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Research Paper

Understanding How Gen Z Feels in the Digital World: Exploring Mental Health Challenges in Shillong, Meghalaya

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ABSTRACT

This research study explores the "Understanding how Gen Z feels in the digital world: Exploring mental health challenges in Shillong, Meghalaya" the study investigates on the Generation Z understanding of the digital world in exploration to mental health challenges face by them. Through qualitative interviews and surveys the research examines the extend of how the digital world have or can shape these mental health challenges. **Research Objectives:** (1.) To explore the Generation Z individual perceive and articulate their experiences of mental health challenges in the digital world. (2.) To uncover the challenges and emotional responses of Gen Z individuals based on their digital habits and online behaviour's. (3.) To generate recommendations that can be drawn from the narratives of Gen Z participants to enhance mental health support services targeted towards the digital well-being of this generation. The findings reveal that by focuses on enhancing accessibility and availability of mental health support for young individuals through digital means. It emphasizes providing round-the-clock services, telehealth options, and user-friendly platforms. Strategies like mobile apps for therapy sessions and crisis intervention services are highlighted for Gen Z individuals. The research proposes destigmatizing mental health, ensuring data security, and offering reliable information online. Personalized treatment plans, AI-driven assessments, and virtual reality for exposure therapy are key aspects. Tailoring services to diverse needs, multilingual support, and continuous feedback mechanisms are emphasized. Encouraging help-seeking behavior involves destigmatizing help-seeking, promoting self-care, and using peer support networks. Strategies like targeted advertising, anonymous helplines, and mental health education in schools are crucial for promoting mental health support seeking.

Keywords: *Gen Z, Digital World, Mental Health Challenges, Shillong, Meghalaya*

Generation Z or Gen Z, often referred to as Gen Z, encompasses individuals born between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s, succeeding the millennial generation. This cohort is characterized by being digital natives, having grown up in a world immersed in technology, social media, and instant connectivity. Gen Z individuals are known for their tech-savviness, adaptability to change, and a strong sense of social consciousness. One defining trait of Gen Z is their diverse and inclusive mind-set, valuing equality, diversity, and social justice. This generation is highly entrepreneurial, with a drive for innovation and a preference for authenticity in brands and communication. Moreover, Gen Z is shaping the

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future workforce with their emphasis on work-life balance, remote work opportunities, and a desire for meaningful and purpose-driven careers.

As the first generation to have truly experienced the impact of climate change, political unrest, and global challenges from a young age, Gen Z is poised to influence societal norms, consumer behaviour's, and workplace dynamics significantly. Understanding the values, preferences, and behaviour's of Gen Z is crucial for businesses, educators, and policymakers to effectively engage with and cater to this diverse and dynamic generation.

Digital world refers to the interconnected network of digital devices, technologies, and platforms that enable communication, information sharing, and interaction through the internet. It encompasses everything from social media, online shopping, streaming services, digital communication tools like email and messaging apps, to cloud computing, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality.

In the digital world, people can connect with others globally, access vast amounts of information instantly, conduct business transactions, create and share content, and engage in various online activities. This world has transformed how we communicate, work, learn, and entertain ourselves, offering new opportunities and challenges in the way we navigate and interact with technology.

The digital world has profoundly influenced society in various ways. It has revolutionized communication, making it faster and more accessible. Social media platforms have connected people globally, enabling instant sharing of information and ideas. Additionally, the digital world has transformed industries like retail, entertainment, and education, offering new ways to shop, consume content, and learn.

Moreover, the digital world has created opportunities for remote work, online learning, and e-commerce, changing traditional work and education models. However, it has also raised concerns about privacy, cybersecurity, and the impact of technology on mental health and social interactions. Understanding these impacts is essential for navigating the digital landscape effectively and responsibly.

The digital world has had a significant Impact on Gen Z. This generation, being digital natives, has grown up with smartphones, social media, and instant access to information. Gen Z individuals are highly adept at using technology for communication, learning, and self-expression. Social media platforms have become integral to their social lives, shaping how they connect with others and perceive the world.

Moreover, the digital world has influenced Gen Z's values and behaviors. They are more socially conscious, advocating for causes online and using their digital platforms to raise awareness about social issues. The digital world has also provided Gen Z with entrepreneurial opportunities, allowing them to create online businesses, content, and communities.

However, the constant connectivity and exposure to digital media have raised concerns about mental health, digital addiction, and online privacy for Gen Z. It's crucial to understand these impacts to support Gen Z in navigating the digital world effectively and safely.

Understanding How Gen Z Feels in the Digital World: Exploring Mental Health Challenges in Shillong, Meghalaya

Mental health refers to our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It impacts how we think, feel, and act, influencing how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices. Good mental health is essential for coping with life's challenges, building resilience, and maintaining overall well-being.

