STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT NEW PALTZ

"The Most Anxious Generation"

The Relationship Between Gen Z Students, Social Media, and Anxiety

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Honors Thesis Research Paper

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Table of Contents

Abstract

This proposed study explores the relationship between Gen Z students and anxiety. The primary research of this study is based off of four interviews with current Gen Z college students, as well data collected from peer reviewed studies, government data and statistics. This study has revealed that a post-graduation fear of the unknown plays a large role in the upwards trend of anxiety disorders among Gen Z college students. This is heavily influenced by the increasing use of technology and the effects of social media, like FOMO, pressures of social comparison, and the immediacy of results. School, politics, school shootings, and financial worries are also deciding factors of mental health issues among this age group.

Keywords: Communications and Public Relations, Social Media, Anxiety, FOMO

Introduction

Members of Generation Z, born between the mid-to-late 1990s to the early 2010s, have been experiencing higher levels of stress and anxiety than their Millennial, Gen X, and Boomer predecessors were at their age-especially in regards to the future. This jarring revelation stems from a number of ever changing factors, ranging from school pressures to economic fears to political concerns to even gun control. While these issues continue to plague Gen Z, research has proven that a fear of the unknown, heightened by social media and a growing reliance on technology, is one of the primary causes that have instigated this increase in mental health issues among today's youth.

Generation Z, making up today's adolescents, teenagers, and young adults, are the first generation to not know a world where social media and technology aren't a part of everyday life. Recent studies have shown that "75% of [Gen Z] own smart devices and access them multiple times per hour…[while] most spend at least 9h interacting with digital content daily." According to a study by Jean M. Twenge, an expert in psychology and renown author of the Millennial-centered "Generation Me," "the mechanisms of adolescents' social interaction have changed." While Gen X and Millennials would spend their free time socializing with others in person-whether it be at the movies, driving around, or going outside-Gen Z are spending this time alone on social media instead. These changes in behavior have led to increased feelings of loneliness and social isolation among members of Gen Z, which in return, has resulted in more mental health issues.

Twenge has also found that "studies using large samples consistently find that more frequent users of digital media are lower in psychological well-being than less frequent users." Examples of low psychological well-being include more stress, feelings of loneliness and social isolation, anxiety and depression. Essentially, studies of Gen Z continue to show a growing number of people, especially students, who are suffering from anxiety and depression in relation to the amount of technology they use.

In response to the findings of these studies, I have conducted four interviews with Gen Z college students who suffer from anxiety to understand and conclude why these mental health issues have become so prevalent among this age group. While these interviews are made up of four, white women who attend college and are not representative of the entire Gen Z population, they still shed light on what are some of the most pressing and anxiety-inducing issues among college students.

Literature Review

1. Beck, Julie. "'Americanitis': The Disease of Living Too Fast." *The Atlantic,* 2016. https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2016/03/the-history-of-neurasthenia-or-americanitis-health-happiness-and-culture/473253/

    Beck's article on "Americanitis" provides an in-depth analysis on how and why anxiety and mental health issues plagued Americans during the transformative years of the Industrial Revolution. Similar to today, in terms of technological advancements and increasing modernization, America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was full of exciting, yet worrisome uncertainties. Americans, overstimulated and overwhelmed by constant change and the fast-paced nature of modern life, began to suffer from bouts of "nervous energy" known then as "neurasthenia." According to David Schuster, an associate professor of history at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne, some symptoms of this disease included: "headaches, muscle pain, weight loss, irritability, anxiety, impotence, depression, 'a lack of ambition,' and both insomnia and lethargy."

    This disease plagued Americans, in particular, due to feelings of "intellectual superiority" and the notion that the US had "evolved beyond the rest of the world." Americans felt that they were living "too fast" and were struggling to "keep up with the demands of modern life." Neurasthenia was also believed to affect only affluent, Anglo-Saxon members of society because they not only experienced this modernization the most, but were also subjected to more mental activity than others, supposedly. For men, the only way to remedy neurasthenia was to spend more time outside, embracing their masculinity, and reverting back to their primitive roots in nature. Women who felt this nervous energy, however, were given the "rest cure" and forced to stay confined in bed with little to no movement or control over their bodies. Later in the 20th century, neurasthenia was broken up into several diagnoses, like anxiety, depression, OCD, etc. Ultimately, as shown during the late 1800s, "technology can give happiness and comfort in some ways, and take it away in others." Gen Z is currently dealing with similar issues, concerning social media, 24/7 news coverage, and the portrayal of life online versus in person.

2. The Harris Poll. "Stress in America: Generation Z." *The American Psychological Association,* October 2018. https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2018/stress-gen-z.pdf

    This 2018 online survey, conducted by the Harris Poll on behalf of the APA, was aimed at understanding what factors cause stress in Americans- particularly the younger Generation Z. Approximately 3,500 adults, ages 18 and older, participated in this survey and provided information regarding their stress levels and coping mechanisms. The survey concluded that "high-profile issues, such as sexual harassment and gun violence are significant stressors for Gen Z." Growing up in the wake of the terrible Sandy Hook and Parkland shootings, it was reported that "three in four of Gen Zs report mass shootings as a significant source of stress." Also, as of 2018, the political climate and news related to the current state of the nation were significant stressors in Gen Z., with 68 percent of young adults admitting that they feel somewhat or very stressed about the future of the U.S.

