

Exploring the Influence of Social Networking on Emotional Well-Being among Generation Z Students in Kisii County

Leonida Nyangweso Orwaru¹, Francisca Mbutitia² & Catherine Simiyu³

^{1,2,3}Department of Educational Psychology, Moi University, Kenya

Email: orwaruleonida@gmail.com; fngithil@mu.ac.ke; kitukatwa@mu.ac.ke

Abstract:

Social media has enabled people to communicate freely with anyone around the world. Today, social media generally impacts people's daily lives and Gen Z students in particular. The study was undertaken in tertiary institutions in Kisii County, Kenya with the purpose of establishing the implication of social networking on the emotional well-being of Gen Z students. The study's main objective was to; establish the influence of social networking on the emotional well-being of Gen Z students in tertiary institutions in Kisii County, Kenya. The study adopted Pragmatic paradigm and employed a convergent parallel mixed methods approach that was guided by both Uses and Gratifications and Social Network theories. Data was generated from a sample of 396 Gen Z students that was derived by use of the formula for calculating samples by Yamane from the targeted student population of 36,820. It also included 5 deans of students from five out of 10 tertiary institutions. The participants were selected through probability sampling that entailed stratified multistage and simple random for the students. For the deans of students, purposive sampling design was employed. A pilot study was conducted to ensure reliability of the instruments. The reliability was estimated using Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha which was above .74 from 5 items. Additionally, quantitative data was analyzed by descriptive statistics. The descriptive statistic method was employed for getting the frequency, mean and percentage. The findings of the study showed that Gen Z students were actively involved in social networking with different motives for engagement. They also access different types of content through various platforms some which may be emotionally useful and some harmful to their well-being. It also recommends the incorporation of emotional wellness and digital counseling into student support systems and establishment of peer mentorship initiatives to strengthen real-life emotional bonds.

Keywords: *Social Media, Emotional Well-Being, Generation Z, Students, Tertiary Institutions*

1.0 Introduction

In recent years, the pervasive influence of social networking platforms has significantly impacted the lives of individuals across generations and in particular the Generation Z cohort. With the advent of digital technology and the internet, this cohort has grown up in a world where social networking sites serve as integral components of their daily lives. The implications of this phenomenon extend beyond mere communication and networking; they delve into the intricate fabric of emotional wellbeing, especially in the context of tertiary education institutions. This

generation is characterized by their lifelong exposure to digital technology, making them proficient in both real and virtual worlds. They are highly adaptable to technology, value education, aspire to higher education, and are drawn to entrepreneurship. However, their heavy reliance on digital technology has drawbacks, including potential challenges in physical interaction, emotional distress, and information literacy deficits (Ariffin et al., 2024). The study aim was to establish the influence of social networking on the emotional well-being of Gen Z students in tertiary institutions in Kisii County, Kenya.

2.0 Literature review

According to Trabelsi 2022, well-being is strongly linked to happiness and life satisfaction. Consequently, there are studies that suggest that higher levels of social networking site (SNS) usage are associated with reduced emotional well-being, emphasizing the complex interplay between individuals' attitudes toward SNS, their usage patterns, and their overall emotional health. Additionally, measures of emotional well-being were further categorized into life satisfaction, sense of purpose/meaning, happiness/positive affect, and self-esteem respectively (Goering et al., 2024).

Emotional well-being among youth can be defined as a generally positive emotional state characterized by high self-esteem, resilience, and the capacity to engage in health-promoting behaviors, ultimately leading to self-actualization and self-efficacy (Msn et al., 2019). The same study identifies three core attributes of emotional well-being in young people: the prevalence of positive emotions, strong self-esteem, and resilience. Positive emotions are reflected in frequent feelings of happiness, optimism, and satisfaction with life, as opposed to persistent experiences of negative emotions such as fear, anger, worry, or dissatisfaction. Furthermore, youth with high emotional well-being typically exhibit positive self-esteem, a trait consistently emphasized in literature on Generation Z. In contrast, the absence of emotional well-being and self-efficacy has been linked to increased engagement in risky behaviors, including substance use and unsafe sexual practices.

