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Research Paper

Media consumption and social vulnerability: generation z's mental health in the digital era

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationship between media consumption and social vulnerability, focusing on the mental health of Generation Z in the digital era. The rapid growth of internet use has created both opportunities and risks, particularly for young people who are digital natives. Using a qualitative case study approach, interviews were conducted with late adolescents aged 18-21 who engage in daily online activities. The findings reveal that excessive exposure to harmful online content, such as pornography, cyberbullying, and hoax news, contributes to psychological distress, digital addiction, and social isolation. These patterns disrupt daily routines, weaken resilience, and increase vulnerability to broader social risks. The results futher indicate that the constant connectivity of generation Z fosters a paradoxical condition; while digital platforms provide spaces for self expression and social interaction, they simultaneously expose young people to unfiltered and often harmful content. Participation reported feelings of anxiety, sleep disstrubances, and reduced academic performance linked to their online habits. In addition, the normalization of cyberbullying and exposure to sensationalized misinformation were found to erode trust in institutions and weaken interpersonal relationships. The study underscores the urgent need for comprehensive interventions. Digital literacy programs, critical media awareness campaigns, and family baed monitoring strategies are essentioal to mitigate the negative impact of unregulated medaiconsumption. Educators and policymakers must collaborate to design currcila tha integrated meia literacy as a core competency, while families should foster open communication to guode adolescents in navigation online spaces responsibly. By framing internet use as aboth a cultural practice and a source of sosio psychological risk, this research contributes to communication scholarship and offers practical insgihts for strengthening generation Z mental resilience in the digital era.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The internet has become a primary necessity in modern life, reshaping communication, education, and entertaiment. For generations Z, born between the late 1990s and early 2010s, digital technology is not an addition but the environment in which they have grown up. They are often described as digital natives, accustomed to smartphones, social media, and constant connectivity [1], [2].

In Indonesia, generation z represents a significant demographic, shaping the workforce and consumer market. However, their deep immersion in digital environments also exposes them to risks, such as harmful content, misinformation, cyberbullying, and addictive platforms. These risks are not only individual but structural, affecting social resilience and mental health on a scale.

Recent data highlight the severity of the mental health crisis among gen z. In 2026, the Indonesian ministry of health reported that over 60% of gen z exhibited symptoms of mental health disorders, including anxiety, depression, and mood instability. A Jakpat survey, Dec 2025, found that 61% of respondents reported frequent mood changes, sleep disturbances, and heightened strees linked to prolonged online activity [3].

Cyberbullying has become a pressing issue. UNICEF Indonesia noted in February 2026 that cases of online bullying dan sexsual exploitation are rising shaply, directly impacting children and adolescents [4]. A study analyzing 20 cyberbullying cases between 2022, 2026 confirmed that victims often experienced depression, withdrawal, and academic decline [5]. This context is visually represented in Figure 1, which illustrates the scale of the mental health crisis among Generation Z in Indonesia in 2026, highlighting how mental health disorder, cyberbullying & exploitation, and impact on victims are interconnected challenges in the digital era



Figure 1. Gen Z Mental Health Crisis in Indonesia (2026), Illustration by AI

Hoax news also contributes to vulnerability. In February 2026, The Indonesian Meteorological Agency (BMKG) had to publicly refute viral misinformation about a predicted "megathrust earthquake,"

which spread panic across social media. Such incidents illustrate how misinformation can destabilize communities and exacerbate psychological distress. These examples show that media consumption is not merely a matter of personal choice but a structural issue with broad social consequences.

Earlier study warned of internet addictions impact on youth. Found that excessive internet use increased communication anxiety and reduced cooperation behavior [5], [6]. Emphasized that addiction negatively affected adolescents' quality of life [7].

Highlighted hoax dissemination as a factor worsening social vulnerability [8]. Stressed the importance of personal social guidance in building positive mental attitudes among gen z.

