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SOCIAL MEDIA AND INTERPERSONAL SKILL DEVELOPMENT: EXPLORING GENERATION Z'S SOCIAL DYNAMICS

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Abstract:

Generation Z has integrated social media into their daily routines, making it a platform for communication, self-expression, and connection. Social media has significantly influenced the way Gen Z communicates. The stigma surrounding Generation Z, primarily due to the heavy usage of social media, is becoming a worrying issue, as it is perceived to lack social skills. This study aims to examine the relationship between social media usage and its impact on interpersonal communication among Generation Z, identify the connection between self-esteem and interpersonal skills in social media, and explore interaction skills on social media and their effect on interpersonal abilities. Additionally, Generation Z can enhance interpersonal skills and foster communication across various groups through social media, as well as build relationships and exchange ideas. A total of 305 students from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) completed the questionnaire. The analysis involved descriptive statistics and correlation analysis, with results displayed in tables illustrating the relationships between the studied components. The findings indicated that social media usage influenced Generation Z's patterns, self-esteem, and social skills, using Social Identity Theory (SIT), which examines how individuals identify as members of a community.

Keywords:

Generation Z, Interpersonal Skills, Social Media Usage, Self-Esteem, Social Skills

Introduction

The rapid growth of social media in the past two decades has changed how people connect, build, and maintain relationships. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, X, and TikTok have become key tools for everyday communication. They offer unique ways to engage with friends, family, and even strangers worldwide. This shift has led to significant changes in how people interact, particularly in the amount, intensity, and nature of their communication.

However, social media addiction means using social media platforms and applications too much. Users spend much time sharing personal experiences, creating content, and interacting with others. Generation Z has become addicted to these sites, which affects their social skills daily. Social skills are the abilities that help people interact, communicate, and work with others. As digital society grows, the development and use of social skills among Generation Z have raised concerns due to the rise of social media. According to Zsuzsanna Deák (2023), Generation Z, also called Zoomers, "Digital Natives," or "Internet Generation," consists of individuals who are deeply connected to technology. They have grown up in a world where everything is linked, making it hard for them to imagine life without the Internet or mobile phones.

Most of Generation Z are likely to learn through watching videos and using PowerPoint presentations instead of traditional notes. This generation is more globally connected than ever. Research shows that about 90% of Gen Z are active on social media (SimpleBeen, 2025). However, in Malaysia, according to the Digital 2025, Global Digital Insights reported that Malaysia had 25.1 million active social media users, representing about 70.2% of the total population and among adults aged 18 and above, which is the largest group of Generation Z, there were around 23.1 million social media users, accounting for approximately 87.0% of the adult population. The platforms that impact Gen Z's social lives include Instagram, TikTok, and X. They generally prefer visual communication and short messages (Vaterlaus, 2019).

Literature Review

The literature on Generation Z's social media use and interpersonal skill development has expanded significantly over the last decade, reflecting the pervasive role of digital environments in shaping communication practices, identity formation, and social relationships. This section reviews the existing scholarship related to social media usage, self-esteem, social skills, and interpersonal communication, and introduces relevant theoretical frameworks guiding this study.

The Impact of Interpersonal Skills Using Social Media among Generation Z

According to recent longitudinal research, teenage use of social media alters how interpersonal skills are practised and developed rather than inevitably reducing them. In contrast to Valkenburg and Peter's (2007) "displacement" model, Steinsbekk, Bjørklund, and Valkenburg (2024) found that increased social media use predicted more offline time spent with friends without having any detrimental effects on social skills.

Nonetheless, the calibre of social media interaction is crucial. According to Uhls et al. (2024), friendship closeness and interpersonal competence are positively correlated with active, relational forms of engagement, such as self-disclosure, emotional support, and reciprocal interaction. Conversely, comparison-based engagement or passive use is frequently associated with lower empathy and less desire for in-person interactions (McAlister et al., 2024).

Furthermore, social media has emerged as a crucial platform for Generation Z's identity exploration. According to Avci and Yalcin (2024), identity-related social media behaviours like self-expression, feedback seeking, and networked presentation can improve social confidence and self-concept clarity, two crucial aspects of interpersonal communication abilities. Therefore, the overall impact of the platform environment depends on deliberate, genuine, and prosocial use, even though it can both challenge and support interpersonal development.