Wall et al. (2023) expand this understanding by outlining four key dimensions of emotional well-being: purpose and meaning, community and belonging, coping and stress management, and subjective well-being. Purpose and meaning refer to an individual's sense of direction and significance in life. Community and belonging involve social connection, trust, and the perception of safety derived from being part of a supportive community. Coping and stress management encompass resilience, adaptability, and flexibility in response to life's challenges, as well as the ability to manage anxiety. Lastly, subjective well-being reflects an individual's overall evaluation of their emotional and psychological state. Gen Z students regard belonging to groups of their peers and if they don't feel that sense of belonging, that aspect alone can impair their emotional regulation and contribute to mental health issues, detracting from their emotional well-being.

The presence of social media in the lives of Gen Zers has affected their emotional wellbeing. It is acknowledged that social media can also exert substantial psychological and emotional impacts on students (Purnama, 2023). Moreover, the ongoing pressure to align with social standards and project an idealized image on social media often takes a toll on students' emotional well-being. This constant digital performance can result in mental fatigue, diminished self-worth, and a growing sense of loneliness. As Purnama (2023) notes, it is crucial to understand that the

psychological effects of social media are complex and far-reaching. These impacts extend beyond surface-level emotional responses, influencing students' long-term mental health, the quality of their relationships, and their ability to focus and succeed academically.

On the other hand, Pescadero & Cabahug (2023) in a study to determine the relationship of Social Media Engagement and Psychosocial Well-Being among Generation Z disclosed that students were highly engaged to various social media platforms for watching movies, getting relief from academic stress, sharing pictures, looking at funny sharing, keeping in touch with the relatives and getting information regarding current social events. Involvement in such activities was for providing them emotional relief from academic stresses.

One of the potential risks of relying on online technologies is cyberbullying and the use of social media among students including the Gen Z students in tertiary institutions has been associated with cyber bullying. While internet technologies offer convenience and global connectivity, prolonged and unfiltered exposure can pose significant risks to users' emotional, psychological, and even physical safety (Hossain, 2022). In a qualitative study conducted among university students in Bangladesh, Hossain (2022) discovered a strong link between experiences of cyberbullying and various psychological challenges. Victims of cyberbullying were found to suffer higher rates of emotional and behavioral disorders, highlighting the detrimental mental health effects of such online harassment.

The study further identified that most cyberbullying incidents occur on popular social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp, with Facebook being the most commonly reported channel for such behavior among students. Hossain (2022) emphasized that cyberbullying has become a recurring issue, leading to a range of negative psychological consequences including anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, and, in extreme cases, suicide findings echoed by Samat and Orientation (2018).

Additional, other studies have explored how digital engagement affects emotional intelligence and social functioning among Generation Z. Contrary to assumptions that screen time reduces social skills, research by Imjai et al. (2024) suggests that while social abilities remain relatively intact, emotional intelligence especially the ability to manage and interpret emotional states tends to decline with excessive digital interaction. Nonetheless, the development of strong social competencies can help counterbalance this decline, as such skills significantly contribute to emotional regulation and understanding in online environments.

Moreover, students' mental health serves as a crucial mediator in the relationship between technological stress and academic performance. According to Zali et al. (2018), overuse of digital devices is directly linked to reduced mental well-being, which in turn undermines students' academic effectiveness. The study also warned that excessive screen time is negatively impacting the holistic growth of younger generations. While digital tools can support learning and career advancement, they are simultaneously reducing opportunities for physical activity, a key component of both mental and physical development. Over-reliance on technology is gradually distancing students from healthy routines, potentially threatening their long-term well-being.

According to Mahmud (2018), youth that spend a lot of time interacting through a screen rather than real life had their concentration and self-esteem affected, hence significantly affecting their personal relationships. He further argues that youth tend to rely on social media for various

reasons like allowing them to portray themselves differently from what they are in reality and managing different identities online. While online platforms have brought numerous benefits to university students, they also come with significant drawbacks. A study by Aizezi and Chen (2021) points out that although digital media positively influences students' lives, it can also disrupt their sense of self. The constant exposure to curated online content may complicate the process of self-identity formation and even trigger identity crises, ultimately reshaping how students live and interact with others.