There are major differences in stress levels among Gen Z compared to other, older generations-which is mostly likely due to the emergence of social media and its control over the lives of young adults. According to the APA study, "more than half of Gen Z (53 percent) [cite sexual harassment and assault reports in the news] as a significant source of stress and fewer than four in 10 of adults overall (39 percent) [say] the same. However, while it has been revealed that Gen Z suffers the most from poor mental health, they are also more likely to seek professional help concerning these issues than other generations.

3. Twenge, Jean M. "IGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood--and What That Means for the Rest of Us." *Atria Books*, 2017.
https://www.google.com/books/edition/iGen/HiKaDQAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&printsec=front cover

Twenge, an expert in psychology and renown author of the Millennial-centered "Generation Me," discusses how and why Gen Z's experiences with technology, along with political factors, have led to generational differences in behaviors, attitudes, and personality traits. Through interviews and a survey of 11 million people, this book delves into why people born in the late 1990s to the early 2010s, "IGen," are "obsessed with safety, focused on tolerance, and have no patience for inequality." There are also major differences in the way Gen Z approach religion, sex, and politics, in comparsion to Millenials and any generation before them.

This book also reveals that as a result of "social media and texting replacing other activities, [Gen Z] spends less time with their friends in person," resulting in "unprecedented levels of anxiety, depression, and loneliness." Twenge looks into the reason why Gen Z is seeming to age more slowly than its predecessors and how this reliance on technology affects the way they socialize and spend their time.

4. Twenge, Jean M., Spitzberg, Brian H., W., Campbell, Keith: "Less in-person social interaction with peers among U.S. adolescents in the 21st century and links to loneliness" *Sage Journals*, 2019.
https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0265407519836170#abstract

A recent study on social and personal relationships revealed that "iGen adolescents" feel increasingly more lonely because they spend more time on social media and less time interacting with one another face-to-face. According to this study, "the mechanisms of adolescents' social interaction have changed, with adolescents in the 2010s (known as iGen) spending more time on digital media such as texting, gaming, and social media, and with time online doubling between 2006 and 2016." Through surveys of adolescents over the course of several years, researchers have been able to examine trends in feelings of loneliness among this age group and how social interactions affect this.

When compared to other generations like Gen X or Millennials, Gen Z spend less time "getting together or socializing with friends, going to parties, going out, dating, etc." Instead, they are using this time that would have been spent with others on their phones or devices and scrolling through social media. Humans are social beings, and rely on social interaction to sustain happiness. With more time spent alone and on social media,

Gen Z are subject to more negative feelings of loneliness and social ostracism than previous generations.

5. Twenge, Jean M. "More Time on Technology, Less Happiness? Associations Between Digital-Media Use and Psychological Well-Being" *Sage Journals,* 2019.
https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0963721419838244

In this study, Twenge examines the relationship between psychological well-being and digital media use among adolescents and teens, particularly members of iGen. "The generation born since 1995, known as *iGen*, was the first to reach adolescence after smartphones became common," and fittingly spend a large amount of time plugged-in to digital media and screens. Through research and surveys, Twenge has found that "studies using large samples consistently find that more frequent users of digital media are lower in psychological well-being than less frequent users." Examples of low psychological well-being include more stress, feelings of loneliness and social isolation, anxiety and depression.

A recent experiment on college students, who were asked to limit their time on social media to 30 minutes a day, found that these students were less lonely and depressed after a week than those who did not participate. Digital media use is also reported to disrupt sleeping patterns, displace other-more social-activities like reading, exercising or spending time outdoors, and can lead to cyberbullying or online social comparison. Ultimately, the more time adolescents spend digital media platforms, the more likely they are to develop feelings of unhappiness or psychological issues.

6. Twenge, Jean M., "Increases in Depression, Self‑Harm, and Suicide Among U.S. Adolescents After 2012 and Links to Technology Use: Possible Mechanisms" *Psychiatric Research and Clinical Practice,* 2020.
https://prcp.psychiatryonline.org/doi/full/10.1176/appi.prcp.20190015

Since the early 2010s, there has been a sharp increase in mental health issues, like depression, anxiety, loneliness, and even suicidal thoughts or tendencies, among adolescents-especially young women and girls. This trend is directly related to the rising use of social media and Gen Z's reliance on technology. Recent studies of samples of adolescents have found that,

"Increased digital media and smartphone use may influence mental health via several mechanisms, including displacement of time spent in in‑person social interactions, individually and across the generation, as adolescent cultural norms evolve; disruption of in‑person social interactions; interference with sleep time and quality; cyberbullying and toxic online environments; and online contagion and information about self‑harm."

Ultimately, increased time spent online can cause adolescents to feel more isolated and under constant scrutiny, compared to earlier generations.

It has also been proven that young girls are affected by these mental health problems more than young boys due to the fact that social media focuses on social relationships. Not only do adolescent girls spend more time on social media-while boys spend more time playing online games-they also tend to care more about their friendships and popularity. This study shows that, when compared to young boys, the more hours young girls spend on social media, the more likely they are to experience some form of

depression. "Trends in social interaction are likely to have a larger impact on girls' mental health than on that of boys, and the increases in mental health issues have, in fact, been larger among girls and young women," according to research by the American Psychiatric Association.

