



Social media dynamics and mental health: A sociological investigation into digital social isolation among Gen-Z

Dr. Sabista Anjum

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, K. A. (P.G.) College, Kasganj, Uttar Pradesh, India

Corresponding author: Dr. Sabista Anjum

Received 12 March 2026; Accepted 23 Apr 2026; Published 6 May 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64171/JSRD.5.2.93-99>

Abstract

Generation Z has matured within a social world in which visibility, friendship, identity and leisure are increasingly organized through digital platforms. Yet the expansion of networked contact has coincided with growing concern about loneliness, anxiety, depressive symptoms and weakened face-to-face belonging. Rather than treating social media exposure as a uniform psychological stimulus, it conceptualizes digital social isolation as a relational condition: individuals may be continuously connected, publicly visible and algorithmically addressed while lacking reciprocal recognition, dependable support and meaningful participation in embodied communities. The analysis integrates social capital, symbolic interaction, social comparison, networked individualism and political-economy perspectives. It identifies six linked mechanisms: the substitution of measurable engagement for reciprocal intimacy; algorithmic comparison and status competition; fear of missing out and perpetual availability; displacement of sleep and co-present interaction; cyberbullying and exclusion; and platform infrastructures that monetise attention and emotional arousal. Recent evidence supports a modest overall relationship between social-media use and loneliness but a stronger association for problematic use, while also documenting genuine benefits for friendship, identity exploration, creativity and access to mental-health information. The paper therefore rejects technological determinism and the assumption that screen time alone explains Gen-Z distress. Vulnerability differs by gender, class, location, minority status, prior mental health and the quality of offline relationships. In India, rapid smartphone diffusion exists alongside family change, educational pressure, uneven counselling provision and persistent digital inequalities, making context-sensitive interpretation essential. The paper proposes a multi-level response based on humane platform design, transparent research access, digital-literacy education, community “third spaces,” accessible mental-health services and young people’s participation in governance. Digital well-being, it concludes, depends less on withdrawing Gen-Z from technology than on rebuilding the social conditions in which connection becomes reciprocal, safe and meaningful.

Keywords: Generation Z, Social media, Digital social isolation, Loneliness, Mental health, Social capital

1. Introduction

For Generation Z commonly understood as those born from the late 1990s to the early 2010s social media is not an external technology added to an otherwise complete social life. It is part of the infrastructure through which friendships are maintained, identities are performed, cultural tastes circulate, political opinions are encountered and social approval becomes visible. The smartphone joins home, college, workplace and neighbourhood as a major site of socialisation. Consequently, the question is no longer whether online life is “real.” The more sociologically useful question is what kinds of relationships, hierarchies and emotional obligations platform-mediated life produces.

This issue has acquired urgency because unprecedented connectivity coexists with widespread unease about youth mental health. The U.S. Surgeon General reported that up to 95% of 13–17-year-olds used a social-media platform and more than one-third used social media “almost constantly” (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023) [8]. The same advisory nevertheless cautioned that “social media has the potential to both benefit and harm” young people. The juxtaposition

matters. A deterministic narrative in which more technology mechanically produces more illness cannot explain why one young person finds solidarity, another experiences exclusion, and a third encounters both in the same evening.

The term *digital social isolation* names this paradox. It does not mean merely being physically alone or having few online contacts. It refers to a mismatch between abundant mediated connection and insufficient relational depth, recognition or dependable support. A person may receive messages, views and reactions yet feel unseen; belong to many networks yet lack someone to contact in a crisis; or maintain an attractive public profile while privately experiencing shame and disconnection. Isolation is therefore not simply the absence of interaction but a socially structured deficit in the quality, reciprocity and security of relationships.

Recent data are a good example of this ambivalence. 74% of U.S. teens said social media made them feel connected to friends, 31% felt excluded and 27% felt worse about their own lives in a 2025 survey (Faverio *et al.*, 2025) [4]. Overall, however, a meta-analysis of 59 studies and 81,344 participants showed a small but significant correlation between social media use and loneliness ($r = .16$), and a higher association

between problematic use ($r = .29$) than time spent ($r = .07$) (Feng *et al.*, 2026) [5]. These results suggest that the organisation and meaning of use matter more than a simple count of hours.