In a similar vein, research conducted by Tayo et al. (2019) revealed that social media contributes heavily to internet addiction and academic distraction among undergraduates. Their findings showed that some students habitually engage in chatting on social platforms during lectures, while others tend to delay academic work in favor of browsing social media. Additionally, several participants admitted to using social media simply to pass time rather than for academic enrichment. These patterns highlight the growing challenge of social media dependency within university settings and underscore the extent to which it can interfere with students' academic focus and productivity.

An investigation conducted in Turkey in a study group comprising of 137 university students aimed to understand why SNS usage makes youngsters happy. It was done using a phenomenological design, which is a qualitative research method to determine why SNS usage causes happiness in accordance with university student opinions and experiences. (Dogan, 2018). The findings showed several reasons attributed to the happiness experienced by use of social networking.

The reasons attributed to the happiness include but not limited to ease of accessing and disseminating information, as a leisure activity, ease of shopping and being up to date (Dogan, 2018). The research also highlighted that users of social networking sites (SNS) tend to engage in constant communication, often driven by curiosity and a desire to stay informed. To maintain this connectivity, they rely on various digital devices and internet plans, ensuring they are always updated with current trends and news. Marciano et al. (2023) observed that sharing or watching humorous videos with friends is positively associated with increased feelings of happiness.

Many Generation Z students report experiencing a sense of life satisfaction when using social media platforms. For some, viewing or sharing content such as photos or status updates related to their social life brings a sense of fulfillment. However, the effect of social media on individuals' satisfaction with their physical environment is nuanced. On one hand, exposure to diverse cultures, lifestyles, and events through digital content can spark inspiration. On the other, it may also lead to feelings of inadequacy or dissatisfaction with one's current circumstances. For example, seeing others travel or experience luxurious settings can evoke a desire for change or foster envy. Ultimately, the impact depends on how individuals interpret what they see online, their mindset, and their ability to distinguish between curated digital portrayals and real life (Cheng et al., 2024).

In a study on social media addiction among university students in Saudi Arabia, majority of the respondents reported that they spend more than four hours on social networking sites and as a result this negatively impacts their academic performances. More than four hours a day, checking it while eating, and immediately they wake up. Further, majority of the students feel depressed and bored if the SNSs don't exist (Khormi et al., 2016). The findings align with evidence showing that

emotional well-being can be negatively impacted by a phenomenon widely recognized as the *fear of missing out* (FoMO). This fear arises when individuals feel excluded from social experiences that others appear to be enjoying (Webster et al., 2021). The study further emphasized that the type and presence of feedback received on social media whether affirmative, critical, or entirely absent can significantly influence a person's emotional state, determining whether the experience supports or undermines their mental well-being.

Kim (2017) posits that digital platforms have the potential to expand users' social circles, enhance interpersonal connections, and provide increased opportunities for emotional support. Online social interactions may reduce feelings of isolation, especially among adolescents, thereby supporting their overall psychological health. Furthermore, social media often serves as a coping mechanism for young people with limited face-to-face social skills. It enables them to engage in meaningful interactions, establish friendships, and explore personal identity in a way that might be difficult in traditional settings. In a related study, it was revealed that many Generation Z students experience a distinct form of anxiety rooted in uncertainty about the future an anxiety captured in the lingering question, "what comes next?" This apprehension is often amplified by their deep connection to social media. These platforms frequently reflect and reinforce stressors already present in students' lives, such as academic pressure, employment uncertainty, financial strain, maintaining an idealized digital persona, and a general fear of what the future holds (Type et al., 2024).

Social media can have both a positive and negative impact on an individual's self-esteem. The young people frequently post images of themselves ('selfies') online, a presentation of self that is linked to the perception of peer acceptance and level of belonging. When this happens, the number of likes or comments a student may receive through social media will indicate peer acceptance and level of belonging. A correlational study that sought to establish an inventory of false presentation behaviors on face book found out that when one received many likes or positive comments, then that indicated peer acceptance. (Wright & Obst, 2018). On the other hand, some studies suggest that social media can play a supportive role in helping young people adjust to life in college. Digital platforms offer students the opportunity to engage meaningfully with campus life, connect with peers, and position themselves as proactive participants in both global conversations and future leadership roles (Woods et al., 2019). Through these platforms, students navigate social and academic environments, strengthening their presence as members of both their institutions and the wider digital community.