7. Talmon, Geoffrey A. "Generation Z: What's Next?" *Med.Sci.Educ.* 29, 9–11, 2019. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40670-019-00796-0

    The way that Gen Z students learn and process information differs greatly from their Millennial predecessors due to political, social, and economic factors that have impacted their formative years. For example, Millennials grew up in the 1990s during a fairly politically stable and peaceful environment. Technology was present, but not at the forefront of their education or social endeavors. Gen Z, however, grew up with constant access to new technologies and studies have shown that "75% own smart devices and access them multiple times per hour…[while] most spend at least 9h interacting digital content daily." While Millennial's parents practiced helicopter parenting, Gen Z students experienced a certain "CIA" style of parenting where their grades or progress were monitored all through technology.

    Gen Z also grew up in a post 9/11 world, full of political unrest, foreign wars, and economic uncertainty with the 2008 recession. They also encountered an onslaught of negative media riddled with public scandals, mass shootings, and political strife. "Gen Z students expect on-demand, low barrier access to all information, often selecting sources that package information in "bite-sized" pieces, as a result of the world's current system of 24/7 news coverage. Due to events over the past two decades,

    > "Gen-Zers...have a more pragmatic view of the world than Millennials, manifested as a higher prevalence of risk aversion, financial frugality, and an expectation that they will need to work harder than the generation that preceded them."

8. Isaf, Meghan. "The Role of Social Media in Dating Trends Among Gen Z College Students" *Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications, Vol. 11, No. 2,* 2020. https://www.elon.edu/u/academics/communications/journal/wp-content/uploads/sites/153/2020/12/06-Isaf_EJfinal.pdf

    As Gen Z students rely more and more on technology for social interactions, their dating experiences have become increasingly more virtual. Social media and online dating apps, like Tinder, play a large role in how Gen Z teens build relationships, especially in college and on a college campus. An Elon University study investigated dating trends among college students at eight different universities and discovered that Gen Z students exhibit "trends toward pursuing casual romantic relationships [and] a tendency to use "ghosting" to terminate relationships."

    Ghosting, as defined by Merriam-Webster is "the act or practice of abruptly cutting off all contact with someone (such as a former romantic partner) by no longer accepting or responding to phone calls, instant messages, etc." Essentially, social media makes it much easier to avoid confrontation that comes with dating because it allows its users to hide behind a screen. Media Dependency Theory has also found that a "higher dependence of an individual on a form of media is accompanied by a stronger influence of such media on the user's perceptions and behaviors." Therefore, Gen Z tend to "ghost"

and prefer causal relationships because these teens have grown up in an age of "instant gratification" from a constant news stream and are used to relying on digital media as a way to communicate.

9. Loveland, Elaina. "Instant Generation" *Journal of College Admission*, 2017. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1142068.pdf

> Elder members of Gen Z, a generation of people born between the years of 1995 to around 2010, have now entered college with a different perspective on higher education and its cost and effectiveness than their Millennial predecessors. Aside from their passion for social issues and their "thoughtful worldview," Current Gen Z students are also more money-conscious. A 2014 Northeastern study revealed that "two-thirds (67 percent) of Generation Z students indicate their top concern is being able to afford college," because of student loans and question whether or not the experience of college would be worth the price.
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> > According to this study completed by the Journal of College Admission,
> > > "When it comes to education, 72 percent [of students] say they want a more customized college experience in which colleges allow students to design their own course of study or major and 79 percent would like to integrate their higher education experience with employer internships. Eighty-one percent believe that college is crucial to starting a career."
>
> Gen Z students value real-world experiences when learning and are "very career-minded, having seen adults around them lose their jobs—in the midst of high unemployment rates—and experience home foreclosures." These trends ultimately stem from the fact that members of Gen Z are used to the instant gratification and answers that they receive from instant streaming services, social media, and communication via technology.

10. Betul Keles, Niall McCrae & Annmarie Grealish. "A systematic review: the influence of social media on depression, anxiety and psychological distress in adolescents" *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 25:1, 79-93, 2020. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02673843.2019.1590851

> While social media and smartphones have become indelible in our current technological society, several studies suggest that digital media use is to blame for the influx in cases of anxiety and mental health issues in adolescents. According to a 2017 World Health Organization report, "10–20% of children and adolescents worldwide experience mental health problems…[and] the most common disorders in children and adolescents are generalized anxiety disorder and depression." Also, The Pew Research Center revealed in 2015 that approximately "92% of teenagers are active on social media," whether that be through a smartphone, tablet or computer. While a study by the American Academy of Pediatrics showed that social media is beneficial for adolescents because it serves as a means for social support and interaction, a 2016 Facebook study found that, instead, posting photos of oneself online can lead to social comparison which causes depression and feelings of isolation.
>
> Addiction to social media or excessive time spent online by teenagers can also lead to health issues, like insomnia or psychological distress. According to the International Journal of Adolescence and Youth, "Internet use is a sedentary behaviour, which in excess raises the risk of health problems," and causes adolescents to be less

physically active. Adolescents are still in their development phases and are in the midst of forming their own social identity, which is now highly influenced by technology and what gets put online. This study implies that as a result of adolescents' "limited capacity for self-regulation and their vulnerability to peer pressure, [they] may not evade the potentially adverse effects of social media use;" thus, putting them more at risk for a mental disorder.

