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The Impact of Social Media on Learning Behaviour and Academic Engagement among Generation-Z Students: A Qualitative Thematic Analysis

¹Dr. Sanjay Kumar*

Assistant Professor, Department of Education,
Dr. S. P. Singh College of Teacher Education, Motihari (Bihar)- 845437
E-Mail: sikhar.sanjay@gmail.com

Mr. Sandeep Kumar Srivastava***

Assistant Professor, Department of Education,
Subhwanti Institute of Education, Siwan (Bihar)- 841227
E-Mail: sandeepkumarsrivastav530@gmail.com

Dr. Ajay Pal ***

Associate Professor
Department of Psychology
J and A Degree College, Baheri, Uttar Pradesh- 243701
E-Mail: Drapsinghip@gmail.com

Shweta Vishwakarma****

Research Scholar, Department of Education,
Manyawar Kasiram Rajkiye Mahavidyalaya, Ninuawa, Farrukabad
(Affiliated- CSJM University Kanpur) Uttar Pradesh – 209601
E-Mail: vishwakermashweta@gmail.com

Abstract

The growing prominence of social media has significantly transformed the everyday experiences of Generation Z, particularly in the ways young people communicate, seek information, interact with others, and participate in learning. Social-media platforms offer considerable opportunities for knowledge sharing, collaboration, creative expression, communication, and independent learning. At the same time, excessive or inappropriate engagement with these platforms may contribute to distraction, ineffective time management, difficulties in maintaining academic attention, exposure to unreliable information, and concerns related to students' emotional well-being. The present study explores the relationship between social media and the learning behaviour of Generation Z students through a qualitative examination of existing literature. The study follows a literature-based qualitative approach and relies exclusively on secondary sources, including scholarly studies and theoretical writings related to social media, digital learning, Generation Z, student engagement, and digital literacy. The literature is analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns and significant dimensions of social-media use in relation to learning.

Five major themes emerge from the analysis: social media as an alternative space for learning; communication and collaborative engagement; digital literacy and the evaluation of online information; creativity and learner independence; and distraction, time management, and digital well-being. The analysis suggests that the influence of social media on learning is complex and largely dependent on the context and manner of its use. While social media can broaden learning opportunities, strengthen peer interaction, and provide access to diverse educational resources, excessive or uncritical engagement may undermine academic focus and productive learning practices. The study therefore emphasises that the educational value of social media is determined not simply by the technology itself but by the purpose, content, and regulation of its use. Developing digital literacy, critical-thinking abilities, self-regulation, and responsible digital citizenship is consequently essential for enabling Generation Z learners to engage with social media in meaningful and educationally productive ways.

Keywords: Generation Z; Social media; Learning Behaviour, Digital literacy; Collaborative learning, Critical thinking, Learner autonomy and Digital citizenship

I. Introduction: -

The rapid development of digital technologies has brought substantial changes to the contemporary educational landscape. The widespread use of smartphones, affordable internet access, social networking sites, and online educational resources has reshaped the ways students acquire knowledge, communicate, exchange information, and engage with learning communities. Within this changing environment, Generation Z represents a particularly important group of learners, as digital devices and online platforms have become closely integrated into their everyday lives. Their familiarity with digital technologies has influenced not only their patterns of social interaction but also their approaches to accessing and processing information. Social media has gradually moved beyond its traditional role as a medium for personal communication and entertainment. It has emerged as a dynamic digital environment in which users can exchange knowledge, participate in discussions, develop networks, express ideas creatively, and engage in informal educational activities. For students, these platforms provide access to a wide range of learning opportunities. They may watch educational content, share academic resources, join subject-related groups, communicate with classmates, seek clarification from peers, follow teachers and experts, and explore areas of knowledge that extend beyond the prescribed curriculum. Previous research on social media and learning has pointed to its potential to enhance learner engagement, motivation, collaboration, accessibility, and communication across physical and geographical boundaries. Nevertheless, the growing presence of social media in students' lives also raises concerns about its implications for effective learning. Digital platforms expose learners to an immense and continuously changing flow of information, and not all of this content is accurate, credible, or educationally valuable. Notifications, entertainment-oriented material, frequent online interactions, and prolonged browsing can divert students' attention from academic tasks. Existing qualitative research has drawn attention to concerns such as distraction, excessive time consumption, the reliability of online resources, and difficulties in maintaining productive interpersonal engagement while using social media for educational purposes.