In a related study exploring the connection between attitudes toward social networking sites (SNSs), frequency of use, and emotional well-being, it was revealed that frequent SNS use has a notable impact on emotional quality of life, particularly contributing to negative emotional states. The research found that one's attitude toward social connection was the most influential predictor of SNS engagement, followed by perceptions of ease of use and personal confidence in navigating these platforms (Hunt & Krishnan, 2021). The findings underscore a significant relationship while social media provides an outlet for connection, increased usage may diminish emotional well-being.

Moreover, internet use has become deeply intertwined with the routines of modern life, especially among youth who have grown up in a digital-first world. This generation, often referred to as digital natives, engages with the internet at exceptionally high rates. However, overwhelming

evidence points to a correlation between excessive internet use and a rise in emotional challenges, including anxiety and stress (Mandi, 2024).

According to Muhamoud et al. (2025), members of Generation Z often perceive their social media followers particularly on platforms like Instagram as nonjudgmental audiences. This perception encourages them to express themselves more freely online. This represents a shift in how social validation is sought and obtained. Unlike previous generations who relied on face-to-face interaction for reassurance and acceptance, Gen Z increasingly seeks validation in virtual spaces, reshaping the nature of interpersonal feedback and emotional affirmation.

The emotional well-being of Generation Z students in tertiary institutions has increasingly come under scrutiny due to their heavy engagement with social networking platforms. In Kisii County, students are deeply immersed in digital spaces, often turning to platforms like TikTok, Instagram, X, Facebook and WhatsApp for entertainment, distraction, and emotional relief. While these platforms can help students feel connected and offer temporary comfort during stressful moments, excessive use has been linked to feelings of anxiety, irritability, and emotional dependency. Some students experience frustration, mood swings, and even anger when they cannot access their devices, pointing to a growing emotional reliance on online interactions.

Research further suggests that digital environments can alter how students perceive themselves and others. The pressure to maintain a positive online image, constant online exposure, and lack of face-to-face communication can erode emotional resilience and self-esteem. Despite these concerns, there remains a gap in localized studies that explore the deeper emotional consequences of social media use among Gen Z students in Kenya. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, there is a pressing need to understand how prolonged online engagement affects students' emotional stability, coping mechanisms, and their ability to navigate everyday emotional challenges in real life.

3.0 Materials and Methods

In order to achieve the research objective and gain deeper understanding of the influence of online networking on the emotional well-being of Gen Z students in tertiary institutions in Kisii County, the study utilized convergent parallel mixed methods design. This design involved combining or integrating qualitative and quantitative research in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem. This is a one phase design where both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed and then compared to see if data confirms or disconfirms each other. The core assumption of this form of inquiry is that the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches provides a more complete understanding of a research problem than either approach alone. In this design, the investigator typically collected both qualitative and quantitative data at roughly the same time and then integrated the information in the interpretation of the overall results (Creswell, 2018).

In line with mixed methods research, the study was based on pragmatic paradigm. Creswell (2018) explains that pragmatism does not adhere strictly to a single philosophical system or view of reality. This perspective aligns with mixed methods research, which enables researchers to incorporate both quantitative and qualitative approaches in their studies. He further notes that pragmatists reject the idea of a singular, unified reality. Similarly, mixed methods research

embraces a variety of strategies for gathering and analyzing both numerical and narrative data, aiming to offer the most comprehensive understanding of a research issue

Since pragmatism in its flexibility, opens the door to multiple methods, thereby integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods. This was beneficial for studying the implications of online social networking on the socio-emotional wellbeing of Gen Z students in tertiary institutions. Further, due to its methodological flexibility pragmatism allows researchers to use a variety of methods either qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods. It was best suited for this study since allowed for not only qualitative and quantitative data collection methods but also analysis.