The central argument of this paper is that Gen-Z mental health is shaped not by social media alone but by the interaction of platform design, social inequality, cultural expectations and the condition of offline institutions. Social platforms can supplement strong relationships, create counter-publics and provide informational support. They can also intensify status surveillance, commodify attention and displace restorative activities. Digital social isolation emerges when online contact is high in frequency but low in reciprocity, when recognition depends on public metrics, and when weak offline supports leave the individual unusually dependent on platforms for belonging.

2. Objectives and Research Questions

The paper has four objectives: (a) to define digital social isolation sociologically; (b) to identify mechanisms linking social-media dynamics with loneliness and psychological distress among Gen-Z; (c) to examine unequal risks and protective possibilities; and (d) to propose interventions beyond individual “screen-time control.” It addresses the following questions:

- How can persistent online connectivity coexist with subjective loneliness and social isolation?
- Which platform practices and social conditions transform online participation into risk or protection?
- How do gender, class, place, minority status and pre-existing relationships mediate outcomes?
- What responsibilities belong to individuals, families, educational institutions, platforms and the state?

3. Methodology and Scope

This is a critical narrative review and conceptual sociological investigation, not a report of original fieldwork. It synthesises peer-reviewed systematic reviews, meta-analyses, longitudinal and cross-sectional studies, and institutional reports. Sources were selected for direct relevance to adolescents or young adults, social-media practices, loneliness, social isolation, depression, anxiety, sleep or social support. Greater evidentiary weight was assigned to systematic reviews, large samples and studies that distinguished types of use. Institutional reports were used for population context and policy guidance rather than as proof of causation.

The method has limitations. “Gen-Z” spans different developmental stages and is inconsistently defined across studies. Much research uses self-reported screen time and cross-sectional designs. Measures of loneliness, isolation, problematic use and mental health differ, while platform features change faster than academic publication. The evidence base is geographically concentrated in high-income countries. Accordingly, associations are interpreted cautiously, and global findings are not automatically treated as descriptions of Indian youth. The analysis draws on sociological theory to link between the empirical patterns and the institutions, norms and inequalities without making unwarranted causal claims.

4. Conceptualising the connected-yet-isolated generation

4.1 Social isolation, loneliness and digital isolation

Social isolation and loneliness overlap but are not identical. Social isolation concerns the objective structure of relationships the number, frequency, diversity and accessibility of social ties. Loneliness is a subjective perception that actual relationships fall short of desired relationships. A student may have few contacts yet feel content, or hundreds of contacts yet experience acute loneliness. Digital isolation adds a mediated dimension: the user remains technically reachable but experiences low reciprocity, shallow recognition, unstable belonging or exclusion from consequential networks.

This distinction prevents two errors. First, high message volume cannot be assumed to equal social support. A “like” signals attention but rarely entails the obligation, knowledge and trust embedded in a strong tie. Second, online relationships should not be dismissed as unreal. For geographically dispersed friends, disabled youth, LGBTQ+ youth and those with rare interests or stigmatised experiences, digitally mediated communities may provide recognition unavailable locally. The Surgeon General’s advisory notes that social media can provide “community and connection with others who share identities, abilities, and interests” (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023) [8]. The sociological task is thus to identify the circumstances under which digital ties deepen or thin social life.

4.2 Social capital and networked individualism

Social-capital theory distinguishes bonding ties, which offer intimacy and solidarity, from bridging ties, which provide information and access across social differences. Social media dramatically expands bridging possibilities but may not generate equivalent bonding capital. Gen-Z users can maintain large, geographically dispersed networks, but the labour of sustaining them becomes individualised. Each person must continuously post, reply, curate and signal presence to remain visible.

This resembles networked individualism: the individual, rather than the household or stable group, becomes the switching point among multiple specialised networks. Such flexibility expands autonomy, yet it may weaken the certainty of membership. The online user is always connected but must repeatedly prove relevance. Silence becomes ambiguous—perhaps a friend is busy, perhaps an algorithm hid the post, perhaps the group has moved on. The resulting insecurity encourages checking and self-monitoring.

