

## **The effects of social media addiction on the relationships and self-presentation in the case of young users from the Z generation**

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**Abstract.** *The distinctive feature of the Z generation is that its members grew up while digital communication technologies developed and had large access to more complex devices. Therefore, the users from the Z generation are constantly connected (Turner, 2015) and at the same time are emotionally attached to the digital devices that they own (Palley, 2012). The paper aims to explore some of the effects determined by social media development in regard to the social behavior of users (emotional reactions, relationship with friends, and the tendency to project an improved self-image in online social networks). The previous academic studies (especially in the USA and China) discussed the influence factors and the methods to diminish the dependency on the internet. At the same time, in Romania, no recent studies depict the characteristics of the relationship of users from the Z generation with the internet and social media technologies. Thus, in order to explore the aspects above, an online survey has been launched, resulting in over 100 valid responses. The results revealed that more than half of respondents have negative emotions when they cannot connect with their familiar digital environment. At the same time, they tend to initiate relationships with a large number of users even if they haven't met these users in real life, while they might have only a few friends in real life. The findings of this research are useful in raising awareness of the potential negative effects of social media consumption and developing strategies for prevention in case of internet dependence.*

**Keywords:** *social media, addiction, effects, internet dependence, generation Z.*

### **Introduction**

The Z generation presents some distinctive features in comparison with other users, such as the tendency to constantly communicate via digital devices. In a study from 2012, almost half of the respondents from the Z generation felt more comfortable communicating online, and 33% felt that online friends understood them better than

friends from daily activities (Palley, 2012). Also, the Z generation members are more centered on multitasking and absorbing information from multiple sources, but at the same time, they can be characterized by shallowness and lack of focus (Desai & Lele, 2017). Another characteristic is the instant gratification mechanism, created due to the use of digital devices that offer instant reinforcing factors to users (Turner, 2015). Therefore, generation Z members have a lower capacity to relax, build aspirations, prioritize issues, and focus on the most important ones (Turner, 2015).

According to a recent digital report using worldwide data (We are social and Hootsuite, 2022), 58.4% of the world population use social media, while in Romania 69.7% of the total population is active on online social networks.

The use of social media determines an increase in social comparisons. Several studies demonstrated that users compare with other users while using Facebook (Jan et al., 2017) and that their wellness state and self-esteem are affected by their self-evaluation as the result of social comparison (Vogel et al., 2014).

At the same time, there is a strong connection between social media use and building self-identity. Social media strongly impacts teenagers, becoming a „resonance box” for developing and validating their identity (Valkenburg & Piotrovski, 2018).

Since the academic studies on this topic collected data on users from generation Z in other countries, few studies in Romania explore the impact of social media use on shaping online and offline relationships and, at the same time, the display of self via online social networks. Therefore, using the emotional reactions to the lack of online connection as an intermediate variable, this study focuses on the impact of social media addiction on social relationships and on the presentation of self as an expression of self-identity.

## **Literature review**

Although the development of the online environment determined several positive consequences by connecting individuals and organizations, also negative consequences have been identified. Thus, internet addiction can be defined as an uncontrollable wish to use the internet, the sense of lack of value during the time spent without being online connected, intense nervousness and aggressiveness when a person lacks internet access and the progressive degradation of social and family life (Bahrainianet al., 2014).

Even if it is studied for over 25 years, internet addiction is still not understood at the level of mechanisms of influence. Internet addiction is different from other addictions because apparently, users have benefits while using the internet (such as internet banking, access to libraries, holiday planning, online shopping, etc.) (Hoeg & Parisi, 2021). These behaviors reach the sphere of addiction in several situations: when they are actions with negative consequences as pornography or online gaming, or when they are performed in a compulsive manner (such as online shopping, online gaming, online conversations, etc.).

Several negative consequences of internet addiction have been identified in academic studies: lack of effectiveness and sleeplessness (Spitzer, 2020), unhealthy lifestyle (Kim

et al., 2010), sleepiness during the day (Lemola et al., 2014), loneliness (Whang, Lee & Chang, 2003) and depression (Morisson & Gore, 2010).

Several studies showed a significant correlation between depression, self-esteem, and internet addiction. Moreover, some studies consider self-esteem a very important factor that can predict internet addiction (Bahrainian et al., 2014). In this perspective, the internet offers teenagers a psychological compensation mechanism for their low self-esteem and self-perceived deficiencies (Griffiths, 2000). By creating a different person via online social platforms or online gaming platforms, they gain power and a different social status (Aydin & Sari, 2011).