The research adopted both stratified multi-stage and census sampling designs. First, the Gen Z students were stratified into various tertiary institutions, to create a sampling frame showing how many first and second years are enrolled in each institution. The population was taken from the institutions first by having students per their year of study, and in each year, according to gender. Here, multiple characteristics were employed at once. That is year of study, and gender which was in terms of male and female. They were further stratified as per their departments or schools. Since all students were eligible, systematic random sampling was used whereby every kth case of the students already selected and were within the Gen Z cohort were then selected for inclusion in the sample. For the Deans of students and or heads of departments, purposive sampling was employed. They were sampled purposively because they had specific characteristics or knowledge relevant to the study's objectives. Also, this was because in most cases, there was one head of the participating institution or their assignee.

Therefore, the sample size for the study comprised of 396 Gen Z students who were used as a study proportion to aid in obtaining the data. For the qualitative data, the researcher conducted three focus group discussions with a sample of 36 participants drawn from the sample. The study selected focus group participants based on their direct experience with the topic, ensuring they shared similar backgrounds to encourage open and honest discussions. Care was taken to choose individuals who could clearly express their thoughts, were available for the session, and were comfortable sharing their views without overpowering others. In getting the sample, the researcher considered the year of study of the participants, stratified them by gender and ensured randomly within the strata, selected the groups. Each group represented a type of institution they were studying. There were also key informant interview schedule with 5 deans of students from the selected tertiary institutions. There were 10 tertiary institutions but only five were purposively selected to participate in the study.

The researcher utilized questionnaires for quantitative data collection and interview guide for focus group discussion for qualitative data collection. The reason for collecting both quantitative and qualitative data was to fuse the results from the two forms of data collection. By so doing, facilitated in bringing greater insight into the problem than would be obtained by either type of data separately (Cresswell, n.d. 2018).

For the quantitative data collection, a questionnaire was the key data collection instrument. The questions were carefully formulated to ensure consistency across all respondents. It comprised of closed ended questions with responses that the respondent selected what they felt applied to them.

The questionnaire adopted the Likert scale because they are a practical and accessible method of collecting data.

Unlike open-ended questions, Likert scales are closed-ended and don't ask respondents to generate ideas or justify their opinions. This makes them quick for respondents to fill out and ensures they can easily yield data from large samples within a short time. It also comprised of close-ended items, rated responses as well as rank orderings. Since Likert scales assign numerical values to each response option for example 1 for Strongly Disagree, 2 for Disagree, they make the data easily quantifiable. This allows researchers to perform statistical analysis, such as calculating means, standard deviations, or conducting correlation studies and so was very ideal for the study. The quantitative data collection tool addressed online characteristics of Gen Z students, the type of content that is accessed through social networking and examined the implications of social networking on the emotional well-being of the Gen Z college students.

The questionnaire comprised of two sections with scales measuring different variables. The first section had 5 items and was about demographics and it included items that were classified as moderating variables, the items include; age, year of study, school and programme enrolled in. The respondent was required to tick the information that was applicable to him or her. The second section was measuring the impact of social networking on the emotional wellbeing of Gen Z students and was also to be ranked.

Triangulation of data collection methods was employed by use of focus group discussions and interviews. In qualitative interviews, the researcher conducts face-to-face interviews with participants, telephone interviews, or engages in focus group interviews with six to twelve interviewees in each group. These interviews involve unstructured and generally open-ended questions that are few in number and intended to elicit views and opinions from the participants (John W. Creswell, n.d. 2018).

The flexibility of this convergent parallel mixed methods design allows for the discovery or elaboration of information that is important to participants thus eliciting more information. The interviews delved into the personal experiences and perceptions of the Gen Z students on online networking and their socio-emotional wellbeing. It also allowed the researcher to ensure that same core information was elicited from each participant, while also providing for the flexibility to probe more deeply into the rich descriptions of experiences that participants shared. The qualitative tools addressed how online social networking affects emotional well-being of the Gen Z students in the tertiary institutions.

