

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT IN REDUCING ANXIETY FACING THE FUTURE FOR GEN-Z IN THE DIGITAL ERA TANJUNG BALAI

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the role of social support in reducing anxiety levels experienced by Generation Z in facing the future in the digital era of Tanjungbalai. Generation Z is the generation born between 1997 and 2012. Generation Z lives amidst the rapid development of digital technology that brings unique challenges, including economic uncertainty, social pressure, and fear of the future. Through a qualitative approach, this study used observation and interview methods with five informants from Tanjungbalai City. The results showed that Generation Z anxiety was triggered by academic pressure, social comparison, and global uncertainty related to the economy and the environment. Social media shows a dualistic impact on the one hand exacerbating anxiety through exposure to unrealistic standards of success and negative content, but on the other hand serves as a source of career information, inspiration, and the formation of a supportive community. In this context, social support, especially emotional support empathy, validation of feelings and instrumental concrete assistance, practical solutions from close friends and family proved to be a critical coping mechanism. Its effectiveness depends on the quality of the interaction, where non-empathetic support can actually increase anxiety.

Keywords: *Generation Z, Future Anxiety, Social Support, Digital Age, Mental Health.*

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1. Introduction

Generation Z, defined as those born between 1997 and 2012, has grown up amidst an unprecedented digital revolution. This digital era provides unlimited access to information, communication, and various learning opportunities. However, behind this progress lies significant challenges looming over the mental health of individuals in this group, particularly related to their anxiety levels in facing an uncertain future. The negative impacts of social media use mentioned above require attention, with teachers working to mitigate them (Fitriyadi, 2023).

Quoted from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS), it explains that in 2025, Generation Z (Gen Z) in Indonesia will reach around 27.94% of the total population, or around 74.93 million people. They are the age group born between 1997 and 2012. It is estimated that around 27% of Gen Z will enter the workforce in 2025. Several studies show that Generation



Z experiences higher levels of anxiety than previous generations. A study by the American Psychological Association (APA) revealed that only 45% of Generation Z feel they have good mental health, reflecting the pressure they experience in various aspects of life. This means that 55% of Generation Z, the media, and the digital environment around them provide unrealistic expectations, causing poor mental burden and anxiety. In this context, anxiety often arises in response to high academic pressure, competition in the workplace, and demands to meet expectations conveyed through social media (Rachmawati, 2021).

Intense academic pressure, which often requires them to perform at a high level, is a major cause of increased anxiety. Academic stress is a condition in which academic demands exceed an individual's resources, ultimately causing physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions that lead to stress (Ramadanti & Herdi, 2022). With the increasing demands of entering top universities and securing good jobs, many individuals in Generation Z feel trapped in a continuous cycle of stress. Social media also plays a role in exacerbating this situation, as individuals often feel compelled to appear perfect and post about their ideal lives to the public, creating pressure to meet unrealistic standards. In line with current trends and issues, these changes impact body image, mental health, lifestyle, and consumer behavior (Sepnia & Nurhakim, 2024).

Amid these challenges, social support is a crucial factor that can help alleviate the anxiety experienced by members of Generation Z. Social support refers to the perception and reality of being loved, valued, and part of a caring social network. This form of social support can come from family, friends, teachers, and the broader community (Wahidati & Nisa, 2024). The right support not only helps them face current challenges but also builds the mental resilience needed to prosper in the future (Setyowati, 2022).

Facing the complexities of life in the digital age, Generation Z has great potential to create positive change. With strong support from parents, educators, and communities, they can develop the skills to navigate challenges and capitalize on opportunities (Sari, 2023). The social support they have around them not only helps reduce anxiety in the short term but also builds a solid foundation for them to face the future with greater confidence.

Overall, it is important to understand that Generation Z is not simply a group burdened with challenges and anxieties. They have the potential to innovate and bring positive change to society if given adequate support. In an effort to provide this support, there must be collective awareness and action from various parties to create an environment that supports the mental health and well-being of Generation Z. Although social support has many benefits, not all Generation Z members have equal access to this support source. Various studies have shown that online social interactions often differ from in-person interactions. In some cases, social media can lead to feelings of loneliness and depression, as individuals feel separated from their supportive social environment. Therefore, it is important to explore how Generation Z builds social connections in a digital context and how the quality of these connections influences their anxiety (Kurniawati, 2020).

The future in the digital age presents unique challenges and opportunities, especially for Generation Z, who are currently transitioning into adulthood. Rapidly evolving technology, social media, and automation have transformed the way they interact, learn, and work. According to Kurniawan (2020), despite having greater access to information and opportunities, Generation Z also faces higher levels of pressure and anxiety about the future. This anxiety is often triggered by expectations for achievement, the skills required in the ever-changing world of work, and the negative impact of social media on their mental health.