Taking care of mental health involves managing stress effectively, maintaining positive relationships, seeking help when needed, and practicing self-care activities like exercise, mindfulness, and hobbies. It's essential to prioritize mental health just like physical health to lead a fulfilling and balanced life.

The digital world has had a big impact on the mental health of Gen Z. Being constantly connected to social media and digital devices can lead to feelings of comparison, FOMO (fear of missing out), and increased stress. The pressure to present a curated and perfect image online can also contribute to anxiety and low self-esteem among Gen Z individuals.

Moreover, the 24/7 access to information and social media can lead to issues like digital addiction, sleep disturbances, and difficulties in managing screen time. Cyberbullying is another concern that can have a severe impact on the mental well-being of Gen Z.

It's crucial for Gen Z to be aware of these challenges and practice digital well-being by taking breaks from screens, setting boundaries with technology, and seeking support when needed. Understanding the potential impact of the digital world on mental health is essential for maintaining a healthy balance in the digital age.

Statement of the problem:
The statement of the problem for this research could be framed as follows:
The study aims to investigate the impact of digital interactions and social media engagement on the mental health of Generation Z individuals, with a focus on understanding their subjective experiences, emotional responses, and coping mechanisms in the digital realm. The problem statement addresses the need to explore how technology use influences the mental well-being of Gen Z and aims to identify strategies to support their mental health in an increasingly digital world.

This research delves into the intricate relationship between Generation Z's mental health and their digital experiences, aiming to uncover the nuanced ways in which technology impacts their well-being. By delving deeper into the subjective experiences, emotional responses, and coping strategies of Gen Z individuals in the digital landscape, the study seeks to address gaps in understanding how online interactions shape their mental health outcomes.

Specifically, the research problem seeks to elucidate the complex interplay between digital interactions, social media use, and mental health challenges faced by Generation Z. By exploring the unique perspectives and coping mechanisms of Gen Z individuals, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing their mental well-being in the digital age. This in-depth investigation is crucial for developing tailored interventions and support systems that effectively address the mental health needs of young people navigating the complexities of the digital world.

Research Objectives:

1. To explore the how Generation Z individual perceive and articulate their experiences of mental health challenges in the digital world.
2. To uncover the challenges and emotional responses of Gen Z individuals based on their digital habits and online behaviour's.
3. To generate recommendations that can be drawn from the narratives of Gen Z participants to enhance mental health support services targeted towards the digital well-being of this generation.

Research Questions:

1. How do Generation Z individuals perceive and articulate their experiences of mental health challenges in the digital world?
2. What are the Challenges and emotional responses of Gen Z individuals based on their digital habits and online behaviour's?
3. What recommendations can be drawn from the narratives of Gen Z participants to enhance mental health support services targeted towards the digital well-being of this generation?

Operational definition:

- **Generation Z**: the generation born in the late 1990s or the early 21st century, perceived as being familiar with the use of digital technology, the internet, and social media from a very young age. (Oxford Language, dictionary)
- **Digital world:** The term "digital world" refers to the totality of circumstances that characterize the living conditions in the digital age. It emphasizes that digital technologies will shape the living conditions of humans in an overriding and comprehensive way. The word "digital" can mean relating to or using devices constructed or working by the methods or principles of electronics. For example, "The system is fully digital, with no analogue components". (Oxford Language, dictionary)
- **Mental Health:** is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. (W.H.O World Health Organization)

Significance of the project:

The research on Generation Z's mental health in the digital age is significant for several reasons. Firstly, understanding how young individuals navigate mental health challenges in the context of their digital interactions is crucial for developing targeted interventions and support systems tailored to their needs. By shedding light on the factors influencing Gen Z's mental well-being online, this research can contribute to the creation of effective strategies to promote positive mental health outcomes in the digital landscape.

Moreover, exploring the emotional responses and coping mechanisms of Generation Z in relation to their digital experiences can provide valuable insights into the complex interplay between technology use and mental health. This understanding is essential for educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers to design proactive measures that foster a healthier digital environment for young people.

Additionally, the research holds significance in amplifying the voices and perspectives of Generation Z, allowing their narratives to shape mental health discourse and support initiatives. By cantering the experiences of young individuals in the digital age, this research

can empower Gen Z to advocate for their mental well-being and contribute to destigmatizing mental health issues in online spaces.

LITERATURE REVIEW

"Understanding university students, perspectives towards digital tools for mental health support: A cross country study"
A study by Iilaria Riboldi and colleagues (2024), conducted a qualitative component of CAMPUS study on 33 students 15 from Italy and 18 from UK. The findings reveals that using digital tools is helpful but it lacks of low efficacy and face to face contact, lack of personalisation and problematic engagement, and by making suitable tools to promote mental health.