Social Media Usage among Generation Z

The use of social media has completely changed how people communicate, especially among younger generations. Important channels for communication, self-expression, and information sharing include Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. In order to comprehend social media's function in contemporary society, it is imperative to be aware of its trends, motivations, and ramifications.

With social media playing a significant role in their everyday lives, Generation Z is the most technologically savvy generation in history. According to the Pew Research Centre (2024), the digital landscape of this generation is dominated by platforms like YouTube, TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram, with a sizable percentage of teenagers reporting "almost constant" use. Moreover, according to Meltwater (2024), 83% of Malaysians are estimated to be active social media users, indicating a very high level of digital engagement among young people.

According to recent research, Generation Z uses social media for a wide variety of purposes, from networking and learning to entertainment and information seeking to community involvement and community engagement. It is also very mobile-centric and multi-platform (West et al., 2024). Crucially, research makes a distinction between passive use such as scrolling, viewing, and consuming content) and active use (such as posting, commenting, and creating content. Passive consumption is associated with social comparison and loneliness, whereas active participation tends to foster social connection and belonging (West et al., 2024). These findings indicate that for Generation Z, social media serves not merely as a communication tool but as a social ecosystem that influences identity, values, and daily interactional patterns.

User's Self-Esteem and Social Media Exposure

Self-esteem, or a person's assessment of their own worth, is essential for mental health and well-being. It determines how people view themselves and how they relate to others, which affects how valuable their lives are in general. According to theorists, a variety of causative factors, such as social relationships, life events, and culture, contribute to the development of self-esteem.

The connection between self-esteem and social media use in Generation Z is complicated, changing, and based on the situation. Avci and Yalcin (2024) assert that affirmative feedback and genuine self-representation on social media platforms frequently enhance users' self-esteem, while environments saturated with comparison may diminish it. Colak et al. (2023) similarly discovered that elevated levels of social media addiction were inversely correlated with self-esteem, primarily mediated by negative body image.

Experimental evidence suggests that quantified feedback, such as likes, comments, and followers, can affect adolescent self-esteem more significantly than that of adults, especially in contexts of social comparison or negative feedback (Chen et al., 2025). Moreover, investigative reports indicate that specific algorithmic characteristics on platforms such as Instagram can subject susceptible users to content related to self-harm and eating disorders, intensifying appearance-related insecurities (Reuters, 2025; The Guardian, 2024).

However, when utilised actively and constructively, social media can cultivate a sense of belonging, validation, and self-expression, thereby enhancing adolescents' self-esteem and interpersonal confidence (McAlister et al., 2024). Consequently, interventions that foster active, meaningful engagement and critical media literacy are essential for alleviating adverse effects and improving psychosocial well-being among Generation Z users.

User's Social Skills and Social Media Exposure
Social skills, such as empathy, listening, and conflict resolution, are essential for personal and professional growth. Social media has emerged as a primary platform for Generation Z to practise these abilities. A recent communication study shows that the impact of social media use on interpersonal competency is not consistent and varies greatly depending on the activity type. Active involvement, such as messaging and content production, is linked to good outcomes such as increased social support, but passive consumption, such as scrolling through feeds, promotes social comparison and negative affect (Verduyn et al., 2024; Valkenburg et al., 2024). These findings highlight the significance of distinguishing across usage patterns when assessing social media's influence on skill development.

A growing amount of longitudinal and experience-sampling research demonstrates that teenagers' reactions to social media vary, with some gaining while others experiencing losses in well-being and offline competence. Beyens et al. (2024) discovered distinct person-specific patterns, implying that individual preferences and contextual circumstances modulate effects. Complementary data suggests that online communication can supplement face-to-face interactions when done within supportive networks, often preserving or even improving offline connections (Uhls et al., 2024). Depending on how and with whom interactions take place, social media can either serve as a practice ground for interpersonal skills or limit them.

Recent studies have also shown the factors that influence these results. Cue-rich, dialogic interactions, such as video calls or group chats, allow adolescents to practise perspective-taking and conflict resolution, whereas public, evaluative contexts with visible metrics encourage impression management rather than authentic exchange (Naderer et al., 2024; Hieftje et al., 2025). These findings place social media in the context of an interactional ecology: when used reciprocally and within supportive networks, it can improve interpersonal competence; when used exclusively for evaluation or comparison, it may weaken face-to-face skills. For Generation Z, the most critical question is not how much time they spend online, but how social media activities influence the quality of interpersonal development.