While these studies provide valuable insights, they often focus on individual psychological outcomes. Few examine how digital practices shape collective resilience and vulnerability. This research addresses that gap by framing internet use as both a cultural practice and a source of socio psychological risk.

Advances in communication technology have brough both positive and negative impacts. Generation z, as digital natives, are particularly vulnerable to harmful internet content. Beyond hoaxes, cyberbullying and addiction, pornographic content has emerged as a significant for risk factor. Many adolescents, driven by curiosity, access adult sites without realizing the long-term consequences for their mental health. Exposure to pornofraphy can lead to addiction, distorted perceptions of sexuality, and declining psychological resilie1ce. This issue complements other risks such as misinformation and online harassment, making generation z inscreasingly vulnerable to social and psychological disasters.

This study uses a qualitative case study approach, interviewing late adolescents aged 18-21 who use the internet daily. The goal is to explore their experiences with harmful content, addictive behaviors, and the impact on mental health and social interactions. Solutions proposed include digital literacy, risk reduction strategies, and social mitigation education.

Innovation lies in positioning media consumption not only as a technology phenomenon but as a socio-cultural practice that generates vulnerability. By integrating communication studies, psychology, and disaster risk reduction, this research contributes new value to interdisciplinary scholarship. This research underscores the urgent need for collaborative efforts to address the mental health crisis among generation z.

2. RELATED WORK

Generation z's immersion in digital environments has created both opportunities and risks. Provides a meta-analysis highlighting how digital addiction negatively impacts adolescents' subjective wellbeing [9]. Highlight how exposure to harmful digital content can shape adolescent vulnerability [10]. Research on Generation Z in mental health in relation to media consumption has evolved in stages. Later works expanded to cyberbullying [11] and hoax dissemination, emphasizing their impact on social trust and vulnerability. Most recent studies integrate digital literacy, misinformation management, and resilience frameworks, reflecting the urgency of addressing gen Z mental health crisis in Indonesia [12].

Research on generation z's mental health in relation to media consumption has evolved in stages. Early studies (2016-2018) focused on internet addiction and its psychological consequences, such as communication anxiety and reduced emphaty [13]. Later works (2019-2022) expand to cyberbullying and hoax dissemination, emphasizing their impact on social trust and vulnerability [14], [15]. Most recent studies (2023-2026) integrate digital literacy, misinformation management, and resilience frameworks, reflecting the urgency of addressing gen z's mental health crisis in Indonesia.

The progression of research stages is visually summarized in Figure 2, which depicts the evolution of Generation Z's mental health studies related to digital media consumption from 2016 to 2026. The Figure 2 reinforces the textual discussion by showing how early investigations emphasized internet addiction and its psychological consequences, later works expanded to cyberbullying and hoax dissemination, and the most recent studies integrated digital literacy, misinformation management, and resilience frameworks. This visual representation provides a clear overview of how scholarly focus has shifted over time, aligning with the methodological approaches described in the text.

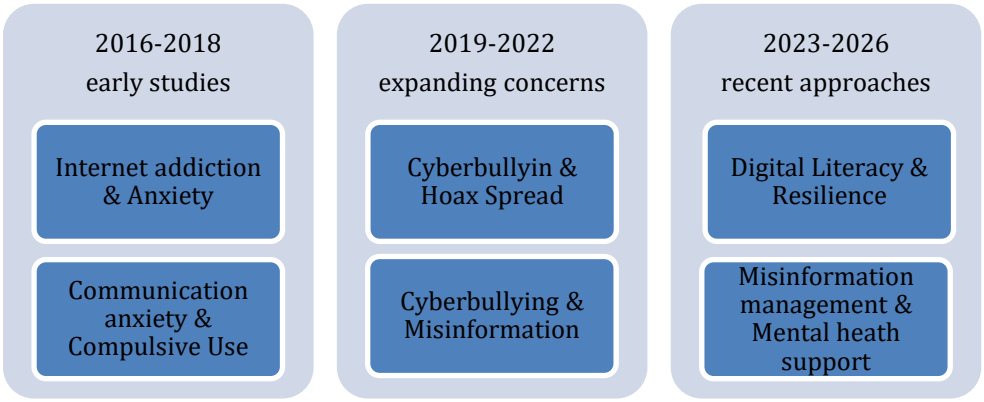


Figure 2. The Evolution of Generation Z Mental Health Research Related to Digital Media Consumption (2016–2026)