"Adverse effect of social media on Generation Z user's behavior government information support as a moderating variable"
A study by Manu Sharma and colleagues (2023), conducted a survey on 319 young user's. The study revealed that behavioral issue including stress, fatigue, fear of missing out, pubbing, anxiety is being affected each day.

"Digital media use and adolescents mental health during covid-19 pandemic: a Systematic review and meta analysis "
A study by Laura Marciano and colleagues (2022), conducted a Systematic review on 30 studies which were published up to September 2021. The finding reveals that not all digital media usage is negative but some digital usage have adverse consequences to mental health.

"Young people's digital interactions from a narrative identity perspective: implications for mental health and well-being"
A study by Isabela Granic and colleagues (2020), conducted a review on the journal volume on covid-19 context. Findings reveals that by designing new digital interventions that promote mental health and well-being.

"Researching mental health disorders in the era of social media: Systematic review"
A study by Akkopon Wongkoblap and colleagues (2017), conducted a Systematic review on Literature on mental health from 2010 to 8 of 2017. The findings reveals that high level of usage is harmful for mental health and is problematic.

METHODOLOGY

Area of the study: East Khasi Hills District Meghalaya- Shillong

Research Design: Qualitative method

Sampling Unit: Individual age ranges from 15 to 25 between the year of 1997-2012.

Inclusion:
- Those who fall under the Generation Z criteria (1997-2012)
- Those who know the English language
- Those who live in Shillong

Exclusion:
- Those who do not fall under the Generation Z criteria (1997-2012)
- Those who do not know the English language
- Those who are not from Shillong

Sample size: 20

Sampling method: Convenient Sampling and Snowball sampling

Methods of data collection: Interview

Data analysis: THEMATIC analysis

Ethical Consideration:
During the course of the study, the following ethical guidelines and considerations will be kept in mind:
- Research participant will not be harmed in any manner during the course of the study
- Informed consent will be obtained from participants prior to the study.
- Respect for the participants' dignity will be prioritized during the course of the study
- Adequate level of confidentiality for the data obtained from the participants will be ensured.
- The protection of the privacy of the research participants will also be ensured.
- Participation for the study will be voluntary and participants has the freedom to withdraw from the study at any point of time.
- The study will be conducted with honesty and transparency in mind to eliminate any bias.

Pilot Study: Interviewed on three people.

FINDINGS/INTERPRETATION/DISCUSSION

The study is undertaken to explore the Understanding how Gen Z feels in the digital world: Exploring mental health challenges in Shillong, Meghalaya. Based on the Thematic Analysis by Braun and Clarke used to analyse the data collected.

Demographic profile of the respondents:
Table: 1 Socio-demographic profile of the respondents

Overview/Area	Description	Total
Shillong	10 (Males) 10 (Females)	20 Respondents
Religion	Christian: 14 Others:6	14 Christian 6 Hindu
Marital Status	Married: 0 Unmarried:20	0 married 20 Unmarried
Family	Join: 0 Nuclear: 20	0 Join family 20 Nuclear family
Socio-economic status	Low: 0 Middle: 20 High: 0	0 low Socio-economic status 20 middle Socio-economic economic status 0 high Socio-economic status

Interpretation:

Accessibility and Availability: To improve the accessibility of mental health services for Gen Z, it's crucial to ensure services are available 24/7, offer telehealth options, and provide easy-to-use platforms. Implementing mobile apps for therapy sessions, online support groups, and crisis intervention services can enhance accessibility for young individuals seeking mental health support.

The theme highlighted in the analysis of improving mental health services for Gen Z focuses on enhancing accessibility and availability through various digital means. The emphasis is on providing round-the-clock services, incorporating telehealth options, and utilizing user-friendly platforms to cater to the needs of young individuals seeking mental health support. The use of mobile apps for therapy sessions, online support groups, and crisis intervention services is highlighted as effective strategies to increase accessibility for Gen Z in their mental health journey. Overall, the thematic analysis underscores the importance of leveraging digital tools and platforms to make mental health services more accessible and convenient for the younger generation.

Barriers and Challenges: Generation Z faces barriers such as stigma around mental health, privacy concerns, and information overload online. Solutions include destigmatizing mental health through education, ensuring data security and confidentiality, and providing curated, reliable information to help navigate the overwhelming amount of content available online.
The theme highlighted in the analysis of the barriers and challenges faced by Generation Z in accessing mental health services revolves around addressing stigma, privacy concerns, and information overload. Solutions proposed include destigmatizing mental health through education, ensuring data security and confidentiality, and offering curated, reliable information to help navigate the vast amount of content available online. The thematic analysis underscores the importance of tackling these barriers by promoting awareness, safeguarding privacy, and providing trustworthy resources to support young individuals in overcoming challenges related to mental health access and information online.