Methods

As part of my research, four Gen Z college students were interviewed using an open-ended interview process. These interviews were conducted in the Spring of 2021 in person and consisted of several questions pertaining to anxiety, social media, and technology. The entire raw transcripts from the interviews are included below, directly before the Results section. All interviewees gave me consent to use their names and information in this paper, as well as in feature stories written from these interviews.

I. Francesca Vultaggio Interview:

1. **Name, Age, Grade/Year?**

Francesca Vultaggio, 21, Senior

2. **Have you suffered/do you suffer from anxiety or stress?**

I definitely suffer from anxiety and I think stress is a big part of my anxiety.

3. **When did these feelings come about? Do you have a specific memory/event that caused it?**

I would say the first time I noticed that I had anxiety I was about 12, but I wasn't actually diagnosed with General Anxiety until I was 17.

4. **Do you have a specific event/memory that caused this?**

Yes. I think when I was 17, graduating high school and right before I decided to go to college and I had to go to a three-day orientation. I think it was the first time I realized I had an actual panic attack before. I would say that summer was the time I really realized my anxiety was real.

5. **What are the symptoms of these feelings?**

They come in different ways but the one that I usually experience is feeling really hot or really faint and my heart races really fast and I usually feel like I wanna cry.

6. **What is your biggest stressor/concern at the moment? Why?**

At the moment, I would say my biggest stressor is the future, since I'm graduating college. I feel like a lot of it is fear of the unknown. I've been nervous about change and at this specific point in my life I feel like there's a big change coming and you don't know where you're going, if you're getting a job or if you're moving out. I think it's a big thing for kids our age because we don't know anything because we haven't really experienced it yet.

7. **Did you have access to new devices, like the iPhone, when you were younger?**

I don't think I got an iPhone until I was 13.

8. **Growing up, were you allowed to use apps like Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, etc?**

We weren't allowed to use Facebook until we were in high school, but I feel like Facebook never really took off after that. But we did start using Instagram and Snapchat in high school. And I remember I deleted Snapchat a bunch of times, but Instagram is probably what I use now.

9. **Why did you delete Snapchat?**

I deleted Snapchat because I feel like that was the place at the time, probably in high school, where people were posting videos of them either partying or I guess just like meeting in big groups. And I remember being very annoyed by it.

10. What about big groups and partying made you nervous?

Um, that was something I was always worried about. I don't think I ever realized I had a fear of big crowds or some sort of like claustrophobic tendencies. But I always thought of parties at that time as somewhere where I would go and wouldn't be able to get home easily, or it was a place for people that I knew weren't acting like themselves. And now I'm fine with it. But I remember at the time I thought that was like the scariest thing to see your friends acting completely different.

11. Do you think that social media affected this in any way?

I think social media affected me because I would feel a sense of guilt that I was scared of it and I would see all of my friends going out or posting pictures like the summer after graduation, and I would feel really bad or guilty about myself that I had all of these fears and couldn't be like them.

12. So do you think FOMO is real, the fear of missing out?

Yeah, I think I experienced FOMO a lot, but actually not as much anymore, but when I was younger, I did.

13. When did you first start to feel that way? Do you like a memory of, like, your first big FOMO?

I remember I didn't go to a sleepover when I was about 12 because I was nervous about it and feeling FOMO And I don't even think there was a word for it yet- just feeling really sad that I was missing out and like the fact that it was on my own account, too, because I didn't want to go, but I knew that everyone else was there, so I knew I was missing all of the fun.

14. Did social media play into this or like these fears?

At the time, there really wasn't social media besides like, AIM instant messenger. But if I think about it, I feel like we did use that a lot to talk about people hanging out. And I think that did play a part in me feeling sad or left out about things.

15. Does the current state of the nation address stress you out?

The state of the nation does stress me out a lot, but I made a choice last year during the height of covid to just not watch the news anymore. And I think it's pretty much been one whole year that I just literally have not watched the news, like for my own sanity. If it's on, I'll watch a little bit of it, but I really just tune all of it out and I never go out of my way to, like, look at the news app on my phone or anything because I just don't want to know. Like, I actually tell myself it's better to be ignorant about things if it's going to affect, like, my anxiety levels. I don't know if that's good or not.

16. Has Covid or how has it contributed to these feelings of stress, especially surrounding the state of the nation?

When it was first happening I remember my anxiety was really bad, mostly because I was really nervous about my family getting sick and like me getting sick. But I guess in terms of the state of the nation, I think it only makes me nervous when I think about how many people don't care or how many people disregard covid regulations and when there's so many people that are trying their best to stay safe.

17. Does social media and societal expectations on how you look or what you should be doing stress you out or cause anxiety? Do you feel influenced by that?

I feel like that's the one thing I don't feel influenced by. I never really had problems with how I looked or compared myself to people in social media to the point where I took over my life. Like if I see a celebrity on social media, I will say, like, oh, wow, I wish I looked like that. But it never goes deeper for me to feel like that about myself, about it. I wouldn't say social media has really made me feel insecure, but I can see the ways that it is toxic for some young people.