Support from parents, friends, and community can provide an essential sense of security and connectedness. When facing uncertainty about the future, emotional and practical support can help them feel more empowered and less isolated. (Dewi et al., 2024). Individuals with strong social networks are better able to cope with pressure and stress and are more optimistic about their future. Therefore, it is important to create a supportive environment for Generation Z, both at home, at school, and in the community. Through guidance and counseling programs that involve social interaction and access to useful resources, we can help them strengthen their coping skills and build resilience. In facing the challenges of the digital age, social support is not only a psychological function but also a key component in propelling Generation Z towards a brighter and more hopeful future (Sulistyo, 2021). Given this phenomenon, the research problem is formulated to understand the role of social support in reducing anxiety about facing the future among Generation Z in the digital age. The formulation of the problem in this study is to understand the role of social support in reducing anxiety in facing the future in generation Z in the digital era of Tanjung Balai.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative research method with a case study approach and direct observation of the phenomena occurring in the field through interviews. This approach was chosen to explore Generation Z's subjective experiences regarding social support and how it contributes to reducing their anxiety about facing the future. Using a case study approach, this study aims to understand the meaning individuals give to social support in their lives. Participants in this study consisted of five interviewees belonging to the Generation Z category, namely those born between 1997 and 2012. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling to ensure that participants had relevant experiences related to social support and anxiety. Inclusion criteria included people who were active on social media and had at least one source of social support from family, friends, or the community (Rofiah, 2023). This study was conducted in Tanjungbalai City over a period of three months. Through this method, it is hoped that a deeper understanding of the role of social support in reducing anxiety among Generation Z will be revealed, as well as providing meaningful insights for the development of more effective interventions in the future.

3. Results and Discussion

The influence of the digital era and social media on anxiety, sources of social support

Interviews with a respondent identified as "AH" found that future anxiety is a psychological condition characterized by feelings of worry, discomfort, and fear about events that have not yet occurred, particularly regarding career, financial, and potential personal impacts. This definition is consistent with the concept of general anxiety, in which individuals respond to problems with a tendency to make decisions based on their own thoughts and characteristics, such as accepting or avoiding stressors or quickly deciding on solutions (Haq & Noorrizki, 2022).

The main triggers of anxiety identified are highly relevant to the conditions of Generation Z. Academic pressure manifested in the pile of college assignments, the complexity of the job application process, and the intensity of tight job competition, are significant sources of anxiety. Respondents with the initials "MA" felt strong pressure to achieve high academic and career goals. This aligns with Meliala's (2024) findings, which suggest that academic pressure in higher education includes demanding assignments, competition between students, and high expectations from lecturers and parents. Meanwhile,

social pressures include difficulty maintaining social relationships and feelings of discomfort in social settings.

Furthermore, the phenomenon of social comparison, particularly that facilitated by social media, is a potent trigger for anxiety. Respondents explicitly stated that seeing others' achievements on social media creates feelings of being left behind or not good enough. This aligns with research conducted by Agustiani & Gazi (2021), which posits social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), which states that individuals tend to compare themselves to others to evaluate themselves. In the digital age, these comparisons become more intense and often unrealistic, as people tend to project the best side of their lives on social media. This can trigger fear of missing out (FOMO) and feelings of inferiority. Uncertainty about the future, both on a personal (financial, career) and global (economic, environmental) scale, is also a significant source of anxiety. Generation Z faces greater uncertainty than previous generations, such as the impact of technological disruption and complex global issues.

The digital age and social media have a two-pronged effect on Generation Z's anxiety levels. On the one hand, the majority of respondents acknowledged that social media exacerbates their anxiety. Constant social comparison, where individuals feel pressured to meet often unrealistic standards of success and productivity, is a major contributing factor. This is supported by various studies showing a positive relationship between intensive social media use and higher levels of anxiety in adolescents and young adults. Exposure to negative news or worry-inducing content also contributes to increased anxiety (Widyawati & Kurniawan, 2021).

On the other hand, the respondent with the initials "HA" also acknowledged the positive benefits of social media as a source of information, inspiration, and community. This aligns with research conducted by Widiana et al. (2024) that found that social media offers numerous benefits for individuals and communities, including education, health, communication, and religion. They can seek career information, read success stories, and gain motivation. Social media also facilitates the formation of online communities that can serve as sources of support.

The consistency of respondents with the initials "S" in choosing close friends or best friends and family as their confidants demonstrates the central role of close interpersonal relationships in overcoming anxiety. Trust, understanding, and non-judgment are the primary reasons behind this preference. Peers, in particular, provide a strong sense of social connection, allowing individuals to share concerns without fear of judgment, as they often share similar life experiences (Rifati, 2018).