4.3 Symbolic interaction and the quantified self

From a symbolic-interactionist perspective, identity develops through imagined and actual responses of others. Platforms intensify this “looking-glass” process by turning reactions into numbers: followers, views, likes, streaks and shares. These metrics detach approval from a specific relationship and convert it into a public status signal. Users learn not only to present themselves but to anticipate what the platform’s audience and ranking system will reward.

The self becomes simultaneously performer, audience analyst and data object. Carefully edited profiles may produce “context collapse,” in which family, peers, teachers and strangers encounter the same performance. The pressure to appear authentic while remaining attractive, successful and socially active creates emotional contradiction. A post may generate visibility without felt understanding; indeed, greater visibility can increase fear of judgment.

5. Mechanisms producing digital social isolation

5.1 From reciprocal communication to performative connection

Communication nurtures belonging when it involves attention, mutual disclosure and continuity. Platform interaction often compresses these demanding practices into frictionless signals. Reactions maintain ambient awareness but can create an illusion of relational maintenance. When birthdays, achievements and distress disclosures are acknowledged by standardised icons, the network appears active while its capacity for care remains uncertain.

The problem is not brevity itself. A short message between close friends may carry great meaning. Isolation emerges when performative visibility substitutes for reciprocal communication, or when public posting becomes the primary way to request recognition. The user may begin to evaluate relationships through engagement metrics and interpret weak engagement as personal rejection, even though algorithmic distribution not interpersonal intention may explain it.

5.2 Algorithmic comparison and status competition

Social comparison predates digital media, but platforms alter its scale, speed and selectivity. Users compare ordinary moments with others’ curated highlights and encounter beauty, consumption, travel and productivity norms shaped by commercial influence. Recommendation systems repeatedly surface emotionally engaging material, while filters and editing tools make idealised presentation routine. The consequence can be relative deprivation: the feeling of lacking not because one has nothing, but because others appear to possess more valued lives.

These pressures are stratified. Young women and girls may encounter intensified appearance surveillance; young men may confront status and masculinity expectations; lower-income users see lifestyles structurally beyond reach; caste, race, religion, sexuality and disability shape exposure to stereotypes and harassment. Pew’s 2025 survey found that girls more often said social media harmed mental health, sleep and confidence, while also reporting some connective benefits more frequently (Faverio *et al.*, 2025) ^[4]. This duality demonstrates why gender is not merely an individual variable but a system of unequal norms and sanctions.

5.3 Fear of missing out and perpetual availability

Social media converts social absence into observable evidence. Photos reveal gatherings to which one was not invited; message indicators expose delayed replies; disappearing content creates urgency; and streaks turn continuity into obligation. Fear of

missing out is therefore not simply personal insecurity. It is produced through platform affordances that make other people’s activity continuously visible and reward prompt response.

Perpetual availability also changes friendship norms. A delayed reply can be interpreted as indifference, while withdrawing from a platform risks social disappearance. This creates an “autonomy trap”: remaining connected can be exhausting, but disconnecting may jeopardise belonging. Problematic use may result when checking briefly reduces anxiety while reinforcing the expectation of constant checking.

5.4 Displacement of sleep, embodiment and co-presence

Mental health is affected not only by content but by what media use displaces. Late-night scrolling can reduce sleep duration and quality; continuous notifications fragment study and conversation; sedentary use may replace movement; and phone presence can diminish attention during face-to-face interaction. In Pew’s survey, 45% of teens said social media hurt their sleep and 40% said it hurt productivity (Faverio *et al.*, 2025) ^[4]. These pathways are socially consequential because fatigue reduces emotional regulation and participation in school, work, family and community.

Displacement is not inevitable. Online coordination may produce offline meetings, civic action or peer support. The relevant question is whether use complements or substitutes for embodied relations. Active, purposeful communication with known others may strengthen ties; passive, compulsive consumption during time previously devoted to sleep or co-presence is more likely to erode well-being.