Social media addiction is considered a subcategory of internet addiction. Similar to the previous definition, social media addiction is characterized by an uncontrollable impulse to connect online and use social media for large periods of time, so that important life sectors are affected (Hillard & Parisi, 2021).

Although similar in regard to the psychological mechanisms of development, social media addiction determines some negative consequences as the intensification of cyberbullying phenomenon (Mesch, 2009; Hinduja & Patchin, 2014). Further, the spreading of fake news contributes to the intensification of racism, and anxiety and presents important threats to the health and safety of users (Pulido, 2020). Also, other studies revealed the connection between social media intensive use, self-aggression, and suicide tendency in the case of American teenagers (Swedo, 2020).

The excessive use of online social networks is associated with unsatisfactory bodily self-perception, low self-esteem, and a higher frequency of eating disorders (Santarossa & Woodruff, 2017). Social media enables comparisons through the intensive use of idealized pictures, while users post only pictures that show them in a positive light (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2019). Instagram, Pinterest and Facebook, especially, present a focus on pictures and by using this feature, the apps impact the self-perceived image of users (Pepin & Endresz, 2015).

In this context, the present study proposes the following objectives of the research: (1) to identify the relationship between access to the Internet and the emotional states of Generation Z respondents, (2) to find the main motivations and perceived benefits for using social media apps of Generation Z respondents, and (3) to identify the relationship between social media use and self-presentation of body image on social media.

## **Methodology**

For the purposes of this research, the quantitative method was used, specifically the survey. An online questionnaire was employed to collect the responses of the Generation Z participants from this study. The questionnaire included pre-coded and open-ended questions based on previous studies investigating the same research topic. The instrument included dichotomous questions, single-answer, and multiple-choice questions, as well as Likert scale questions. A filtering question was added at the beginning of the survey to make sure the respondents correspond to the Generation Z age range, and the rest of the sections investigated topics such as: internet and social media consumption (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and LinkedIn), social media effects, and socio-demographic characteristics such as education and living

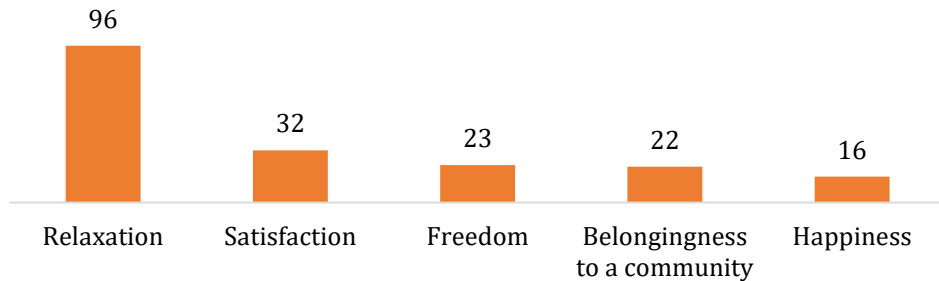
environment. The data collection process was conducted online, for a week in May 2022. 128 responses were collected, and 126 were valid and included in the analysis.

Internet addiction is the relationship between time spent online and how the individual feels when connected to the Internet compared to when they do not have access to the Internet.

As far as the sample is concerned, a convenience sample included individuals born between 1995 and 2012, representing members of Generation Z (Bonchis, 2021), both Internet and social media users. The online questionnaire was distributed in social media groups where Generation Z users interact. According to the results, on average, participants from the research sample spend almost 3 hours online and 2 hours and 30 minutes on social media applications. The age range of the respondents varies between 13- and 27 years old, and the average is 23. For most of the participants, the last graduated program is the bachelor’s program (32%, n=41), then high school (29%, n=37), and master’s program (27%, n=35). More female respondents (77%) participated in this study than male respondents (23%). Most of them live in the urban area (85%), compared to the rural area (14%).