18. Do you feel like being an older member of GenZ is different than those that are younger than us?

Yes, I feel like we don't even know if we are Gen Z or not. I mean, I don't think we're millennials, but I do think that, like, if I were to compare myself to someone that was 16, we would not have anything in common or like wouldn't follow the same people. Um, somebody told me that the cutoff is whether or not you really liked High School Musical as a kid. And I feel like we did.

19. What do you do to cope with your feelings of stress and anxiety?

To cope with my feelings of stress and anxiety I try to take deep breaths. I used to write everything out, which really helped. And now I find that distraction is key. Whether it's like reading a book or going for a walk or watching TV, that's like mindless but still distracts me, really helps me to go into another world where all of a sudden I'm forgetting what I was just like spiraling out of control of that.

20. Do you or are you getting professional help? And would you seek it out if you aren't?

I've been getting professional help since I was 17 and I really wish that I had gone before that. And not to say that therapy has been great, like all around, but I definitely feel like it's something that really helps me. And I've taken breaks from it and gone back. And each time I go back, I, like, wish that I had just kept with it because it's really helpful to talk to somebody that you don't know just because you have like an unbiased person that just will listen to you and make you feel like your feelings are valid and give you like actual help. And even though it can be awkward or upsetting at times, I think it's really helpful to get help and advice because it's really no use just sitting and feeling sad all the time. I would know.

II. Giovanna Cocuzza Interview:

1. Can you tell me your name, your age and what year you're in?

Ok, I'm Giovanna, I'm a senior and I'm 21 years old.

2. Have you suffered or do you suffer from anxiety or stress?

I currently suffer from anxiety and stress and I have been for a while.

3. When did these feelings come about? Do you have a specific memory?

A memory? Probably around I want to say high school was when it got bad but I had some in middle school. I was in a lot of extracurriculars in high school and me and my boyfriend broke up, which is a thing, but that's probably when it started.

4. What are the symptoms of these feelings and do they vary?

It definitely varies depending on the situation. A lot of time is like jittery feeling or feeling like that. Like when you want to crawl out of your skin, that kind of feeling shaky, leg shaking, hands sweating-kind of regular nervousness, but elevated, if that makes sense.

5. What would you say is your bigger biggest stressor or concern at the moment?

At the moment, my biggest stressor and concern is getting my apartment ready for next year. And my parents are putting my house at home up for sale. So I have to move everything out in a short period of time and graduation.

6. Does the current state of the nation stress you out, would you say that's like something that's been a stressor?

Yes, I think I've been less concerned about it as of the very recent past, just because I have so many personal stressors that I'm stressed out about, but in general it definitely stresses me out.

7. Ok, just switching it up. Do social media and societal expectations stress you out or cause anxiety? Give an example.

Yes, I think it was worse when I was growing up just because that's what we were constantly surrounded by. So it's definitely been difficult to deal with social media because, you know, you always want to get a big amount of likes and like you want to post something, but you're worried about what other people are going to think. I think I've gotten a little bit past that, but definitely I've been stressed out about it in the past.

8. Did you have access to new technological devices when you were younger, like an iPhone?

Yes, I think I got my first iPhone in sixth or seventh grade, but I had Facebook. I started Facebook in fifth grade and that was probably my earliest other than my iPod and like Instagram, that was probably the earliest.

9. **So, that's my second question. Growing up, were you allowed to have social media apps like Facebook and Instagram and what was your experience with them?**

I think at that point it didn't get to this competitive weird FOMO type of level that it is at now. It was mostly just wanting to share things with your friends, which was perfectly fine, like there was no problem with me having Facebook or Instagram at the age of 10 or 11. I think when it started to develop where, you know, these people were, you became jealous of other people. I think that developed later on where people were kind of using social media to brag about themselves.

10. **And you would say that was when you were a teenage**r?

Yeah, that would probably be like between seventh grade and then like climbing into high school. And then at that point, I was just over it.

11. **Which platform of social media do you feel like you did use the most and what do you use now?**

Growing up, I think I used Instagram the most. I think I still use Instagram the most, but I don't post on Instagram as much as I used to. So, like, I'll go and look, you know, see what other people's content is or even Tik Tok also probably along with Instagram now.

12. **Ok, I mentioned it earlier, but do you feel like is FOMO real? When did you first start to feel that way?**

Yes. I think at the earlier ages, like middle school and things like that, I wasn't really feeling it as much because I wasn't old enough to let, say, travel or, you know, have a consistent boyfriend or whatever. I think when I was younger, it definitely wasn't so bad. I think actually I've been experiencing much more like recently, like within the last year and a half.

13. **Did you ever feel anxiety from that kind of feeling or feeling like you have to look a certain way because of social media? Give an example.**

Yes. I don't know, it's just like all the time. Well, I think now with social media influencers, they definitely make you feel a sense of so much more like where you should be up to in your life. I feel there are a lot of old classmates I went to school with that are engaged now. And in one way I'm like OK, that's a little young to be engaged, but at the same time, you know, I'm like, oh, I'm supposed to be somewhere else in my life, you know, but I'm in college.

14. **Do you feel like social media has forced you to socially compare yourself?**

 Yes, because normally I wouldn't know what these other people are doing, but now I do. So when I see, you know, Joe Schmo going on vacation, I want to be on vacation. But really, without social media, I would have had no idea. So that kind of fear of missing out that we are now experiencing I think definitely has to do with social media.