Most prior works adopted qualitative case study designs. For example, used interviews with adolescents to analyze the psychological impact of cyberbullying. Employed surveys to measure perceptions of hoax news. International studies, such as relied on large scale quantitative surveys to assess anxiety linked to social media use [16].

Several studies formalized their procedures using algorithmic frameworks. For instance, Proposed a misinformation detection algorithm that classifies online content based on source credibility and emotional tone [17]. Cyberbulliying has become one of the most pressing challenges in digital communication. Unlike traditional bullying, cybernullying transcends physical boundaries, occurring across platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and WhatsApp. Victims often exprerince depression, withdrawal, and academic decline. That victims reported ling term psychological effects, including suicides ideation.

UNICEF Indonesia (2026) reported a sharp rise in online harassment and sexual exploitation cases, particularly affecting adolescents. Globally, Demonstrated that cyberbullying victims are twice as likely to develop anxiety disorders compared to non victims [18]. These findings highlight the universality of the problem, while also emphasizing the need for stronger protective policies and digital literacy programs.

The spread of misinformation or hoax news has become a defining feature of digital era. Found that false news spreads significantly faster than information on Twitter, with emotional content driving virality. This dynamic is particularly dangerous for generation z, who often lack the critical skills to evaluate information sources.

Internet addiction has been conceptualized as a behavioral disorder characterized by compulsive use of digital platforms. Internet addiction shared similarities with substance addiction, including tolerance, withdrawal, and relapse. Their meta-analysis revealed that adolescents are particularly vulnerable due to developmental factors such as heightened curiosity and peer influence.

More recent studies have also emphasized the impact of online pornogprahy. It's found that adolescents exposed to pornography reported higher levels of anxiety and distorted soial relationships. Documented how easy access to pornographic advertisements on social media platforms contributes to early exposure among minors, often withput parental supervision. The concept of social vulnerability provides a useful framework for understanding the broader impatcs of media consumption. Defined social vulnerability provides as behaviors or conditions that reduce resilience against threats [19]. Argued that pornography consumption among youth is linked to compulsive behaviors like other forms of digital addiction. The literature therefore suggests that pornography, alongside hoaxes and cyberbulyying must be considered a central component of generation Z vulnerability in the digitalera. In the digital era, vulnerability manifests through dependence on online platforms, reduced empathy, and isolation.

The phenomenon of hikikomori, where individuals withdraw entirely from real world interaction, exemplifies how digital culture can exacerbate vulnerability. Documented this phenomenon in Japan, noting its spread to other countries, including Indonesia. By framing internet use as a cultural practice, it highlights how digital environments shape identitu, social interactions, and resilience. Its moves beyond individual psychology to examine sttuctural risks.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to examine the relationship between media consumption and social vulnerability in generation z's mental health. The research was designed to chronologically, beginning with the identification of the problem, namely the negative impacts of digital media use on adolescents' psychological resilience. The design ws rooted in the contructivist paradigm, aiming to explore the meaning of behaviors behind human action and the ways in which media environments shape vulnerability.

Data acquisition was conducted through in-depth interviews with six informants, all of whom were late adolescents aged 18 to 21 years. The informants were selected randomly, with the criteria that they were daily internet users accessing the internet through smartphones, laptops, or tablets. To protect privacy, each informant was anonymized with initials: RAP, MR, MBY, AP, NAP, and JM.