The educational role of social media can therefore be understood as complex rather than uniformly beneficial or harmful. The same digital platforms that facilitate access to knowledge and encourage collaboration may also contribute to fragmented attention, information overload, and unproductive patterns of online behaviour. Previous qualitative investigations of students' experiences have indicated that social media can provide academic assistance and strengthen social connections while, at the same time, creating interpersonal and psychological challenges that may affect meaningful engagement with learning. Against this background, the present study examines the relationship between social media and the learning behaviour of Generation Z through a qualitative analysis of existing scholarly literature. Rather than focusing on the amount of time students spend on social-media platforms or attempting to establish statistical relationships between social-media use and academic achievement, the study seeks to interpret the broader patterns emerging from previous research. Particular attention is given to the ways in which social media influences communication, collaboration, digital literacy, critical evaluation of information, creativity, learner autonomy, concentration, time management, and digital well-being. By bringing these dimensions together, the study aims to develop a balanced understanding of the opportunities and challenges that social media presents within the learning experiences of Generation Z.

II. Review of Literature

Examining the role of social media in the development and inculcation of life skills has become increasingly important for several reasons. The widespread use of social media has made digital platforms an essential part of everyday life, particularly among younger generations. Therefore, understanding the influence of these platforms on human behaviour, learning, and personal development is highly significant (Bhowmick and Madhu, 2020).

Communication Skills: Social media has emerged as one of the major channels through which young people communicate and interact. It is therefore important to examine its influence on communication-related abilities, including active listening, empathy, expression, and conflict resolution. While digital platforms can promote interaction, excessive dependence on them may also affect the quality of direct interpersonal communication (Khanam, 2022).

Digital Literacy: Effective participation in social media requires users to possess appropriate digital knowledge and skills. It is necessary to investigate whether social media use contributes positively to the development of digital literacy or creates challenges related to the responsible and effective use of technology. In an increasingly technology-oriented society, digital literacy has become an essential life skill.

Critical Thinking and Evaluation of Information: Social media provides access to an enormous amount of information from multiple sources. Consequently, users require critical thinking abilities to differentiate reliable information from false, misleading, or biased content.

Examining the influence of social media on the development of critical thinking and information evaluation skills is therefore highly relevant (Bhowmick and Madhu, 2020).

Identity Formation: Digital platforms play an important role in influencing the way individuals perceive and present themselves. Social media may affect self-awareness, self-esteem, confidence,

and the overall process of identity development. Understanding these influences is important for supporting healthy psychological and personal growth among young people (Khanam, 2022).

Relationship Building and Social Skills: Social networking platforms provide opportunities for individuals to establish connections, maintain relationships, and interact with diverse groups of people. Their influence on important social abilities such as empathy, cooperation, collaboration, and networking needs to be examined because these skills contribute significantly to both personal and professional development.

Time Management and Productivity: Excessive engagement with social media may result in poor time management and a decline in productivity. Therefore, research is needed to identify ways of minimizing these negative consequences while encouraging the constructive use of social media for learning and skill development (Bhowmick and Madhu, 2020).

Mental Health and Well-being: Patterns of social media use have also been associated with concerns relating to anxiety, depression, loneliness, and emotional well-being. Exploring the relationship between social media engagement and psychological well-being is important for designing appropriate interventions, awareness programmes, and support mechanisms for young users (Khanam, 2022).