15. **So how would you say that you cope with these feelings of stress and anxiety?**

I go to therapy once a week, so that definitely helps. My therapist kind of brings me down a notch instead of letting me spiral. And I think other things are just kind of trying to block out negative energy. If I have someone on Instagram that I do not care or want to see what they're posting or what they post makes me feel bad. I mute them or I unfollow them or, you know, and I just try to surround myself and my feed, I guess, with content that makes me happy. So I follow people on Tik Tok that post funny things that make me laugh instead of things that make me depressed.

16. Ok, my next question was do you feel like you need or want professional help, but you already have a therapist. Would you say that it's been a good experience?

It's definitely been a good experience. I think the key to therapy is finding a therapist that is a good fit for you. I was lucky that right off the bat when I started therapy a few years ago, I think I was managed with a pretty good therapist that knows a lot about my kind of feelings and situations and is able to help those problems that I experienced.

III. Kelsie Dougherty Interview:

1. State your name, age and what year you are in.

I am Kelsie Dougherty, I am twenty one years old and I am getting my MBA. Grad school.

2. So have you suffered or do you suffer from anxiety or stress?

I do.

3. When did these feelings come about? Do you have a specific memory?

I remember it beginning in high school, so starting to get into more difficult classes, everything at home was based on grades and you know, what we were doing in school. So I was trying to be up to par like my siblings, as they were very smart. So I was a different person than them. But grades are always the most important thing in my house.

4. So what would you say are the symptoms of these feelings?

For me right away I always feel my heart go very fast, like that is like my number one trigger and then my hands shake like crazy. So it's like if I'm presenting or something like I'm trying to hold the paper, like there's no way to hide my body shaking and my heart rate going.

5. What would you say is your biggest stressor concern at the moment and why?

Um, I think at the moment well, besides COVID, is probably just finding a real job. Ideally I would have one while still in grad school. I need some kind of income prior to graduating and, like moving out where my parents in the future, I need something that I can see myself doing long term with growth. I've been applying, but it's hard applying into the remote world. A lot of positions are temporary because they're anticipating everything going back to normal. Just like applying after applying, getting emails. I just want something to stick.

6. Bouncing off that and Covid and everything, would you say the current state of the nation stresses you out?

Less so now that we're in a new administration, but the state of the country being that half the country is in denial, half the country won't take the vaccine, and then now that people are less scared to go out they're having shootings again. So I feel like the state of this country is never positive. It hasn't been in our lifetime where we've been aware of politics.

7.   Do you feel like the 24/7 news cycle has something to do with that?

I don't think so. I feel like it's better to be informed than not. So if you're aware of what's going on, it's better than not knowing and being unprepared or something major happening and you really don't know the details of it. It could be important affecting anyone's future. Like after those shootings, Biden was trying to pass another gun restriction law. So it's like that can affect everyone, like everyone's safety. If you know that you can feel more confident in this country that they're trying to make an effort to make a change.

8. Bouncing off of that and how social media affects that, would you say that social media and societal expectations cause anxiety or stress you out?

Yeah, I would say so. It's hard not to compare yourself to others, you know, on your page, your friends and followers and people you follow. You know, we're like a very comparative generation and we try to relate to each other. So I would say that, you know, especially with younger kids, like a little bit beneath us where they grew up with iPhones and being on social media where we didn't really have it until closer to high school. But I can imagine it's something that affects everybody's mental state.

9. Did you have access to like new devices like the iPhone when you were younger?

I got an iPhone when I was in ninth grade. That was my family's rule. I had a flip phone for middle school.

10. Were you allowed to have apps like Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook growing up?

Yes. But only through high school. Like my mom was very against letting us have phones with the Internet on them when we were younger. So by high school, we were allowed to do that.

11. Which platform and social media do you feel like you use the most like now and then?

Back then it was definitely Instagram and Twitter. Now it's more Snapchat and Tiktok.

12. So growing up, using that kind of social media, did you ever feel like FOMO or the fear of missing out was real?

Absolutely.

13. Do you have a specific example of the first time you realized that?

I was part of a bunch of different groups in high school, like my front, like way in school, friends, my then friends and dance friends. And there's always animosity and dance and, you know, two-faced-ness. I guess maybe it was 10th grade and I had seen posting on Snapchat stories that they were together and then I wasn't included. I've always felt like I wanted to include everyone and everything, but that's not the case. That's something I only knew about because seeing those posts otherwise I wouldn't have known they were together.

14. Do you feel like social media is a large factor of anxiety in our generation?

Yeah, I would say so. I really weaned off of checking stories like I never check Instagram or Snapchat now, so it's just like making the effort to not constantly be seeing what other people are doing. It's like you don't need to feel anxious about that, you know, like what everyone else is doing and saying.

1**5. What do you do to cope with these feelings of anxiety?**

I drink a lot of water, like having my water bottle with me became a safety net. If I have water, I feel hydrated because a lot of my anxiety can form into fainting. So I feel hydrated. I feel just better about coping with it. Definitely. And just listening to music kind of like talking it out, just doing a mindless activity absolutely helps- something you don't have to concentrate on.

16. Last question. Do you feel like you need or want professional help and would you seek it out if you did?

I think yes. My brother has been seeing someone for years, and it's helped him with like ups and downs. I think I've come to a point where I can't keep suppressing the anxiety, especially now as I'm trying to find a job and stuff. So I think I would seek out help. I just don't know if it will be a formal therapist setting or someone really like a psychiatrist where you see them less frequently and they prescribe medicine.