The interviews revealed that generation z's media consumption patterns often involved exposure to harmful content. Several informants admitted to accessing adult sites out of curiosity or personal needs, while others described exposure to pornographic advertisiments that appeared unexpectedly during children entertainment. This highlights pornography as a significant factor contributing to mental instability. Other informants reported experiences of cyberbullying, addiction to smartphones, and difficulties in separating themselves from online activities. One respondent explained how constant internet use disrupted basic routines suh as eating and sleeping, while another emphasized the prevalence of hoax news that was easly believed and sprean without verification. These accounts provided desciptive data that revealed how media consumption contributs to social vulnerability, manisfesting in weakened empathy, disrupted communication, and declining psychological resilience.

Secondary materials were also used to support the analysis, including internet news and academic journals related to the theme. This triangulation ensured that the findings were grounded in both primary and secondary sources, reflecting the broader context of media consumption in Indonedia society.

The research procedure was structured to classify responses into categories of risk-cyberbullying, pornography, hoax news, and addiction. This classification allowed the researchers to systematically analyze the vulnerabilities faced by generation z. By focusing on the lived experiences of the six informants, the study provided insight into how daily media consumption in the digital era contributes to unstable mental health and social vulnerability.

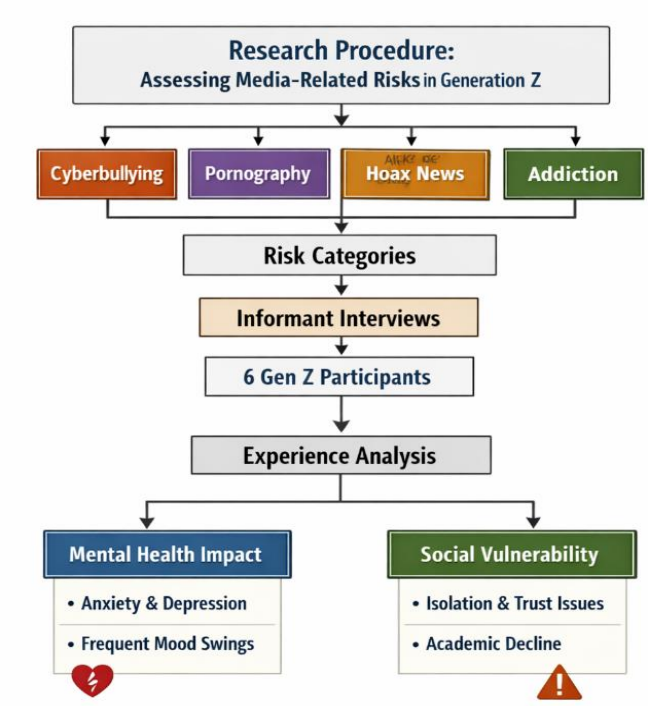


Figure 3. Generation Z Media Consumption Risk Classification Process

The classification process is visually outlined in Figure 3, which illustrates how responses were categorized into risk domains, cyberbullying, pornography, hoax news, and addiction. This Figure 3 complements the narrative by providing a structured overview of the analytical framework, showing how the lived experiences of the informants were systematically organized to reveal the vulnerabilities faced by Generation Z in their daily media consumption

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Exposure to Pornographic Content

The interviews revealed that pornography is a significant dimension of generation z's media consumption. RAP (19) admitted that his initial curiosity led him to access adult sites, which eventually became a daily habit. He described how irritable and less engaged in offline social interaction. AP (18) added that pornographic advertisements often appeared during childrens entertainment on YouTube, raising concerns about minor exposure to harmful material. This testimony highlights how pornography is not only a private issue but also a structural risk embedded in digital platforms.

These findings resonate with broader research. Found that adolescents exposed to pornography reported higher levels of anxiety and social withdrawal. Emphasized that digital edvertisement accelerate exposure among Indonesian youth, often without parental supervision. Argued that pornography consumption among generation z frequently develops into compulsive behaviours like other forms of digital addiction [20].

Taken together, pornography consumption undermines psychological resilience and contributes to social vulnerability. Informants accounts confirm that exposure is often unintentional, facilitated by algorithms and advertisements and that once curiosity is triggered, it can evolve into compulsice behavior. This cycle illustrates how media consumption directly destabilizes mental health and weakens social bonds.