Interpersonal Skills in the Digital Age
Interpersonal skills encompass the communication behaviours necessary for effective interaction, including perspective-taking, nonverbal awareness, problem-solving, and collaborative negotiation. Digital platforms have introduced new opportunities and challenges for interpersonal skill development. According to Vaterlaus (2019), social media supports

connection with diverse audiences, facilitates idea exchange, and encourages cross-cultural interaction. However, the digitally mediated nature of communication can also disrupt traditional conversational cues, affect turn-taking, and reduce the depth of interpersonal engagement.

Recent empirical studies suggest that interpersonal skills do not deteriorate simply because communication shifts online. Steinsbekk, Bjørklund, and Valkenburg (2024) found that adolescents who used social media actively developed stronger offline friendships without a corresponding decline in conversational ability. These findings challenge the common perception that digital communication inevitably replaces in-person interactions.

Theoretical Framework: Social Identity Theory (SIT)

According to Social Identity Theory (SIT) by Tajfel and Turner (1986), people seek out similarities, belonging, and shared norms in their groups and also categorize themselves and others into these groups. The online communities on social media are the new-age identity markers. They change the way people talk to each other, set up their relational expectations and also change their perception of being a part of a group (Valkenburg et al., 2024; Hieftje et al., 2025). Social media is a perfect platform for Generation Z to discover and build the groups that match their identities. Consequently, their self-confidence and interpersonal skills get strengthened when they experience acceptance in these groups.

On the other hand, identity threats like exclusion and cyberbullying may result in the escalation of defensive communication behaviours and the hindrance of the development of interpersonal skills (Valkenburg et al., 2024; Hieftje et al., 2025). Therefore, SIT is instrumental in explaining the correlation between Gen Z's social identity online as a factor in their interpersonal interactions and the acquisition of interpersonal skills and the social media setting as a potential facilitator or barrier of their social development.

Uses and Gratification Theory (U&G)

Uses and Gratification Theory has also been brought in as another perspective to explain the reasons for the selection of specific media and interaction styles by individuals. In their seminal paper "Uses of Mass Communication by Individuals" (Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch, 1973), the authors argue that people consume media to satisfy various psychological and social needs, among which are connection, validation, learning and entertainment. Ruggiero (2000) points out that U&G is extremely important for characterising the online world in which users are "active selectors" and not just "passive recipients". For Generation Z, some of the most frequent gratifications are relational maintenance, identity exploration, belonging, stress relief and emotional regulation.

Whiting and Williams (2013) noted that teenagers prefer digital platforms which allow them to control their self-presentation, get recognition from peers and have access to immediate feedback, which are factors that have been shown to influence the expression of interpersonal skills. Aligned with this theory, U&G in the research framework helps to understand that social media communication effects depend on the interaction of user motivations, behavioural intentions, and the types of gratifications sought, rather than being a direct consequence of social media exposure.

The review of literature indicates that social media usage, self-esteem, and social skills have a significant impact on the interpersonal communication of Generation Z. The aggregated studies imply that the findings are dependent on the quality of engagement, psychological needs, group identity processes, and gratification-based motives. This research is grounded in the theories of Social Identity Theory and Uses and Gratification Theory to examine the relationship between online interaction frequency and the acquisition of interpersonal skills in a Malaysian university setting.

Methodology

This study used a quantitative, cross-sectional survey approach to investigate the relationship between social media use, self-esteem, social skills, and their impact on interpersonal skills among Generation Z students. A quantitative research approach is used to quantify and evaluate aspects to identify patterns and trends. According to Apuke (2017), quantitative research involves gathering data to quantify and statistically analyse information to support or refute conflicting knowledge assertions. The study looked at diploma, undergraduate, and postgraduate students at Malaysia's Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), with individuals acting as the unit of analysis.

A stratified sampling procedure was used to ensure proportional representation at all academic levels within the Faculty of Business and Social Sciences. A total of 305 valid responses were gathered, exceeding Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) minimal sample size for large student populations and providing appropriate statistical power for subsequent analysis. Additionally, to improve content validity, the primary tool for gathering data was a structured questionnaire that had been adapted from previously approved instruments.