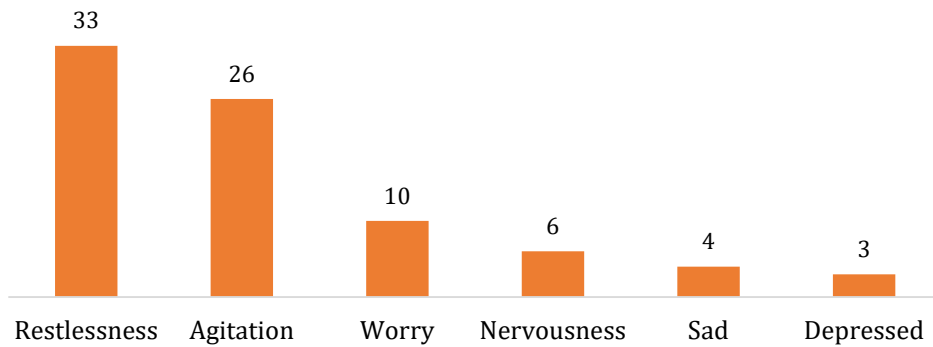
**Results and discussion**

As far as the emotional benefits of spending time on the Internet are concerned, the research results show that most of the participants feel relaxed (76%), followed by satisfaction (25%), freedom (18%), and belongingness to a community (18%). Ultimately, the lowest percent is dedicated to happiness (12%) (see Fig. 1 Emotional benefits of spending time on the Internet).



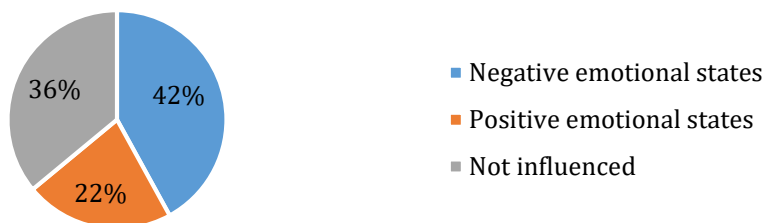
**Figure 1. Emotional benefits of spending time on the Internet (Source: Authors’ own research results)**

In the contexts in which Internet access is not available, the respondents face negative emotional states such as: restlessness (26%), agitation (20%), worry (7,9%), nervousness (4,8%), sad (3,2%), or depressed (2,4%). At the same time, respondents also experienced positive emotional states when they do not have access to the Internet: they feel stress-free (13%), peaceful (11%), or relaxed (7%) (see Fig. 2 Negative emotional states of lack of internet). Even though this was a multiple-choice question, the respondents were consistent with their answers and none of them chose both positive and negative states in the selection process.



**Figure 2. Negative emotional states of lack of internet (Source: Authors' own research results)**

In order to identify what are the most prominent responses of users when they do not have access to the Internet, the respondents were grouped according to the different emotional states (positive, negative, or neutral) they selected. As seen in Fig. 3 (Grouping of respondents according to the emotional states felt when they don't have access to the internet), the largest group belongs to respondents manifesting negative emotional states (42%), followed by the neutral group (respondents who selected „Not influenced“) (36%), and the ones manifesting positive emotional states (22%). However, according to the Pearson correlation coefficient, there is no significant relationship between time spent on the Internet and emotional states when there is no access to the internet (see Table 1 Pearson correlation coefficient between the variables “Time spent on the Internet in a day” and “Emotional states when there is no internet access”).

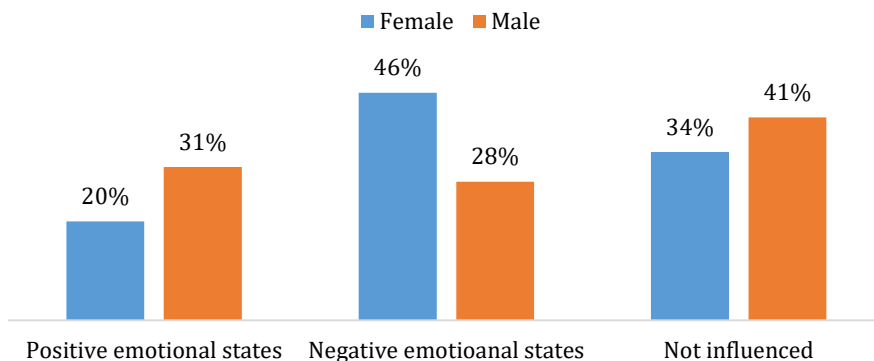


**Figure 3. Grouping of respondents according to the emotional states felt when they don't have access to the internet (Source: Authors' own research results)**

**Table 1. Pearson correlation coefficient between the variables “Time spent on the Internet in a day” and “Emotional states when there is no internet access” (Source: Authors’ own research results)**

		Time spent on the Internet in a day	Emotional states when there is no internet access
Time spent on the Internet in a day	Pearson Correlation	1	0,127
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0,157
	N	126	126
Emotional states when there is no internet access	Pearson Correlation	0,127	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,157	
	N	126	126

From a gender perspective (Fig. 4 Gender distribution for each group of states felt when an individual does not have access to the Internet), most of the female respondents present negative emotional states when they do not have access to the internet, whereas only a third of the male respondents face the same feelings. On the other side, 41% of men are not influenced by lack of access to the Internet, which is the case for 34% of women. 31% of men and 19% of women have positive emotions when they do not have access to the Internet. Nevertheless, gender does not influence the respondents’ emotional states when they don’t have access to the Internet, according to the Pearson correlation coefficient.