4.2. Cyberbullying and Online Harrassment

Cyberbullying emerged as another critical theme. MR (20) admitted that they used Twitter to bully others with offensive language, reflecting how adolescents sometimes adopt harmful behaviors online. In contrast, NAP (19) described being a victim of online harassment, which made him feell isolated and anxious. He explained that repeated axposure to negative comments reduced his confidence and made him reluctant to participate in online discussions.

These testimonies align with recent studies. Singh, Victims of cyberbullying often experience depression and decline in academic performance [21]. Highlighted that cyberbullying victims globally are twice as likely to develop anxiety disordes compared to non victims. Informant's accounts confirm that cyberbullying is not only a communication problem but also a social risk, as it isolates individuals and weakens their resilience.

The dual perspective, perpetrator and victim, illustrates the complexity of cyberbullying. Adolescents may oscillate between roles, sometimes engaging in harassment and at other times suffering from it. This dynamic reflects the broader vulnerability of Generation Z, who are deeply immersed in digital environments where boundaries between victim and aggressor are blurred.

4.3. Addiction to Digital Devices

Addiction to digital devices was reported by MBY (21) dan NAP (19). MBY admitted that he could not separate himself from his smatphone, while NAP explained that constant internet use disrupted his eating and sleeping routines, leading to quarrels with his parents. These accounts highlight how digital dependency destabilizes daily life.

Showed that Generation Z's consumption patterns in Indonesia are heavily influenced by social media exposure, intertwining digital lifestyles with social pressures and reinforcing social vulnerability [22]. Who argued that digital consumer culture shapes youth identity and can destabilize resilience [23].

Found that digital transformation of consumption patterns in Indonesia poses risks of impulsive behavior and family conflict, while also offering opportunities for sustainable practices.

The accounts also illustrate how addiction is normalized among adolescents. Informants described their dependency as part of everyday life, suggesting that digital addiction is socially acceptable rather than recognized as a problem. This normalization contributes to vulnerability, as it prevents adolescents from seeking help or developing healthier consumption habits.

4.4. Susceptibility to Hoax News

JM (20) emphasized that many internet users believe and spread hoax news without verification. He admitted that he himself had shared misinformation, assuming it was true. This testimony illustrates how lack of digital literacy makes adolescents vulnerable to manipulation.

JM testimony illustrates how misinformation spread organicalll among adolescents through peer networks. Trust in friends often replaces verification, creating an acho chamber effect where false narrative gain legitimacy simply by repetition within social circles. These dynamic highlights a critical vulnerability; adoliscents frequently lack the digital literacy skills required to critically evaluate information, leaving them susceptible to manipulation and reinforcing harmful narratives.

Recent studies confirm this risk. Kurnia and Astuti [24] mapped the landscape of digital literacy movements in Indonesia, showing that while initiatives exist, gaps remain in reaching adolescents effectively. These gaps contribute to the vulnerability JM described where information is shared without verification assuming it to be because it circulated among peers.

Recent evidence strenghthens these findings. [25] Found that adolescent in Indonesia face challenges in digital health literacy, with unverified online content exposing them to misinformation that directly influences health behaviiors. Similarly, Dennis and Lindeberg [26] emphasized the importance of digital health literacy education as a strategy to counter hoaxes in the digital era, underscoring that misinformation is not only a communication problem but also a public health concern. [27] Further demonstrated that digital literacy is closely tied to edolescent mental health, with poor literacy skills linked to increased vulnerability to misinformation and psychological stress.

Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive approach. Education in digital literacy must be prioritized, not only to equip

Adolescents with critical skills but also to foster resilience against manipulation. Community based interventions are equally improtatnt, as misinformation thrives in collective, health communication strategies and policy interventions, societis can reduce adolescent vulnerability to misinformation and strengthen trust in relable institutions.

