.

### *Qualitative Insights from Open Responses*

In the open-ended questions, participants often mentioned the need for more personal contact and emotional authenticity. Typical pieces of advice they would give to younger generations included:

“Don’t spend too much time on social media.”

“Remember that what you see online is not always real.”

“Be careful what you share and with whom.”

These statements demonstrate critical awareness and an understanding of the risks associated with digital culture, even though the participants themselves remain highly engaged within it.

## Discussion

The results of the survey depict a complex yet revealing picture of the digital habits of the young people who took part in the study. They confirm the tendency that Generation Z constructs its social relationships, identity, and daily routines within a deeply digitalized context. This generation does not make a clear distinction between “online” and “offline” realities - the boundaries between them blur into a hybrid communication space that is simultaneously accessible, intense, and emotionally charged.

Additional empirical evidence that complements the present findings can be found in several recent studies by Mucea, which explore how Generation Z develops attitudes and habits in digital environments. A study on online absenteeism among adolescents shows that habits formed on social media negatively influence participation in digital classes, revealing that digital well-being depends not only on access to technology but also on adapting the educational environment to the expectations of Generation Z. The dependence on digital devices intensified during the pandemic due to online learning formats (Mucea, 2023). Longitudinal evidence from graduates of a dual vocational school further illustrates how a cohort educated largely online during the Covid-19 period built its career expectations and negotiated entry into the labour market, showing that intensive exposure to digital learning reshapes both professional aspirations and perceived opportunities (Mucea, 2022). At the same time, a survey among working students employed in a multinational company highlights specific values of Generation Z - strong expectations regarding salary, preference for flexible scheduling, and emphasis on health-related benefits - all of which reflect a desire for work-life balance and well-being in increasingly digitalised workplaces (Mucea & Pătru a, 2024). Together, these findings provide a broader empirical foundation for understanding how online platforms, educational practices, and labour market expectations intersect with young people’s pursuit of digital well-being in the 21st century.

### *Intergenerational Barriers as a Social Challenge*

The fact that almost half of the participants (46%) believe that older generations do not fully

understand their way of digital communication corresponds to Prensky’s (2001) distinction between digital natives and digital immigrants. For Generation Z, digital communication is not an “alternative” but a natural language of socialization. In contrast, older generations often perceive digital technologies as tools rather than as a social environment. This difference generates disparities in communication styles, in the understanding of emotional cues, and in the sense of closeness.

From a sociological perspective, these differences represent not so much a conflict as a cultural transition - a paradigm shift in which virtual communication becomes a new form of social capital. As Sherry Turkle (2011) notes, digital communication creates an “illusion of connection,” where one can be “always available,” but not necessarily “emotionally present.” This captures the tension between connectedness and isolation that young people experience on a daily basis.

### *Psychological Effects: Anxiety, Comparison and Digital Fatigue*

The data indicate that over 90% of participants have experienced anxiety, pressure, or tension related to social media content to varying degrees. Almost half (46%) said this happens “sometimes,” and another 46% said “rarely,” revealing a high baseline sensitivity to digital stimuli, even when users perceive themselves as in control.

These findings correspond to the concept of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) proposed by Przybylski et al. (2013), according to which constant access to information and social comparison generates anxiety about exclusion and leads to compulsive checking of notifications.

At the same time, the tendency toward social comparison - acknowledged by half of the respondents - can be interpreted through the lens of Zuboff’s (2019) “attention economy,” in which platforms encourage continuous self-comparison to maintain user engagement.

The accumulation of anxiety, inadequacy, and the constant need for validation through likes or comments supports Anna Lembke’s (2021) notion of the dopamine cycle - a process of alternating pleasure and emotional depletion characteristic of behavioral addictions. Although the young participants demonstrate a certain level of

awareness, their digital habits remain closely tied to algorithms designed to stimulate consumption through micro-doses of pleasure and social recognition.