Ethical and Responsible Behaviour: The use of social media raises several concerns related to privacy, digital etiquette, online behaviour, and responsible digital citizenship. Studying how these platforms influence ethical judgement and responsible decision-making is essential for promoting a safe, respectful, and positive online environment.

Educational Opportunities: Social media platforms also provide access to a variety of learning resources, educational communities, and opportunities for developing new skills. Investigating the effectiveness of social media as a tool for education, continuous learning, and personal development is important for making the best possible use of its potential advantages (Bhowmick and Madhu, 2020).

Social media engagement plays a significant role in influencing the attitudes and behaviours of Generation Z. The process of social media engagement involves several components, including exposure to social media platforms, consumption of digital content, interaction and participation, critical assessment of information, social comparison, and identity development. These processes may influence an individual's self-esteem, resilience, and coping abilities, thereby affecting overall well-being and the formation of personal identity (Arjun and Juna, 2015).

III. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, literature-based research design to examine the relationship between social media and the learning behaviour of Generation Z students. The study is interpretive and descriptive in nature, with emphasis on understanding the recurring ideas, perspectives, and patterns presented in existing scholarship. Rather than measuring variables quantitatively, the study seeks to develop a contextual understanding of how social media may influence students' learning experiences and practices. As the study is based exclusively on

previously published literature, no primary data were collected. The research does not involve questionnaires, interviews, surveys, participants, or statistical procedures.

Sources of Data: The study relies entirely on secondary sources relevant to social media, Generation Z, education, and learning behaviour. The literature consulted includes: Peer-reviewed journal articles, published scholarly research studies, Academic books and theoretical works, studies addressing social media and education, and relevant literature concerning digital learning and student engagement. Particular attention was given to qualitative and conceptual studies that explore students' experiences and practices in digital and social-media-based learning environments. These studies provide insights into the educational opportunities and challenges associated with social-media use, including collaboration, learner engagement, independent learning, information access, distraction, and digital well-being.

IV. Analytical Procedure: -

The selected literature was examined using a thematic approach. Relevant ideas, observations, and findings were identified across the reviewed studies and subsequently organised into broader conceptual categories. The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns concerning the relationship between social media and students' learning behaviour.

Five principal themes emerged from the literature:

- ❖ Social media as an informal learning environment
- ❖ Communication and collaborative learning
- ❖ Digital literacy and critical thinking
- ❖ Creativity and learner autonomy
- ❖ Distraction, time management, and digital well-being

These themes provide the analytical framework for interpreting the educational opportunities and challenges associated with social-media use among Generation Z learners.

Rationale for the Qualitative Approach

A qualitative approach is appropriate for the present study because the purpose is not to establish statistical relationships or measure the frequency of social-media use, but to understand the broader educational meanings and patterns associated with it. Thematic analysis enables findings from different studies to be brought together and interpreted in relation to common issues and perspectives. Through this approach, the study develops a balanced understanding of social media as both a potential resource for learning and a source of educational challenges, depending on the nature, purpose, and extent of its use.

V. Findings and Thematic Analysis

The thematic examination of the existing literature reveals several recurring patterns concerning the relationship between social media and the learning behaviour of Generation Z. The findings indicate that social media functions as both a potential educational resource and a source

of challenges for learners. Six interconnected themes emerged from the analysis: social media as an informal learning space; communication and collaborative learning; digital literacy and critical evaluation; creativity and learner autonomy; distraction and academic concentration; and social relationships and digital well-being.