IV. Veronica O'Brien Interview:

1. Okay, state your name, your age and what year you are in.

My name is Veronica O'Brien. I am 21 years old, and I am a graduate student at SUNY New Paltz.

2. Have you suffered or do you suffer from anxiety or stress?

Yes.

3. When did these feelings come about? Do you have a specific memory that caused it?
I think in high school what started it was just being really overwhelmed with school. When you're put into these hard classes, just to get an honor roll at the end of the day, it's just a sticker on your diploma for an advanced region's diploma. So I guess there's that pressure to keep up with the other students. So that's when it first started with just school in general. My family is so relaxed about things so they don't really consider that to be anxiety prone. But yeah, that's when it first started. And then I think just in general with socializing, like being on a team, and in band, and like, all these different programs, it's like, that becomes your life. So you don't have that other group of people that you probably would have wanted to. Once I got to college, I think it just became more of the real world hitting you and I was obviously anxious about finding an internship and job placements and all of that. As you get into relationships, there's those problems that come across, too. School was something that I've always had to be constantly stressed about and making sure I'm doing well.

4. What would you say are some symptoms of anxiety, like feelings that come with it?

Probably overthinking. I'm just making up scenarios in my head. and always think the worst. When I would get severe panic attacks, I would just hyperventilate, I'd cry for anything. So like the tears and the waterworks. Like, my hands were trembling a little bit and I'll just start shaking. I literally feel my body moving back and forth. That happened, like two times when it was really bad. But other than that, I would just be crying or overthinking in that way.

5. What would you say is your biggest stressor of concern at the moment and why?

I think the biggest stress is just how the future is going to be. We're at this weird point in time where I've already graduated. But I haven't walked across the stage yet. I guess it's that whole theme of imposter syndrome. I have a job now but I'm not gonna be in person until the fall. So it's like, I made it, but it doesn't feel like I have because I'm still living in this college town. I don't know what's going to happen in the future. My goal is obviously not living with my parents forever. I don't get stressed about it too much, because I'm just like, okay, we'll go with the flow and see what happens. But that's the most pending thing right now just thinking about like, "Oh, my God, the future" and like, how are things going to be.

6. Would you say that the current state of the nation stresses you out and the whole 24/seven news cycle that we live in?

I think in the beginning of the pandemic, I would listen and watch it for background noise. I would do some work on the couch and be like, "Oh, it's on." And I just got kind of numb to it. I know this sounds kind of morbid, but with school shootings, it happens so often, you're just like, "Oh, another school shooting happened." And then it's just like, wait, a school shooting just happened? Like it should be a little more serious. I guess the reaction should be more serious. For the pandemic and the 24 hour news cycle, I think for the first 30 days Cuomo would have his little tidbit every day, and after a while, it was just repetitive. Then it got worse with the election because we had a president that was extremely unstable and unqualified, and didn't handle situations well and really made our country look poor. Especially when there's so much we could have done in the beginning, like right when the pandemic really hit. So it just was like a snowball effect. After Biden was elected, I haven't really looked at the news all the time. I guess there's no need to because he's qualified and fully capable. The things that used to happen in the news are laughed upon now, because someone that obviously takes his job seriously wouldn't put the country in that position.

7. **Would you say that social media and societal expectations on how to look or what you should be doing stress you out or cause anxiety?**

Yeah, I think it does, because, I mean, we've grown up when Instagram was just an app for editing photos. That's what the app was originally used for. Me and [my friend] Leigh would copy each other about different photo apps and photo editing apps. She was like, oh, there's this Instagram app. And I was like, "Oh, my God, I don't want to copy her" and then it ended up being the Instagram that we all know. But from there, I remember it was a huge thing to get, like 11 likes, because that's when the number would show up. So I think that's the first sign of having that stress or social media as that pressure to just get likes. I think it also just stemmed into why people like things in a picture. If I'm wearing a bikini, that will get more likes than if I, you know, posted a nice sunset, or a tree or something a little more meaningful. I guess it also depends on who you follow and who your friends are, and who you're following. Now that I have the travel blog, I've noticed that you're supposed to engage with other people and that's how you grow your account. During the height of quarantine, like April, like the Twilight Zone, I was really engaging. I remember I posted this photo of me in a bikini, and it got so many more likes than just a regular photo of a cool place that I was really happy to post about. It shows that people don't really care about the content. So it's like trying to find people that lift you up and not just think about how your body looks.

8. **Do you feel like you socially compare yourself online to others? Is that a big anxiety-inducer with social media?**

Yeah, especially now when people say, "Oh, I'm not wearing any makeup." That doesn't mean any more having a bare face. That means for some people putting natural makeup on, maybe like a tinted moisturizer, or just a little bit of mascara, or doing your eyebrows or something. We don't really get to see people and their raw self when they wake up. And especially now with all these filters where people's eyes look bigger and the lip plump and everyone's using them just like a regular filter. And I remember when we first had filters on Snapchat, you would stick out your tongue and a rainbow would come out- you knew it was fake. You were able to differentiate those things, but now the comparisons are real. People even have Photoshop and Lightroom

where you can make someone's teeth look whiter. I remember one of my friends, we took a picture together and she would smooth out the little gaps where you can see your head when her hair was up so that it looked perfect. Then she also made her jewelry pop, so she added something to her jewelry so it would have more bling to it and sparkle or something. She was just editing so much and I didn't realize how much she actually put into that because people care about those things. You can definitely compare yourself to others when you're not really seeing their true self.