The questionnaires designed for data collection were of the Likert scale type. The scale helped quantify subjective data and made it easy to analyze patterns and trends. They were designed to collect quantitative data on the implications of social networking on the socio-emotional wellbeing of Gen Z students in the tertiary institutions. The Likert scale consisted of a range of statements and respondents indicated their level of agreement or frequency based on a scale. The respondents chose the statements that best described their experience. The questionnaires were in two sections. Part A contained bio data information and Part B onwards had items based on the objectives of the study. The responses to the questionnaires are varied and not confined to one type. As illustrated, the Likert scale has five response categories ranked and abbreviated as follows: 5- Strongly Agree (SA) 4- Agree (A) 3- Moderately Agree (U) 2- Disagree (D) 1-Strongly disagree

Other scales included responses or categories namely; Always, Often, and Never. When this scoring is scored, always has the highest score and never has the least. Others include ranking in order of priority. Discussions and conclusions were done as per the scores in that those who strongly agreed had a high score of 5 while those who strongly disagreed had the lowest score of 1. The maximum score on a response depended on the number of items per scale.

For the Focus group discussions, recordings were done and field notes were taken in order to capture all the information as it was being discussed. Also, the exact notes were important as they helped in the analysis stage because they captured the precise statements made by the participants and were used as exact quotes to answer the questions of the research. This was then presented according to the themes as per the study objectives. These data was analyzed thematically.

After obtaining approval of the research proposal by the board of graduate studies and subsequent permission from the National Council for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI), the researcher embarked on the process of data collection. First, data collection for piloting was done in order to pretest the research instruments and thereafter actual data collection followed. The researcher with the research assistants (who had been trained) visited the tertiary institutions, explained to the deans and principals about the intention to collect data as well as the purpose and significance of the study. The researcher presented copies of the permits and provided consent institutional consent which were signed by the authorities. The researcher then sought and obtained the permission of the college administration before proceeding to the respondents.

The researcher then requested to meet with the first and second year Gen Z students and introduced self and the research assistants. The research assistants were taken through their roles in order to maintain the ethical standards as well as data credibility. Data collection was done in two phases with the first one being the pilot whereby the data collection instruments were pretested. Then the second phase was the collection of the actual study data using the instruments.

The researcher explained to the respondents about the study and the reasons why it was important. Then the researcher went ahead and explained about the structure of the questions and allowed the participants to ask questions in case they might have any questions with regards to the study. Data collection tools were then distributed to the respondents and they were given time to respond. For some institutions, the respondents asked that the questionnaires be left with them so that they are collected later. This was because of their busy schedule. This was respected and the research assistants went back the following day to collect the filled questionnaires. After collection the questionnaires were then coded in readiness for analysis and analyzed.

Similarly, for the qualitative data, three focus group discussions were held and interviews with the deans or heads of departments were held. Each focus group for the Gen Z students had 12 members. The researcher requested the deans or heads of institutions or their assignees to help in identification of the participants for the focus group discussions. The researcher assembled the respondents, together with the research assistants and leading the discussions, the researcher welcomed the participants and thanked them for accepting to take part in the study. After establishing the rapport and creating a free atmosphere, the ground rules were set. The rules included issues like participating in the group was voluntary, and participants had the right to abstain from discussing any issue that they were not comfortable with. Also emphasized was the

respect for each other, valuing each participants' contributions, that the participants would do most of the talking. They were also assured of confidentiality.

During the discussions, the researcher and the assistants were keen to listen actively without interrupting in order to allow free flow of information. The consent was sought from the participants of the study so that the research assistants would take notes and also do an audio recording. This was to back up the notes taken so as to ensure nothing was left out. The information was later arranged into themes according to the objectives for analysis. The process was the same for the three groups. As for the key informant interview, the researcher conducted one on one interview with the deans of students, using an already prepared interview schedule. The researcher thanked the interviewees, presented the informed consent and stressed the importance of the interview. In the same breadth, notes were taken so as to fully capture the views. All the information gathered from the interviews and focus group discussions was analyzed and is discussed alongside the quantitative data gathered through the questionnaires.

4.0 Results and Discussions

4.1 Response rate for the students

Data was collected from students drawn from Tertiary institutions in Kisii County, Kenya. A total of 396 questionnaires were issued; out of which 330 were returned and used in the analysis which representing a response rate of 83.33%. Table 1 represents the response rate to the questionnaire.