Social Media as an Informal Learning Space: One of the prominent themes emerging from the literature is the growing role of social media as an informal space for learning. Educational engagement is no longer confined to classrooms, libraries, or formally organised instructional settings. Through digital platforms, students can encounter lectures, tutorials, explanatory materials, academic discussions, and resources shared by peers and educators. This development has created opportunities for learning through everyday digital interaction. Students can pursue topics according to their interests, seek explanations when they encounter difficulties, and access supplementary material beyond the prescribed curriculum. Social media can consequently make learning more accessible, flexible, and interactive. Previous research has also highlighted convenience, motivation, engagement, and opportunities for learning beyond geographical boundaries as important benefits of social-media-based learning. However, learning through social media differs from learning within a structured educational environment. Educational material is generally presented alongside entertainment, commercial content, personal communication, and other forms of information. The absence of a clearly defined academic structure may make it difficult for students to distinguish valuable educational resources from irrelevant or unreliable content. The educational usefulness of social media therefore depends considerably on learners' ability to select, assess, and use appropriate content.

Communication and Collaborative Learning: Communication and collaboration constitute another significant dimension of social-media-based learning. Digital platforms enable students to interact with classmates and other learners quickly, regardless of their physical location. Academic groups and online communities can provide spaces where students exchange ideas, discuss assignments, share learning materials, ask questions, and offer peer support. Such interaction can extend the learning process beyond the boundaries of the classroom. Students can remain connected to their peers and continue academic discussions outside formal teaching hours. Social media can thus contribute to a more participatory form of learning in which knowledge is exchanged through interaction and collaboration. The literature suggests that opportunities for connection and collaborative engagement are among the important educational benefits associated with social media. Nevertheless, digital communication should not be regarded as a complete substitute for direct interpersonal interaction. Face-to-face communication develops additional dimensions of social and communicative competence, including the interpretation of gestures, facial expressions, tone, and other non-verbal forms of communication. A balanced learning environment should therefore integrate digital interaction with meaningful interpersonal engagement.

Digital Literacy and Critical Evaluation: A further theme concerns the importance of digital literacy in an environment characterised by unprecedented access to information. Generation Z

learners can obtain information quickly through social-media platforms, but accessibility does not necessarily indicate accuracy, reliability, or educational value. Students may encounter a mixture of credible sources, personal opinions, commercial messages, misinformation, biased representations, manipulated material, and incomplete accounts. The ability to distinguish among these forms of content has consequently become an essential component of contemporary learning. The literature identifies the credibility of online resources as an important concern associated with social-media-based learning. Students therefore need more than technical competence in operating digital platforms. They require the ability to question information, examine its source, compare alternative perspectives, verify claims, and assess evidence before accepting or sharing content. Digital literacy should consequently be understood as a combination of technological proficiency and critical judgement. In the context of Generation Z, the ability to navigate the digital environment responsibly is closely connected with the quality of learning that social media can facilitate.

Creativity and Learner Autonomy: Creativity and learner autonomy represent another important dimension emerging from the literature. Social media provides students with opportunities not only to consume information but also to produce and communicate their own content. Digital videos, presentations, podcasts, visual projects, digital narratives, and other creative formats can provide alternative ways of expressing knowledge and ideas. Such possibilities can encourage students to experiment with different forms of communication and develop confidence in presenting their ideas. Social media may therefore support learning approaches that move beyond conventional written assignments and encourage active participation and creative expression. The accessibility of digital resources can also promote learner autonomy. Students are able to explore subjects that correspond to their interests, search for additional explanations, and select resources according to their individual learning needs. This can contribute to a more independent approach to learning. However, autonomy is meaningful only when accompanied by self-regulation. The same freedom that enables students to explore educational content can also lead them towards unrelated entertainment and prolonged digital engagement. Learner independence therefore needs to be supported by appropriate guidance, purpose, and self-discipline.

Distraction, Time Management and Academic Concentration: Alongside its educational possibilities, social media presents significant challenges for students' attention and academic routines. The literature repeatedly identifies distraction and excessive time consumption as concerns associated with social-media use. Digital platforms are characterised by a continuous flow of notifications, messages, videos, images, and other forms of content. Consequently, students who initially access social media for academic purposes may shift their attention towards entertainment, personal communication, or unrelated material. Such interruptions may affect concentration and interfere with the completion of academic tasks. An important distinction emerging from the literature is therefore that between purposeful engagement and habitual engagement. Purposeful engagement involves using social media with a specific learning objective, such as accessing educational resources, discussing academic issues, collaborating with peers, or following relevant educational content.