According to Sarafino & Smith (2014), several aspects of social support are: a). Emotional Support, expressed in the form of assistance to provide warmth and affection, provide attention, trust in individuals and express sympathy. b). Esteem Support, that esteem support can be given through awards or positive assessments to individuals, encouragement and enthusiasm or approval of individual ideas or opinions and making positive comparisons with others. c). Instrumental Support (Tangible or Instrumental Support), includes direct assistance, such as providing loans or helping with work to complete individual tasks. d). Informational Support, providing information, advice, suggestions, or feedback on what other people in need should do. e). Social Network Support, this type of support is provided by creating conditions for someone to be part of a group that has similar interests and social activities. Social network support is also called companionship support which is a positive social interaction with others, which allows individuals to spend time with other individuals in social or entertainment activities.

The real-life examples provided by respondents clearly demonstrate how social support effectively reduces anxiety. Assistance with studying or scheduling, as well as positive words when faced with failure, not only lighten the load but also increase self-confidence and the ability to focus. Garmenzy (in Parma and Pande 2018) argues that the benefit of social support is that it can reduce anxiety, which is a contributing factor to stress.

Generation Z utilizes various digital platforms, such as instant messaging apps and online groups/communities, to seek support. This reflects their tendency to interact and seek information in digital spaces. These platforms enable fast and broad access to social networks, as well as allowing individuals to share stories and seek opinions from various sources. Social support platforms are crucial for individuals to have when dealing with situations (Ramadanti & Herdi, 2022). Respondents' experiences of receiving support that exacerbated anxiety highlight the importance of quality support. Belittling comments, inappropriate comparisons, or irrelevant/patronizing advice can leave individuals feeling unheard, invalidated, and even more distressed. This emphasizes that good intentions alone are not enough; support must be delivered with empathy, understanding, and tailored to the individual's individual needs. Inappropriate support can erode trust and discourage individuals from seeking help in the future.

The biggest challenge in seeking support in the digital age is the difficulty of distinguishing truth from empathy from others. Digital technology has become an integral part of Generation Z's daily lives. They grew up in an environment where mobile devices are their daily companions, so their communication often takes place through text messages, instant messaging apps, and social media (Wulandari et al. 2023). Amidst the abundance of online interactions, it can be difficult to determine whether support is genuine or merely lip service. Furthermore, the fear of being judged or misunderstood, especially on public platforms, can hinder Generation Z from fully opening up. The presence of invalid and judgmental information online can also exacerbate stress, making the process of seeking support more complicated. This demonstrates that while digitalization provides numerous channels, it also requires digital literacy and critical skills to navigate complex information and interactions.

The advice from respondents identified as "AS" collectively emphasizes an important message: "Don't go through it alone." This underscores the power of social support as a vital coping mechanism. Encouraging sharing and finding a friend or trusted person to talk to is key. Emphasizing that all feelings are valid helps destigmatize anxiety and promotes self-acceptance. This advice aligns with research findings that social support can ease psychological burdens and pave the way for solution-finding, contributing to individual resilience (Sarafino & Smith, 2014).

4. Conclusions

This study examines the role of social support in reducing future anxiety among Generation Z in the digital age, focusing on the subjective experiences of five participants. Findings indicate that Generation Z defines future anxiety as a feeling of anxiety related to career, financial, and personal impacts, triggered by academic and professional pressures, social comparison in digital media, and global uncertainty. The digital age, particularly social media, has a dualistic impact; the majority of respondents felt their anxiety was exacerbated by social comparison and negative information, but social media was also recognized as a positive source for career information, inspiration, motivation, and a supportive community.

When coping with anxiety, respondents consistently sought primary support from their immediate circle, namely close friends and family, based on trust, comfort, and the expectation of understanding without judgment. The most frequently received types of

support were emotional (words of encouragement, understanding, listening) and instrumental/practical support (concrete assistance and brainstorming solutions). Social support has been shown to be effective in easing the burden, increasing focus, uplifting morale, and helping find solutions. Experiences of support that belittled feelings, made inappropriate comparisons, or offered irrelevant advice actually exacerbated anxiety. Key challenges in seeking support in the digital age include difficulty distinguishing genuine empathy, fear of being judged or misunderstood, and the use of invalid information. Overall, advice from respondents emphasized the importance of not facing anxiety alone, sharing stories, validating feelings, and recognizing that social support can ease the burden and help find solutions.

Recommendations from this research: Promote initiatives that create safe spaces, both offline and online, for Generation Z to share experiences and seek support. Consider developing curated digital platforms, focusing on quality interactions and empathy, to minimize the risk of "fake support" or disinformation. Awareness campaigns about mental health and the stigma associated with anxiety need to be continuously enhanced.

For Social Media and Digital Platform Developers: Consider designing features that can reduce the negative impact of social comparison and the spread of information that exacerbates anxiety. Focus on developing features that facilitate more personalized and empathetic interactions, as well as tools to filter judgmental content.

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