Service Improvement: Enhancing digital mental health services can involve personalized treatment plans, AI-driven mental health assessments, and integrating virtual reality for exposure therapy. Tailoring services to cater to diverse needs, offering multilingual support, and continuous feedback mechanisms for service improvement are vital aspects to consider.
The theme highlighted in the analysis of improving digital mental health services focuses on enhancing personalized treatment plans, utilizing AI-driven mental health assessments, and integrating virtual reality for exposure therapy. It emphasizes the importance of tailoring services to meet diverse needs, providing multilingual support, and implementing continuous feedback mechanisms for ongoing service enhancement. The thematic analysis underscores the significance of incorporating advanced technologies and personalized approaches to make mental health services more effective, accessible, and tailored to individual requirements.

Encouraging Help-Seeking Behavior: Strategies to encourage young people to seek help for mental health concerns online involve destigmatizing help-seeking, promoting self-care practices, and utilizing peer support networks. Implementing targeted advertising for mental health services, providing anonymous helplines, and integrating mental health education in school curricula can also encourage help-seeking behavior.

The theme highlighted in the analysis of encouraging help-seeking behavior among young people for mental health concerns online emphasizes destigmatizing help-seeking, promoting self-care practices, and utilizing peer support networks. Strategies such as implementing targeted advertising for mental health services, offering anonymous helplines, and integrating mental health education in school curricula play crucial roles in encouraging individuals to seek help. The thematic analysis underscores the importance of creating supportive environments and accessible resources to facilitate help-seeking behavior and promote mental well-being among young individuals.

Recommendations:
Mental health professionals and policymakers can enhance digital support services tailored to the digital generation by advocating for telehealth reimbursement policies, training professionals in online therapy techniques, and ensuring ethical guidelines for digital mental health practices. Collaborating with tech companies to develop evidence-based interventions, conducting research on digital mental health outcomes, and engaging in continuous evaluation and improvement of digital services are essential for providing effective support to young individuals.

The theme highlighted in the analysis of professional and policy recommendations for enhancing digital support services tailored to the digital generation emphasizes advocating for telehealth reimbursement policies, training professionals in online therapy techniques, and ensuring ethical guidelines for digital mental health practices. Collaborating with tech companies to develop evidence-based interventions, conducting research on digital mental health outcomes, and engaging in continuous evaluation and improvement of digital services are crucial steps in providing effective support to young individuals. The thematic analysis underscores the significance of aligning professional expertise and policy frameworks to meet the evolving mental health needs of the digital generation.

DISCUSSION

The focus of the research is on enhancing accessibility and availability through various digital means for young individuals seeking mental health support. The emphasis is on providing round-the-clock services, incorporating telehealth options, and utilizing user-friendly platforms to cater to their needs effectively. The use of mobile apps for therapy sessions, online support groups, and crisis intervention services is highlighted as effective strategies to increase accessibility for Gen Z individuals in their mental health journey. Solutions proposed include destigmatizing mental health through education, ensuring data security, and offering curated, reliable information online. Personalized treatment plans, AI-driven mental health assessments, and integrating virtual reality for exposure therapy are also key aspects. The importance of tailoring services to meet diverse needs, providing multilingual support, and implementing continuous feedback mechanisms for service enhancement is emphasized. Encouraging help-seeking behavior among young people for mental health concerns online involves destigmatizing help-seeking, promoting self-care practices, and utilizing peer support networks. Strategies like targeted advertising for mental health services, anonymous helplines, and integrating mental health education in school curricula play crucial roles in encouraging mental health support seeking.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the research underscores the vital role of digital platforms in enhancing mental health support accessibility for young individuals, particularly Gen Z. By emphasizing round-the-clock services, telehealth options, and user-friendly interfaces, the study advocates for leveraging mobile apps, online resources, and crisis intervention services to address the unique challenges faced by this demographic. The proposed solutions, such as destigmatization efforts, personalized treatment plans, and innovative technologies like AI and virtual reality, aim to create a more inclusive and responsive mental health support system. Encouraging help-seeking behaviour's through education, self-care promotion, and community networks, alongside targeted strategies like advertising and anonymous helplines, are crucial steps in fostering a supportive environment for mental health awareness and assistance among young people.

Limitation

One Limitation of this research could be the potential digital divide among young individuals, where access to digital platforms and telehealth services may not be equitable for all, particularly for those in underserved communities or with limited internet connectivity. This could hinder the effectiveness of the proposed strategies in reaching a diverse range of individuals seeking mental health support.

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