Habitual engagement, in contrast, may involve repeated checking of notifications, continuous scrolling, entertainment-oriented consumption, or prolonged use without a clearly defined purpose. This distinction is important because the educational impact of social media cannot be adequately understood simply by considering the amount of time students spend online. The purpose, quality, and pattern of engagement are equally significant in determining whether social-media use contributes to or interferes with learning.

Social Relationships and Digital Well-being: The final theme concerns the relationship between social-media engagement, interpersonal relationships, and digital well-being. Social media can provide students with opportunities to maintain relationships, communicate with peers, find communities with shared interests, and obtain social or academic support. At the same time, digital interaction can generate challenges. Social comparison, pressure to maintain an idealised online identity, privacy concerns, cyber-related interpersonal difficulties, and psychological pressures may influence students' experiences of social media. The literature therefore presents social media as a space that can simultaneously promote social connectedness and create new forms of social pressure. The educational implications of this duality are significant because students' emotional and social experiences can influence their ability to engage effectively with learning. Digital well-being should consequently be considered an important component of contemporary education. Helping students develop healthy patterns of digital engagement involves not only teaching them how to access and use information but also enabling them to manage their online interactions, protect their privacy, recognise harmful digital behaviour, and maintain a healthy balance between online and offline life.

VI. Discussion

The thematic analysis of the reviewed literature demonstrates that the relationship between social media and the learning behaviour of Generation Z is multifaceted and shaped by the context in which digital platforms are used. Social media can broaden students' access to information, facilitate informal learning, encourage peer interaction and collaboration, support creative expression, promote learner independence, and expose students to a variety of perspectives. At the same time, the literature draws attention to several concerns, including distraction, excessive time consumption, difficulties in determining the credibility of online information, exposure to misinformation, diminished academic concentration, interpersonal challenges, and pressures associated with digital engagement. This combination of opportunities and challenges suggests that the educational influence of social media cannot be categorised simply as either positive or negative. Rather, its implications depend largely on the purpose, quality, context, and pattern of engagement. Social media can function as a productive learning resource when students use it intentionally to obtain educational information, communicate with peers, collaborate on academic activities, or explore areas of interest. Conversely, unregulated or habitual engagement may divert attention from academic activities and encourage patterns of use that are less conducive to meaningful learning.

Three interrelated factors are particularly significant in determining the educational value of social media.

Purposeful Engagement: The educational benefits of social media are more likely to emerge when students approach digital platforms with clearly defined learning objectives. Using social media to locate educational resources, participate in academic discussions, exchange ideas, or collaborate with peers can extend learning beyond conventional classroom boundaries. Purposeful engagement therefore distinguishes educational use from passive or entertainment-oriented consumption.

Critical Engagement: The abundance of information available through social media makes critical engagement essential. Students need to examine the reliability of sources, distinguish evidence from opinion, recognise bias, and verify information before accepting or sharing it. Digital access alone does not ensure meaningful learning; the ability to interpret and evaluate information is equally important.

Self-Regulated Engagement: The literature also highlights the importance of students' ability to regulate their digital behaviour. Effective learning requires learners to manage their time, control distractions, and establish appropriate boundaries between academic and recreational activities. Self-regulation can therefore help students derive educational benefits from social media without allowing digital engagement to interfere with academic responsibilities. Taken together, these dimensions indicate that social media should be understood not simply as a technological platform but as a learning resource whose educational value is shaped by the learner, the content, the context, and the manner in which it is used.

VII. Implications for Education

The findings of the study have important implications for contemporary educational practice. Rather than excluding social media from students' educational experiences, educational institutions can focus on developing the competencies required for its responsible and productive use.