5.5 Cyberbullying, exclusion and collapsed boundaries

Digital interaction extends interpersonal conflict beyond the temporal and spatial limits of school or neighbourhood. Harassment can be persistent, searchable and witnessed by a large audience. Exclusion may be communicated indirectly through group images, unanswered messages or removal from chats. Because smartphones travel with the user, there is no assured refuge.

Boundary collapse further exposes young people to adult audiences, commercial persuasion and unwanted content. Marginalised users can find solidarity, but the same visibility can invite targeted abuse. Thus, platform participation may simultaneously reduce identity isolation and increase exposure to hostility. Outcomes depend on moderation, privacy controls, peer norms and institutional response.

5.6 The political economy of attention

An individual-choice model asks why young people fail to exercise self-control. A political-economy approach asks why platforms are designed to maximise time, data extraction and repeated engagement. Infinite scroll, autoplay, personalised recommendations and variable rewards convert attention into revenue. Emotionally arousing content may receive greater circulation because it retains users, not because it contributes to collective well-being.

This business model externalises social costs. Families and schools are expected to manage harms created by systems whose internal data and algorithms remain opaque. Not having access to platform data and transparency has hindered the understanding of the “full scope and scale” of effects (Office

of the Surgeon General, 2023) [8]. Digital isolation is therefore not merely a failure of individual coping; it can be an institutional outcome of environments optimised for engagement rather than care.

Table 1: Social-media dynamics, sociological mechanisms and mental-health implications

Platform dynamic	Sociological mechanism	Isolation and mental-health pathway	Protective condition or response
Performative metrics	Recognition is quantified through likes, views and followers.	Self-worth becomes dependent on public feedback; low engagement may be read as rejection.	Prioritise reciprocal communication and hide or de-emphasise public metrics.
Algorithmic curation	Curated success and beauty norms intensify upward social comparison.	Status anxiety, inadequacy and distorted perceptions of peers' lives may increase.	Recommendation controls, media literacy and diverse representations.
FOMO and perpetual availability	Read receipts, streaks and visible events create expectations of constant responsiveness.	Exclusion becomes observable; withdrawal risks social disappearance and anxiety.	Negotiated response norms, notification boundaries and device-free periods.
Night use and notifications	Platform time displaces sleep, study, movement and face-to-face attention.	Fatigue and fragmented attention reduce emotional regulation and relationship quality.	Sleep-protective defaults, notification pauses and offline routines.
Cyberbullying and context collapse	Conflict persists across audiences, time and settings and can become publicly searchable.	Humiliation, fear, withdrawal and loss of safe social space may follow.	Effective reporting, rapid moderation and accessible institutional support.
Attention economy	Engagement-maximising design transfers social costs to users, families and schools.	Compulsive checking and reduced autonomy can deepen problematic use.	Independent audits, data access for research and safety-by-design regulation.

Note: Author's synthesis of the literature reviewed in this paper

6. Mental-health outcomes and the problem of causality

Recent reviews link problematic social-media use to depression, anxiety, stress, sleep problems and reduced well-being, although the results and directions of the associations are somewhat different (Sala *et al.*, 2024; Shannon *et al.*, 2022). Khalaf *et al.* (2023) [10, 11, 6] have provided evidence that the use of social media has been linked to adolescent depression, and emphasized the need for longitudinal studies because of the prevalence of cross-sectional studies. Valkenburg *et al.* (2022) [14] also indicated the need for a person-centred approach – the average effect could fail to capture interindividual variation. The evidence is mixed for simple exposure effects (Plackett *et al.*, 2023) [9] as is the use and experience of exposure by adolescents in the clinical group versus the non-clinical group, favoring differential patterns of use and more negative experiences in the clinical group (Fassi *et al.*, 2025) [3].

Bidirectionality is central. Social-media dynamics can exacerbate feelings of loneliness, but lonely youth can also use social media more, in different ways, or with a more negative attitude toward social media feedback. Cohort studies also indicate that the negative experiences of online technologies, rather than technology, is especially relevant to loneliness (Matthews *et al.*, 2025) [7]. A 2025 analysis by Smith *et al.* found both social isolation and social-media time associated with depression, but isolation had the substantially larger statistical relationship. The authors cautioned that interventions focused only on abstinence can miss the deeper social conditions producing distress.