Table 1: Response rate questionnaire

	Count	Percentage (%)
Returned	330	83.33
Non-returned	66	16.67
Total	396	100

Source: Research Data 2025

This resulted to 83.33% overall response rate. The response rate for the study was within the recommended levels as argued by Ruth & Peter (2013), who stated that a response rate of 75% is considered excellent and a representative of the population (Ruth & Peter, 2013). The high response rate achieved was attributed to self-administration of the questionnaires applied by the researcher. This was also as a result of prior notification of the intended data collection to the prospective respondents and the presence of research assistants who helped the researcher. Even though the respondents were left with the questionnaires in order for them to fill, they were allowed to call in case they needed any clarifications or had any questions. This contributed to the achieved response rate.

4.2 Data presentation, analysis and interpretation

The collected data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative data analysis approaches. The Data collected from the questionnaire was analyzed, interpreted and presented on the basis of objectives of the study. Quantitative data was analyzed descriptively using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 26. Since this study is descriptive in nature, a descriptive statistics method was employed for getting the frequency, mean, and percentage. The influencing factors were measured using descriptive statistics. Qualitative analysis was done on the data

obtained from the semi-open-ended items, interview schedule and the focus group. The qualitative data was also categorized in themes in accordance with research objectives and discussed along with quantitative presentation. The focus group discussion aided in filling the gaps by providing in-depth information in responding to the objectives, corroborating the numeric data from the quantitative data.

According to Creswell (2018) descriptive design is key on collecting qualitative and quantitative data, this is obtained through using both open ended and closed questionnaires. This study was guided by the same ideal while collecting data. The data was discussed and presented through tabulation, graphs, charts, and diagrams where inferences were made.

The objective of the study was to determine the influence of social networking on the emotional well-being of Gen Z students in tertiary institutions in Kisii County, Kenya. The researcher provided the respondents with statements and asked them to indicate their level of agreement. The coding used was as follows: Strongly Disagree (SD) – 1, Disagree (D) – 2, Neutral (N) – 3, Agree (A) – 4, and Strongly Agree (SA) – 5. This study aimed to explore in detail how the social networking influence the emotional well-being of the Gen Zs.

Table 2: Emotional well-Being of Gen Z students

Statement	SD	D	U	A	SD	Mean	SD
Social networking influences my feelings	48 (14.5%)	57 (17.3%)	58 (17.6%)	94 (28.5%)	73 (22.1%)	3.26	1.36
I express myself better on social networks	37 (11.2%)	55 (16.7%)	41 (12.4%)	95 (28.8%)	102 (30.9%)	3.52	1.37
Social networking has improved my self-awareness	23 (7.0%)	22 (6.7%)	28 (8.5%)	114 (34.5%)	143 (43.3%)	4.01	1.19
Social networking helps me calm down after difficulties	28 (8.5%)	45 (13.6%)	46 (13.9%)	114 (34.5%)	97 (29.4%)	3.63	1.27
It matters a lot how people view me online	73 (22.1%)	68 (20.6%)	32 (9.7%)	80 (24.2%)	77 (23.3%)	3.06	1.51

Source: Research Data 2025

From table 2, 48 (14.5%) respondents strongly disagreed when asked whether social networking influences their feelings. However, 57 (17.3%) respondents disagreed, 58 (17.6%) respondents were undecided, 94 (28.5%) respondents agreed while 73 (22.1%) respondents strongly agreed. The mean for this was 3.26 with a standard deviation of 1.36. This is so because majority of the respondents agreed.

When asked whether they express themselves better on social networks, 37 (11.2%) respondents strongly disagreed, 55 (16.7%) respondents disagreed, 41 (12.4%) respondents were undecided, 95 (28.8%) respondents agreed while 102 (30.9%) respondents strongly agreed. The mean and standard deviation for this was 3.52 and 1.37 respectively. This is so because majority of the respondents strongly agreed.

On whether social networking has improved their self-awareness, 23 (7.0%) respondents strongly disagreed, 22 (6.7%) respondents disagreed, 28 (8.5%) respondents were undecided, 114 (34.5%)

respondents agreed while 143 (43.3%) respondents strongly agreed. The mean and standard deviation for this was 4.01 and 1.19 respectively. This is so because majority of the respondents strongly agreed.