**Figure 4. Gender distribution for each group of states felt when an individual does not have access to the Internet (Source: Authors’ own research results)**

The main reasons why the Generation Z respondents use social media are: communicating with family and friends (24%), for relaxation (23%), keeping up with the news of my acquaintances (19%), news (16%), meeting new people (8%), sharing opinions (8%). The social media application that is most preferred by respondents is Instagram (98%), YouTube (93%), and Facebook (87%), followed by TikTok (14%) and LinkedIn (11%).

Regarding the perceived negative effects of Internet consumption, most of the respondents (94%) confirmed that they did not lose a significant relationship, a job or a career, or an educational opportunity because of the time they spent using the Internet.

When the respondents do not spend time on social media, most spend time with friends (28%) and family (27%). Almost half of the respondents play sports or spend time in nature (18%), and some prefer relaxing with other types of activities (reading, painting, dancing) (27%). Other activities mentioned were studying, playing on the computer, exploring new places, or watching films or TV shows. When going out with friends, most of the respondents rarely check their phones (46%), followed by moderate checking (38%), not at all (9%), and very often (6%).

### *Facebook use*

As far as their self-presentation on social media is concerned, most of the respondents agree that it is important for them to look as natural as possible in the pictures they post of themselves. As seen in Table 2 (Respondents' behavior on Facebook – mean, median, mode, and standard deviation), respondents mainly agree that editing photos, using brightness and highlighting colors, is important to a high degree ( $M=3,64$ ,  $SD=1,463$ ), but they do not edit their body to appear thinner ( $M=1,12$ ,  $SD=0,400$ ). However, the respondents do consider it important to highlight only the good parts of their bodies in the photos they post ( $M=3,21$ ,  $SD= 1,421$ ). Regarding their Facebook friends, the respondents neither agreed nor disagreed that they share the same friends in real life ( $M=2,55$ ,  $SD=1,130$ ), and they must accept the friend requests of the people they know ( $M=3,94$ ,  $SD=1,160$ ). Even though 87% of the respondents used Facebook in the past week, more than half spend less than an hour on Facebook daily (57%). A third of the respondents have between 501 and 1000 friends (36%), followed by the 1001-2000 friends range (27%), and then more than 2000 friends (13%).

**Table 2. Respondents' behavior on Facebook – mean, median, mode, and standard deviation (Source: Authors' own research results)**

Affirmation	Mean	Median	Mode	Standard Deviation
Facebook friends are my friends in real life too	2,55	3	3	1,130
I only accept friend requests from people I know	3,94	4	5	1,160
I spend a lot of time choosing which photos to post	3,27	3	3	1,374
Before I post on Facebook I edit the photos	2,86	3	1	1,404
I usually just edit the brightness and highlighting colors	3,64	4	5	1,463
I usually edit my body to be thinner	1,12	1	1	0,400

I use face filters in the posted photos	0,39	1	1	0,814
I want to look as natural as possible in the pictures I post	4,15	4	5	0,950
I want to highlight only the good parts of my body in the photos I post	3,21	3	4	1,421

*Instagram use*

Almost all of the respondents used Instagram weekly, while most of them spend between one hour (26%), 2 hours (27%) and 3 hours (21%) per day. As opposed to Facebook, respondents agreed to a lower extent they follow only people they know (M=2,71, SD=1,195) and follow influencers to a higher degree (M=3,24, SD=1,290). An important perceived benefit is the inspiration they obtain from using Instagram, because they choose specific accounts to provide them with that type of content (M=4,02, SD=1,074). Even if the respondents follow more accounts of the people they do not know, the chat is mainly used for those they know (M=1,56, SD=1,030). Like Facebook, respondents spend more time choosing photos to post (M=3,34, SD=1,312) and editing their own photos (M=3,19, SD=1,422). For almost half of the Instagram users, likes are important to some extent (44%), followed by to a high extent (25%), and to a low extent (19%). Most respondents have less than 1000 followers on Instagram, and only 3,2% have over 2000 followers.

*YouTube*

The second most used account in this sample is YouTube, with more than 93% of the respondents using it daily. Most of the respondents spend between 1h/day (30%) and 2h/day (20%) on this app, while 15% spend more than 3h/day (15%). The respondents prefer fun (M=3,86, SD=1,446) and educational (M=3,59, SD=1,316) content. However, most respondents use YouTube to listen to music (M=4,36, SD=0,975). They typically do not create content to post on their personal channel (M=1,10, SD=0,478).