The 2026 meta-analysis by Feng *et al.* sharpens this point. The pooled relationship between overall use and loneliness was modest and highly heterogeneous, whereas problematic use

showed a stronger association. Active and passive use, considered as broad categories, were not independently significant in that analysis. The implication is not that platforms are harmless, but that “hours online” is an insufficient sociological measure. Research must examine motives, content, relationships, platform features, time of day and the resources available outside the screen.

Mental-health language also requires care. Grief stricken responses to exclusion, fear of status, and fatigue from being constantly available can be responses to a challenging social context, rather than indications of personal disorder. Medical help may be crucial but too much individualization may mask institutional causes. Distress is situated in a sociological account in the interplay between biography and social structure.

7. Protective and Empowering Potentials

If benefits are to be taken into account as seriously as harms in an adequate analysis, they must be explained accordingly. Social media can keep relationships alive, provide creative outlet, provide health information, provide some outlet for youth to communicate with each other where they are geographically, disabled or stigmatized. Social media is also a place to showcase creativity: 63% of the surveyed U.S. teens felt they identified with the statement “Showing creativity on social media is important. Creativity is also a way to show on social media: 63% of the surveyed U.S. teens agreed that “Showing creativity on social media is important.” Share scholarships, job posts, educational materials and civic awareness programs online as well.

Digitally mediated communities can provide recognition and language to minority identities that does not exist in their local environment. Peer narratives can reduce stigma around mental health and encourage help-seeking. Yet information quality varies, self-diagnosis may be encouraged, and commercial “wellness” content can commodify vulnerability. Protection therefore depends on digital literacy, credible sources, effective moderation and pathways from online information to qualified care.

The most useful distinction is not online versus offline but extractive versus relational use. Relational use is purposeful, reciprocal and integrated with broader life. Extractive use is organised around surveillance, comparison and compulsive capture of attention. The same platform can support both. This explains why blanket prohibition may remove valuable support while failing to rebuild offline community.

8. Inequality, Intersectionality and the Indian context

Gen-Z is not a homogeneous category. The capacity to benefit from social media depends on devices, privacy, literacy, language, household norms and safe physical environments. A young person with a private room, stable broadband and supportive adults experiences a different digital world from one sharing a device, facing family surveillance or relying on expensive data. Digital inequality now concerns not only access but autonomy, quality of participation and protection from harm.

India’s scale and diversity make these distinctions especially important. Rapid smartphone adoption has widened access to education, employment information and dispersed kin networks, including in smaller cities. At the same time, linguistic hierarchies, rural–urban inequalities, gendered

restrictions, caste discrimination and uneven mental-health services shape online experience. According to UNICEF India, the survey conducted by NCERT in 2022 revealed that 11% of the students were facing anxiety, 14% were experiencing extreme emotions and 43% were experiencing mood swings (UNICEF India, n.d.). The figures cannot be blamed on social media; they create a broader sense of vulnerability.

The increasing importance of digital validation may stem from competition at school level and ambiguous employment opportunities, as well as from the disruption caused by the pandemic. The emotional isolation and loneliness are also correlated with the quality of life, and emotional intelligence is identified as a relevant moderating resource in the study on Gen-Z employees in India (Annamalai *et al.*, 2025) [2]. For some young women, the Internet provides a freedom not found in the heterosexist norms of mobility; it can also add to their monitoring, policing, and abuse by the image. English-dominant content may expand opportunity while marginalising vernacular expression. Students in Kasganj or comparable semi-urban settings may participate in global media cultures while depending on dense family and local networks. Their experiences should not be inferred from metropolitan or Western samples.

Indian research should therefore examine how digital practices interact with family structure, caste, gender, religion, language, educational institution and migration. Mixed methods are especially suitable: surveys can measure patterns, while interviews, digital diaries and network mapping can reveal meanings and relational change. Young people should be treated as knowledgeable participants, not merely as passive victims of technology.