The data collection process was carried out online to ensure accessibility and efficiency. Google Forms was used to create the survey, which was then shared via UiTM student networks and WhatsApp groups. Anonymity was maintained to promote open communication, and participation was entirely voluntary. The supervising lecturer gave ethical permission for the project, and informed consent was acquired at the beginning of the survey. 101 students from Universiti Kuala Lumpur participated in a pilot test to further improve the tool. The results of the pilot study, which evaluated reliability, validity, and clarity, showed that all variables had strong internal consistency. Interpersonal skills (α = .832), social media usage (α = .779), self-esteem (α = .829), and social skills (α = .829) all showed strong dependability, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding the suggested threshold of 0.70.

Data was analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics. Descriptive statistics were first employed to summarise respondents' demographic profiles. Reliability tests proved the scales' internal consistency, confirming their resilience. Finally, correlation analysis was used to investigate the associations between the independent variables (social media usage, self-esteem, and social skills) and the dependent variable—interpersonal abilities. This methodological approach provided a rigorous framework for addressing research objectives while also ensuring the study's findings were valid and reliable.

Findings and Discussion

The results show a clear link between social media use, self-esteem, social skills, and how well Generation Z develops interpersonal abilities. Social media use had a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.532$, $p < 0.01$), self-esteem showed a slightly stronger connection ($r = 0.587$,

p < 0.01), and social skills stood out as the strongest factor (r = 0.612, p < 0.01). To better understand these findings and connect them to theory, each factor is examined individually through the combined perspectives of Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Uses and Gratification Theory (U&G).

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) helps us see how belonging to social groups, online identity creation, and group norms influence communication habits. On the other hand, Uses and Gratification Theory (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973) looks at media use through the motivation lens, suggesting people engage with media to meet psychological and emotional needs. Together, these frameworks explain how digital experiences shape interpersonal skill growth among Generation Z.

Social Media Use and Interpersonal Skills

Recent studies draw a key line between active and passive social media use (Uhls et al., 2024; Valkenburg et al., 2024). Active use means engaging intentionally, like chatting, collaborating, and offering support, which tends to build empathy and better conversational skills. In contrast, passively scrolling without interaction often leads to comparisons, lower confidence, and less face-to-face interaction (McAlister et al., 2024). This idea of "engagement quality" underpins much of the analysis here, so this term will be used instead of repeatedly contrasting active and passive behaviour.

Self-Esteem and Interpersonal Communication

Self-esteem showed a solid positive link to interpersonal skills (r = 0.587, p < 0.01). Simply put, those who feel more confident and validated generally communicate better. Using U&G Theory, this makes sense: when people receive positive responses online, likes, comments, and interactions, their sense of self-worth grows, which boosts their interpersonal abilities.

This aligns with research by Avci and Yalcin (2024), showing that affirmation via online interaction strengthens one's confidence and clarity of self. However, U&G also warns of downsides: seeking approval or status on social media can cause stress and harm communication confidence (Colak et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2025). So, self-esteem acts as a bridge between digital experiences and real-world social skills, helping some and hindering others depending on the context.

Social Skills as the Leading Predictor

Social skills showed the strongest correlation with interpersonal skills (r = 0.612, p < 0.01), suggesting those who already excel at empathy, listening, and cooperation in one area tend to carry these strengths into broader social situations. The Social Identity perspective highlights how group belonging and supportive digital communities offer chances to practice positive social behaviours. Meanwhile, U&G points to platforms that encourage collaboration and peer support as spaces where social skills get a regular workout.

Because social skills and interpersonal skills overlap—think of things like empathy, feedback, and conflict handling—their strong connection makes sense. The study's measurement tools reliably captured these behaviours (α = .829), which helps explain why social skills are such powerful predictors.

Generation Z often interacts in rich digital environments: from group chats and student networks to gaming and community servers like Discord. These spaces demand active participation, making them real training grounds for social skills. Studies show that consistent online interaction helps polish communication skills that then carry over into face-to-face settings (Verduyn et al., 2024; Valkenburg et al., 2024). Social skills here are tangible, repeatable, and practised daily through digital exchanges.

Theoretical Integration

Looking at the findings, it's clear that identity-based factors and gratification-driven motives both play significant roles in social growth for Generation Z. Social Identity Theory explains how belonging to digital groups shapes how young people communicate and present themselves. Uses and Gratification Theory reveals why they pick specific platforms and interaction styles—to meet emotional, social, and psychological needs.

Together, these theories show that digital communication skills don't develop by chance. Instead, they come from motivated choices rooted in identity and purpose. This approach moves beyond just measuring screen time and focuses on how Generation Z uses media in rich, meaningful ways to build social abilities.