Strengthening Digital Literacy: Digital literacy needs to extend beyond basic technological skills. Students should be equipped to assess the credibility of online sources, identify misinformation, recognise biased or manipulated content, and use digital information responsibly. Such competencies can help learners navigate the rapidly expanding information environment more effectively.

Promoting Critical Thinking: The widespread availability of information through social media reinforces the need for critical-thinking skills. Teachers can encourage students to compare different sources, examine evidence, question assumptions, and consider alternative viewpoints. Such practices can transform social media from a source of information consumption into an opportunity for critical inquiry.

Integrating Social-Media into Learning: When appropriately planned, social media can complement formal classroom instruction. Teachers may incorporate educational videos,

academic discussion spaces, collaborative digital projects, resource-sharing activities, and subject-specific online communities into their teaching practices. Such integration can provide learners with additional opportunities for interaction and knowledge construction.

Developing Self-Regulation and Time Management: Students should also be supported in developing strategies for managing their digital engagement. Establishing appropriate boundaries between academic and recreational use can help minimise distraction and maintain concentration. Time-management and self-regulation skills are therefore important components of effective digital learning.

Encouraging Responsible Digital Citizenship: Education should prepare students to participate responsibly in digital environments. This includes awareness of privacy, copyright, respectful online communication, cyberbullying, misinformation, and the potential consequences of sharing digital content. Responsible digital citizenship can help learners make informed and ethical decisions while interacting through social-media platforms. Overall, the educational response to social media should focus on guided and purposeful integration rather than complete restriction. Teachers and educational institutions have an important role in helping Generation Z develop the knowledge, critical judgement, and self-regulatory abilities required to use social media as a meaningful complement to formal education

VIII. Limitations

The present study is based exclusively on secondary literature and does not involve the collection or analysis of primary empirical data. The findings should therefore be interpreted as a qualitative synthesis of existing scholarship rather than as empirically generalisable conclusions. The study provides an interpretive understanding of the patterns identified in previous research but does not claim to represent the experiences of all Generation Z learners. A further limitation arises from the rapidly evolving nature of social-media technologies. Digital platforms, algorithms, patterns of user engagement, and online learning practices continue to develop over time. As a result, findings and interpretations presented in existing studies may not fully reflect subsequent changes in the digital environment. The relationship between social media and learning therefore remains an area that requires continued scholarly examination as technological practices and educational contexts evolve.

Conclusion:

Social media has emerged as a significant element of the contemporary learning environment experienced by Generation Z. Its integration into everyday life has created new possibilities for accessing educational resources, communicating with peers, collaborating on academic activities, pursuing independent learning, and expressing ideas creatively. However, the qualitative synthesis of existing literature indicates that the educational influence of social media is neither uniformly beneficial nor inherently problematic. Its impact is largely determined by the purpose, context, content, and patterns of engagement associated with its use. When employed constructively, social media can supplement classroom learning by providing students with additional resources, opportunities for interaction, and spaces for knowledge exchange. In contrast,

excessive or uncritical engagement may result in distraction, ineffective use of time, information overload, and difficulties in sustaining academic attention. The findings consequently highlight the need to move beyond simply providing students with access to digital technologies. Contemporary education must also equip learners with the competencies required to navigate digital environments thoughtfully and responsibly. Digital literacy, critical thinking, self-regulation, effective communication, and responsible digital citizenship are therefore increasingly important for meaningful engagement with social media. Educational institutions and teachers have a crucial role in developing these competencies. Rather than viewing social media solely as a source of distraction or treating it as an automatic solution to educational challenges, a balanced approach is required. Students should be guided towards purposeful, critical, and responsible use of digital platforms while maintaining appropriate boundaries between academic and recreational engagement. Ultimately, the educational potential of social media lies in its thoughtful integration into the learning process. It can serve as a valuable complement to teachers, classrooms, textbooks, and direct human interaction, but it should not be regarded as a replacement for these essential components of education. The effective use of social media therefore depends not simply on technological access but on the development of informed, critical, self-directed, and responsible learners.

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