Table 2: Intersectional patterns of digital social isolation and appropriate institutional responses

Social dimension	Unequal exposure or constraint	Potential isolation risk	Priority institutional response
Gender and sexuality	Appearance surveillance, gendered harassment and restrictions on device use or mobility.	Self-censorship, anxiety and retreat from both online and offline participation.	Gender-sensitive moderation, confidential reporting and inclusive peer-support spaces.
Class and household resources	Shared devices, limited privacy, unstable data access and pressure to display unaffordable lifestyles.	Restricted participation, shame and intensified status comparison.	Affordable access, private support channels and critical consumer-literacy education.
Rural or small-city location	Fewer offline services and opportunities, weaker connectivity and greater dependence on online networks.	Online exclusion may compound geographic isolation and limited help-seeking.	Hybrid counselling, community youth spaces and locally accessible digital-literacy programmes.
Caste, religion and minority status	Targeted abuse, stereotyping, language exclusion and surveillance across collapsed audiences.	Reduced belonging, concealment of identity and distrust of public platforms.	Multilingual moderation, anti-discrimination protocols and trusted community partnerships.
Pre-existing vulnerability	Loneliness or mental-health difficulty may shape more passive, compulsive or negatively interpreted use.	A bidirectional cycle can develop between distress and problematic engagement.	Contextual clinical assessment, early referral and relational rather than screen-time-only interventions.

Note: Author’s synthesis of the literature reviewed in this paper

9. Recommendations

9.1 Platform governance

Platforms should adopt safety-by-design principles: privacy-protective defaults for minors, meaningful control over recommendations, interruption of endless-scroll patterns, effective reporting systems and independent auditing,

consistent with the American Psychological Association’s (2023) call for developmentally appropriate safeguards. Researchers need privacy-respecting access to platform data. Risk assessment should examine not only content removal but how ranking systems amplify comparison, hostility and compulsive return.

9.2 Educational institutions

Schools and colleges should teach critical digital literacy rather than rely only on prohibition. Students need to understand algorithmic curation, persuasive design, misinformation, privacy, cyberbullying and the emotional effects of quantified approval. Institutions should provide confidential counselling, peer-support systems and clear referral pathways. Phone-free periods can protect attention when developed transparently with students and combined with attractive opportunities for face-to-face participation.

9.3 Families and communities

Families should favour dialogue, modelling and negotiated boundaries over surveillance and shame. Shared expectations around sleep, meals and device-free conversation are more credible when adults follow them too. Communities must also rebuild “third spaces” libraries, sports grounds, arts groups, youth clubs and accessible public places where belonging does not depend on consumption or online popularity.

9.4 Mental-health services

Assessment should ask not only how long a young person is online, but what they do there, whom they encounter, what is displaced and whether use feels controllable. Interventions can combine sleep support, social-skills work, treatment of anxiety or depression, cyberbullying response and reconnection with valued offline roles. A digital detox may help some individuals, but it is not a substitute for safe relationships and accessible care.

9.5 Research priorities

Future studies should use longitudinal, experimental and person-specific designs; include platform-level behavioural measures; and represent low- and middle-income settings. Researchers should distinguish communication, creation, entertainment, news, comparison and compulsive use. Indian studies should be multilingual and intersectional, with urban, semi-urban and rural samples. Participatory research can involve Gen-Z in defining well-being and designing interventions.

10. Discussion

The connected-yet-isolated paradox becomes intelligible when connectivity is separated from solidarity. Platforms multiply contacts but do not guarantee recognition; they accelerate communication but can weaken attention; they display social life while exposing exclusion. Their effects are mediated by the strength of prior relationships and by institutions that distribute time, security, dignity and care.

Three conclusions follow. First, digital social isolation is relational rather than numerical. Neither follower count nor screen time adequately captures whether a person possesses dependable ties. Second, causation is recursive. Distress shapes media use, media practices shape distress, and both are influenced by family, school, labour markets, inequality and platform design. Third, responsibility must be distributed. Advising vulnerable young people to self-regulate within

environments deliberately engineered to capture attention is inadequate; treating all online connection as pathological is equally mistaken.