*TikTok*

Almost a third of the respondents spend 1h/day on TikTok (30%), while 20% spend 2h/day on the app, and 22% spend less than 1h/day. Respondents follow influencer content to some extent (M=3,15, SD=1,363), and their friends' content to a low extent (M=1,85, SD=1,136). They spend most of their time on TikTok for fun (M=4,29, SD=0,899) and inspiration (M=3,5, SD=1,355), and for educational content to some extent (M=3,35, SD=1,219). Even though they spend their time on TikTok, they do not create content for their own profile (M=1,35, SD=1,068).

*LinkedIn*

The less-used social media app is LinkedIn, as it is accessed by 41% of the study participants, who spend less than 1h/per day on this app (84%). The respondents mostly want to connect with people who work in the same domain (M=3,79, SD=1,226), and less with people they know (M=1,96, SD=1,120). They connect with everyone



sending invitations to make as many connections as possible ( $M=3,29$ ,  $SD=1,377$ ). Regarding the interaction with other users of the platform, the respondents prefer chatting in private with anyone connecting with them ( $M=3,04$ ,  $SD=1,400$ ) to commenting on posts ( $M=1,71$ ,  $SD=1,143$ ).

## Discussion

Almost half of the participants spend 3 to 4 hours on the Internet daily. When they do not have access to the Internet, more than 40% feel negative emotions such as: restlessness, agitation, worry, nervousness, sadness, and even depression. However, 22% of the respondents have positive feelings such as: lack of stress, peace, and relaxation, while 35% believe the lack of access to the internet does not influence their emotional state. However, statistically speaking, there is no significant relationship between time spent on the Internet and emotional state, so this topic can be further investigated in future research. Neither gender nor age does not influence the respondents' emotional state when they spend time on the Internet.

As far as the motivations for using social media apps is concerned, respondents typically choose Facebook for connecting with friends and family, while on Instagram they seek inspirational content, from both people they know and people they don't know, so they tend to follow accounts of people they do not personally know. Even though they follow their content, they do not usually chat with the people they do not know, as they keep their private discussions for friends and acquaintances. On TikTok, respondents prefer influencers and TV stars, as opposed to people they do know. On the other hand, on LinkedIn, they seek connections in order to extend their professional social network, so they accept invitations from people they do not personally know in real life.

For most respondents, authentic and natural self-presentation on their personal accounts is important. Editing photos before posting is somewhat important, as they pay attention to lighting and colors, whereas using filters and editing body parts are important to a low extent. However, even though they do not edit their photos for perfection, the respondents want to highlight the best parts of their bodies to some extent. On Instagram, even though they spend more time choosing the photos for posting, that does not necessarily imply editing for self-improved appearance. Most respondents prefer presenting themselves as authentic, highlighting the best parts of their bodies.

## Research limits

A convenience sample was used, so extending the research findings to the population at large is not recommended. 77% of respondents are females, so extending specific characteristics to gender is impossible. Regarding age, 56% of the respondents are between 23 and 27, whereas 7% are between 13 and 17. This age difference can influence respondents' understanding of social media effects or their perceived benefits. Also, the background and the respondents' education level are disproportionate, which leads to the difficulty in identifying whether these elements influence the relationship between the Internet and social media consumption.

Furthermore, the selective self-presentation topic should be further explored, as the respondents might be aware of the social online stigma related to photo editing.

## Conclusions

The results show no correlation between the time spent on the internet and the respondents' emotional state, which is why we cannot say that they are addicted to the Internet. Indeed, the time overspent on the internet and social media have a series of negative effects on them, especially since almost half of the respondents have negative moods when they cannot access the internet. Strictly related to the studied sample, we note that the Z generation, also known as the digital generation, can detach from the digital environment in specific contexts.

Even if the respondents have hundreds or thousands of friends on social media, they can only trust 3 or 4 friends in real life. So, there is a difference between friends on social media and everyday life, each fulfilling a different role. The individuals in the sample do not want to display an ideal body image on social media. Still, they want to be as natural as possible, even if they only post photos that highlight their body.

Although the results of this research refer to a small sample, they can provide a starting point for future studies. Several aspects and correlations between Gen Z's internet and social media consumption and how they influence social behavior can be identified. To analyze the previously mentioned aspects in depth, applying qualitative research methods will provide much more relevant results.

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