Furthermore, they were asked whether social networking helps them calm down after difficulties, 28 (8.5%) respondents strongly disagreed. However, 45 (13.6%) respondents disagreed, 46 (13.9%) respondents were undecided, 114 (34.5%) respondents agreed while 97 (29.4%) respondents strongly agreed. The mean for this was 3.63 with a standard deviation of 1.27. This is so because majority of the respondents agreed.

Lastly, when asked whether it matters a lot how people view them online, 73 (22.1%) respondents strongly disagreed, 68 (20.6%) respondents disagreed, 32 (9.7%) respondents were undecided, 80 (24.2%) respondents agreed while 77 (23.3%) respondents strongly agreed. The mean for this was 3.06 with a standard deviation of 1.51. This is so because majority of the respondents agreed.

Further findings from interviews indicated that social networking influences Gen Zs feelings, expression, improved their self-awareness and helps them calm down during difficulties. The findings are as follows;

“Social networking can affect the emotional well-being of students, it can arouse a lot of emotions especially when it comes to online dating. Some of the things happening online can be very detrimental”. Principal one of the Tertiary Institutions

On the issue of emotional wellbeing and online interactions, most Gen Z students described it as exciting, addictive whereas some felt empowered by the ability to connect with many people instantly, while others mentioned experiencing pressure to maintain an image or respond promptly to conversations.

“When I do a post and get more likes, I feel good and it makes me happy but when I don’t get few likes, I get depressed and at times loose hope” FGD 1 Group Member

On the same breath, according to the principal of one institution, also agreed social media plays a significant role in shaping students’ emotional wellbeing. He said,

“In this institution, we have observed cases where students face anxiety, depression, or self-esteem issues due to cyberbullying, online comparison, or pressure to maintain a certain lifestyle online. At the same time, social media can also offer support through motivational content, spiritual guidance, or access to mental health resources. The key is to guide students in using these platforms mindfully and critically”.

Respondents unanimously agreed that social media has a profound influence on students’ emotional wellbeing. The study found that students often experience anxiety, low self-esteem, and even depression resulting from cyberbullying, unrealistic comparisons, and the pressure to maintain a certain lifestyle online.

However, it was also noted that social media can serve as a platform for emotional support and motivation when students engage with uplifting or educational content. One respondent stated, “If

we can guide them to follow mental health and motivational pages, social media can actually help rather than harm.” This finding is in agreement with that of Park et al., (2023) who also found out that use of social networking among students sometimes helps them divert from stressful situations.

5.0 Conclusion and recommendation

On how social networking affect the emotional well-being of Gen Z students in tertiary institutions, the study concluded that social networking influences one’s feelings and helps them calm down after difficulties. Also, it matters a lot how people view someone online and social network helps one express him/herself better and improves self-awareness.

Based on the findings, the study made the following recommendations:

- 1) Incorporate emotional wellness and digital counseling into student support systems
Given that social networking plays a significant role in shaping students’ emotional and self-perception, tertiary institutions should prioritize emotional wellness as part of their student support services. This can be achieved by organizing regular forums or discussions focused on the emotional impact of social media. In addition, institutions should provide access to digital counseling services to help students effectively cope with stress, manage anxiety, and build resilience in handling emotionally charged online experiences.
- 2) The study recommends the development of a comprehensive policy to guide responsible social media use within tertiary institutions in Kenya, aimed at promoting ethical digital engagement, safeguarding institutional reputation, and fostering a respectful online environment for all stakeholders.

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Email of Corresponding Author:

orwaruleonida@gmail.com

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Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

About the Author

Leonida Orwaru holds a Master of Education (Guidance and Counseling) from Egerton University and is currently a candidate for Doctor of Philosophy (Educational Psychology) degree in the School of Education, Department of Educational Psychology at Moi University. Her research interest include: Mental Health, Early Childhood Development and Social Capital.

Dr. Francisca Mbutitia is a senior Lecturer in the School of Education, Department of Educational Psychology, Moi University.

Dr. Catherine Simiyu is a senior Lecturer in the School of Education, Department of Educational Psychology, Moi University.

Email of Corresponding Author:

orwaruleonida@gmail.com

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