Critical Counterarguments and Contextual Considerations

While the study found strong links among social media use, self-esteem, social skills, and interpersonal communication, it's important to remember this is correlational data. That means we can't say for sure that social media causes changes in communication skills. Other factors—like personality, past experiences, or home life—could also play roles. To figure out cause and effect, longitudinal or experimental studies are needed.

Additionally, the advantages of digital engagement come with risks. Passive browsing, social comparison, cyberbullying, and exposure to unrealistic ideals can hurt social skill development, especially for those with lower self-esteem or less emotional support. Research (Colak et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2025) shows that ongoing exposure to evaluative content can increase anxiety and reduce confidence in face-to-face settings, highlighting the downside of seeking approval online.

The Malaysian context adds another layer. Not all youth have the same digital access—students in urban areas like Klang Valley usually have better internet, devices, and online learning options. Meanwhile, rural or lower-income youth might face connectivity issues and limited tech resources. These differences influence how often and how well they use social media, shaping interpersonal skills in distinct ways. Cultural norms around communication and privacy also vary across communities, affecting online interaction patterns.

Therefore, while positive connections between digital engagement and social skills exist among Malaysian youth, these results should be viewed with care. Socioeconomic and cultural factors mean not everyone experiences the same benefits. Future research should include diverse samples from urban, semi-urban, and rural areas, plus mixed research methods, to capture better the range of young people's digital social experiences.

Implication and Conclusion

The findings of this study offer meaningful insights for educators, policymakers, and mental health practitioners working with Generation Z. To strengthen the developmental potential of digital platforms while addressing communication challenges, several practical strategies are recommended across educational, policy, and psychosocial domains.

Educational institutions should adopt structured programs that help students develop healthy digital communication habits, rather than simply regulating screen time. One approach involves implementing school-based digital behaviour intervention programs, which can teach students to recognise constructive versus harmful online engagement patterns. These interventions should move beyond technical safety and include guidance on healthy self-disclosure, supportive communication, and recognising algorithmic risks such as social comparison.

Another educational strategy is the integration of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) with digital literacy modules in school and university curricula. SEL programmes that emphasise empathy, perspective-taking, and conflict resolution can be adapted to online contexts. When paired with digital literacy (e.g., discerning reliable content, recognising manipulation or online pressure), this dual approach can equip students with stronger competencies to manage interpersonal interactions both online and offline. Institutions such as UiTM, UPTM, and other Malaysian higher education providers could incorporate SEL–digital literacy modules into orientation programmes, co-curricular courses, or communication subjects.

At a policy level, government agencies such as Malaysia's Ministry of Education (MOE) and Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) could develop national guidelines for digital social well-being among youth. These guidelines should include standards for positive online communication, algorithm transparency, and content moderation that encourage relational engagement rather than passive consumption. In addition, policymakers can support public–private partnerships between universities and technology providers to develop digital citizenship initiatives, aimed at promoting ethical online behaviour, combating cyberbullying, and encouraging peer support communities. Targeted campaigns for rural and lower-resource schools are especially vital, given the digital divide highlighted in this study. Policymakers should consider providing resources such as low-bandwidth digital learning tools, community digital labs, or subsidised connectivity for underserved regions.

Mental health professionals and counsellors should be aware of the dual role of online communication in shaping self-esteem and interpersonal relationships. School counselling units and university wellness centres can implement psychoeducation workshops on managing digital stress, reducing unhealthy comparison, and recognising negative online triggers. Interventions should focus on strengthening self-esteem offline as a protective buffer against harmful digital experiences.

Another promising approach is the development of peer-led support groups that create safe spaces for students to discuss digital challenges, identity concerns, and relationship difficulties stemming from online interactions. Research has shown that peer interaction is particularly effective for Generation Z because it leverages their preferred communication style and social identity needs.

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Given that digital access varies dramatically by geography and socio-economic status, practical steps should include equitable digital infrastructure initiatives. Universities and secondary schools could provide shared device programmes, access-friendly online learning platforms, or campus-based digital resource hubs to ensure consistent exposure to positive online communication opportunities. Tailored training programmes for rural educators, particularly in East Coast Malaysia, can help local schools adopt SEL-based digital literacy adapted to their cultural and infrastructural realities.

Acknowledgement

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