### *Awareness and the Strive for Digital Balance*

A positive aspect of the results is that more than half (58%) of the participants have already attempted digital detox, and half apply digital hygiene strategies such as turning off notifications (50%) and limiting screen time (27%). This suggests the emergence of self-regulation and critical awareness toward one's own digital behavior.

This trend aligns with Cal Newport's (2019) concept of *digital minimalism*, which advocates intentional and mindful technology use for the sake of personal well-being. It also reflects the formation of a new kind of digital ethics - a pursuit of balance between connection and self-preservation.

Some of the open-ended responses, such as "*Don't spend too much time online*" or "*Remember that not everything on the Internet is real*," suggest that young people are beginning to perceive social media not only as a communication tool but also as a potential source of risk requiring critical thinking. This internal ambivalence - simultaneous attachment and need for distance - can be interpreted as a sign of emerging digital maturity.

### *Educational and Social Dimensions*

The findings confirm that digital well-being should be regarded not merely as a matter of personal choice but as a social competence that requires support through education and social work. Educational institutions thus have a dual role: on the one hand, to develop digital skills, and on the other, to promote critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and self-reflection in online environments.

According to Rheingold (2012), the future will favor individuals who use technology consciously and responsibly, rather than those who simply possess more of it. In this sense, social media also represent a field of social work - a space where prevention of digital dependence, psychoeducational interventions, and the development of personal resources can be effectively implemented.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The exploration of social media as part of the social and psychological reality of young people reveals a complex picture of interrelated effects-ranging from opportunities for communication, self-expression, and social participation to risks associated with anxiety, dependency, and loss of concentration. The findings of the conducted study confirm that social media is not merely a tool for sharing information but a comprehensive social environment in which identity, belonging, and emotional bonds are constructed.

Generation Z demonstrates high digital competence and adaptability, yet it also appears vulnerable to cognitive overload, social comparison, and difficulties in self-regulation. This duality-between freedom and dependence-defines a new type of social dynamic in which digital skills must be complemented by emotional balance, empathy, and critical thinking. Intergenerational differences in the perception of online communication manifest themselves not only at the technical but also at the cultural level: while older generations tend to approach digital interaction instrumentally, young people view it as inseparable from personal and social self-expression.

The psychological effects of social media use prove to be ambivalent. On the one hand, excessive exposure leads to anxiety, FOMO (fear of missing out), emotional fatigue, and social comparison; on the other, social platforms create spaces for self-expression, mutual support, and a sense of belonging. This dual role of the digital environment calls for careful consideration by professionals in social work, psychology, and education.

At the same time, a positive trend toward growing awareness of the need for digital balance is emerging. Increasing numbers of young people are taking steps to limit screen time, disable notifications, or engage in temporary digital detox. This shift indicates the formation of a critical digital culture-one that acknowledges the limits of technological influence and seeks a sustainable balance between connectivity and inner stability.

The results also outline concrete directions for action. In the educational context, it is essential to integrate topics related to digital well-being, ethics, and self-reflection into

curricula. Digital literacy training should go beyond technical skills and encompass the development of socio-emotional competencies such as attention management, empathy, self-regulation, and critical thinking in online environments. In the field of social work, social media can serve as an effective tool for information campaigns and the prevention of digital dependence, as well as for educational activities aimed at recognizing anxiety, social comparison, and digital fatigue. It is especially important to encourage intergenerational dialogue on digital culture through collaborative projects that bridge stereotypes and foster mutual understanding between age groups.

From a research perspective, the topic holds significant potential for further development. The sample should be expanded and include participants from additional countries to explore

cultural differences in digital habits.

Conducting longitudinal studies would allow the assessment of long-term effects of digital behavior on mental health, social integration, and quality of life.

In conclusion, social media has become a new social space-simultaneously a source of opportunity and vulnerability. Addressing its challenges requires an integrated approach in which education, social work, and scientific research operate in synergy to build a conscious, ethical, and psychologically resilient digital society. The digital environment of the twenty-first century offers unprecedented possibilities for connectivity, but also new forms of dependency. The balance between them can be achieved only through awareness, critical reflection, and shared responsibility-both at the individual and institutional levels.

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