9. **Okay, so growing up, did you have access to new devices like the iPhone?**

Yeah. Right when it came out, my mom had gotten it. So we would play with her phone. I always had older phones. I remember when the iPhone five came out, that's when I had the three GS, but I still had access to like those devices.

10. **When you were growing up, were you allowed to use apps like Snapchat, Instagram and Facebook?**

Yeah, my family didn't regulate. My mom is only 20 years older than me and she uses Instagram. She doesn't use Snapchat, but they were never really strict with me.

11. **Which platform of social media did you use the most back then and now?**

I think it has always been Instagram. Probably Facebook when it came out, but mostly Instagram.

12. **Would you say that FOMO, the fear of missing out, is real? Do you have a memory of when you first started to be aware of this?**

Yeah, for sure. I remember in middle school you would feel it because people would hang out-and they wouldn't post a photo of it-but there would always be some kind of posts on Facebook or something. They wouldn't post the actual photo of them hanging out but you kind of could put the dots all together. I remember that was the first thing and then you hate to be someone that's left out of things. I was raised where if you have a group of friends, just include everybody, like, why not? Even when we're younger with birthday parties, you invite everyone or no one or one really close friend. You wouldn't want to exclude an entire friend group. That just obviously grew worse over time because people just hang out-and it could be something that they didn't mean to leave you out- but now they tag people and post stories. On Venmo, you can see different people's transactions, and I saw on the news that it's creating a lot of FOMO for people because you're not seeing the physical post, but you're still seeing evidence that there was a hangout happening. Then you can see what they're doing with the emojis.

13. **So what would you say that you do to cope with feelings of anxiety?**

The first thing that came to mind is to think about how lucky I am and how much I have going for me in that sense. Let's just say if there's something with FOMO, right, and I'm dwelling upon like, "Oh, my God, like, she didn't invite me there," then it's just like I've done fun things too and

I am able to have experiences as well. Just because I'm not there-you can't have it all and you can't do it all. You have to just focus on us sometimes. Another thing I think about is, when you hang out with somebody, it depends on who you're with. Most of the time, they're posting about where they are and everything, but they're on their phone half the time anyway. So it's like, are they really having fun? Are they really enjoying it? I've been in those situations where I would feel left out. And then I would hang out with them and then they'd be on their phones the whole time. I remember thinking this is not fun in my head but it looks fun because you're posting it. In reality, it's not what it seems. I wish I laid off my phone more.

14. Last question. Do you feel like you would need or want professional help for your anxiety? Would you seek it out?

During quarantine, I actually sought help. I don't think it worked. To be completely honest, to me, it seemed like a scam. You're just paying so much money a month for getting help on things that you probably could just search up on the internet. I know people have had good experiences and swear by their therapist or their life coach, but I don't know. I think it's something that maybe I would try again in the future if I was recommended to somebody, but I think just staying busy and staying active is a way for me to kind of not think about it. I wish it did work for me because that would have been nice. But then it's like anything that you get addicted to. You eventually want to keep going every month and then you end up paying for their second and third homes. It's like am I really growing or is this person just keeping me in for her own benefit? Especially with quarantine, I remember trying to call to ask if there were any open spots and they were booked. It was based on demand because there were just so many people that had so many problems that were amplified because of the pandemic.

Results

After conducting these four interviews and collecting data from various sources and experts, one of the main reasons for increased levels of anxiety among Gen Z students is simply what's next. This fear of the unknown, that has plagued many prior generations, is heightened by the existence of and reliance on social media. Social media shines a spotlight on stressors that these students already have, such as school, finding a job, financial burdens, maintaining a perfect image, and the overall fear of the future. Technology aggravates these fears because it essentially enables users to know-and consequently compare themselves to- what their peers are doing at any given time.

The 24/7 news cycle that exists on social media is also a new stressor that previous generations did not have to deal with. New information-from the most recent mass shooting to a political blunder-can appear on Twitter, Facebook, etc. by the second, and often without filter or fact-checking. There is now an immense pressure placed on Gen Z, who often get their news from social media outlets, to stay educated about what is happening in the world. This can be a huge anxiety-inducer, because it has become almost impossible to escape the constant barrage of information and-oftentimes- bad news on social media.

The more time Gen Z students spend on social media, the more they tend to self-isolate, as well. Humans are social beings; therefore, self-isolation and a reliance on technology for social interaction can result in more feelings of loneliness, depression, and the tendency to socially compare oneself. Snapchat filters, photo-editing apps, and other social media features, that smooth over imperfections and blemishes, have caused Gen Z to not only over-analyze their looks, but also become increasingly more insecure. Growing up in a world, as Gen Z has, where everything you do online is scrutinized and immortalized can create long-lasting, negative effects on mental health and wellbeing.

Despite the alarming rise in cases of mental illness among Gen Z students, based on the interviews and my research, this age group is still more likely to seek professional help for their problems than other generations.

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