The evidence supports calibrated concern. In 2023 the Surgeon General stated, “we do not yet have enough evidence to determine if social media is sufficiently safe” for young people (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023) [8]. This uncertainty should encourage precaution, transparency and better research not moral panic. Feng *et al.*'s (2026) [5] results show why: problematic use matters more than time alone, and heterogeneity is substantial. Policy should target harmful systems and practices while preserving the forms of connection Gen-Z values.

11. Conclusion

Social media has become a central institution of Gen-Z social life. It can enlarge networks, sustain friendships and enable identity, creativity and support. It can also organise comparison, make exclusion continuously visible, interrupt sleep, commercialise attention and substitute public reaction for reciprocal care. Digital social isolation arises from this contradiction: a person can be highly connected as a platform user but weakly integrated as a social being.

A sociological approach moves beyond blaming either technology or the individual. It asks how platforms, inequalities, cultural norms and weakened communal institutions organise the conditions of connection. The appropriate response is therefore not wholesale digital withdrawal. It is the construction of a healthier ecology in which young people possess agency online, protection from exploitative design, accessible mental-health support and meaningful places to belong offline. The measure of digital progress should not be how continuously Gen-Z can be reached, but how securely its members are recognised, supported and able to participate in shared social life.

References

1. American Psychological Association. Health advisory on social media use in adolescence. American Psychological Association, 2023.
2. Annamalai S, Vasunandan A, Mehta A. Social isolation and loneliness among Generation Z employees: the mediating role of loneliness and the moderating role of emotional intelligence. *Cogent Social Sciences*. 2025;11(1):2441474. doi:10.1080/23311975.2024.2441474.
3. Fassi L, Ferguson AM, Przybylski AK, Ford TJ, Orben A. Social media use in adolescents with and without mental health conditions. *Nature Human Behaviour*. 2025;9:1283-1299. doi:10.1038/s41562-025-02134-4.
4. Faverio M, Anderson M, Park E. Teens, social media and mental health. Pew Research Center, 2025.
5. Feng HP, Lien YJ, Cian SY, Wang WY, Li YT, Chen CH, *et al.* Exploring the relationship between social media use and loneliness in adolescents and young adults: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Social Psychiatry*

- and Psychiatric Epidemiology. 2026;61:1345-1359. doi:10.1007/s00127-026-03175-4.
6. Khalaf AM, Alubied AA, Khalaf AM, Rifaey AA. The impact of social media on the mental health of adolescents and young adults: a systematic review. *Cureus*. 2023;15(8):e42990. doi:10.7759/cureus.42990.
 7. Matthews T, Odgers CL, Danese A, Fisher HL, Newbury JB, Caspi A, *et al*. Social media use, online experiences, and loneliness among young adults: a cohort study. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 2025.
 8. Office of the Surgeon General. Social media and youth mental health: The U.S. Surgeon General's advisory. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023.
 9. Plackett R, Sheringham J, Dykxhoorn J, Kassianos AP. The longitudinal impact of social media use on UK adolescents' mental health: longitudinal observational study. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*. 2023;25:e43213. doi:10.2196/43213.
 10. Sala A, Porcaro L, Gómez E. Social media use and adolescents' mental health and well-being: an umbrella review. *Social Science & Medicine*. 2024;339:116367. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2023.116367.
 11. Shannon H, Bush Kelliher MG, Sheehan K, Richardson CG. Problematic social media use in adolescents and young adults: systematic review and meta-analysis. *JMIR Mental Health*. 2022;9(4):e33450. doi:10.2196/33450.
 12. Smith ML, Spivak M, Abbott A, Campbell MD, Neher T. Social isolation, social media use, and the adolescent mental health crisis: exploring the interaction of risk factors on depression. *Boston Congress of Public Health Review*, 2025, 91.
 13. UNICEF India. Mental well-being for young people. UNICEF India, n.d.
 14. Valkenburg PM, Meier A, Beyens I. Social media use and its impact on adolescent mental health: an umbrella review of the evidence. *Current Opinion in Psychology*. 2022;44:58-68. doi:10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.08.017.