4.5. Integrating Media Consumption and Social Vulnerability

The findings from six informants demonstrate that media consumption contributes to social vulnerability in multiple ways. Pornography undermines psychological resilience, cyberbullying isolates victims, addiction destabilizes routines, and hoax news erodes trust. Together, these factors create a cycle of vulnerability where generation z becomes increasingly dependent on digital media while simultaneously exposed to harmful content.

Table 1. Risk Factors for Media Consumption by Generation Z

Risk Factors	Main Impacts	Sources of Vulnerability
Pornography	Anxiety, Compulsive behavior	Advertising exposure/adult sites
Cyberbullying	Depression, social isolation	social media Interactions
Digital addiction	Sleep distrubances, Family conflict	Smartphone dependence
Hoaxes/Misinformation	Stres, erosion of trust	Unverified distribution

The range of vulnerabilities identified through informants' accounts is systematically summarized in Table 1, which organizes the main risk factors of media consumption among Generation Z alongside their psychological and social impacts. This tabular representation reinforces the narrative by highlighting how

pornography, cyberbullying, digital addiction, and hoaxes each contribute to anxiety, isolation, family conflict, and erosion of trust. By presenting these categories in a structured format, the table provides a clear analytical framework that complements the descriptive findings and illustrates the interconnected cycle of vulnerability

Defined social vulnerability as conditions that reduce the ability to face threats. Informant's accounts confirm that vulnerability is not only individual but also collective, as harmful media consumption patterns affect families, communities, and institutions. The diversity of experiences, from pornography to hoaxes, illustrates how media consumption destabilizes both personal and social resilience.

This integration highlights the need for multi level interventions. Families umst supervise adolescent media use, schools must provide digital literacy education and government must regulate harmful content. Without such interventions, generation Z will remain vulnerable to the negative impacts of media consumption in the digital era.

Table 2. Comparative Analysis of Informants Experiences

Informant	Age	Main Media Consumption Pattern	Negative Impact Reported	Category of Vulnerability
RAP	19	Frequent use of adult sites	Developed hbit of daily access, mental instability	Pornography
MR	20	Twitter interaction	Admitted bullying others online, fostering negative behavior	Cyberbullying
MBY	20	Smartphone dependency	Unable to separate from device, disrupted routines	Addiction
AP	18	Exposure to porn ads in entertaiment	Concern about minors' exposure, distorted perceptions	Pornography
NAP	19	Constant internet use	Neglected eating/sleeping, quarrels with parents	Addiction
JM	20	Belief in hoax	Spread misinformation without verification	Hoax/Misinformation

The comparative details presented in Table 2 provide a structured overview of the informants' diverse experiences, showing how different patterns of media use, ranging from pornography exposure and cyberbullying to smartphone dependency and belief in hoaxes, translate into distinct forms of vulnerability. This tabular analysis strengthens the narrative by illustrating that Generation Z's engagement with digital platforms is multidimensional, with each case highlighting how everyday media practices can undermine mental health and social resilience.

Social vulnerability is cumulative. Exposure to pornography, cyberbullying, addiction, and hoax news collectively undermines resilience, creating a cycle of vulnerability. Informants confirm that these risks are interconnected: addiction facilitates exposure to pornography, cyberbullying fosters isolation, and misinformation spreads through peer networks.

Mental health is destabilized by daily media use. Informats reported unstable emotions, disrupted routines, and declining emphaty. Their testimonies confirm that media consumption directly affects psychological well-being, making adolescents more vulnerable to anxiety, depression and social isolation.

This study confirms that generation z's mental health is deeply intertwined with media consumption. Adolescents are active participants in digital environments where harmful content is persuasive. Their vulnerability reflects both individual behaviours and structural conditions, including weak regulation, insufficient parental supervision, and inadequate digital literacy education.

Interventions must focus on strengthening digital literacy, promoting healthy media consumption habits, regulating harmful content, and providing psychological support. Informant's accounts confirm that without such intervention, generation z will remain vulnerable to the negative impacts of media consumption in the digital era.

Table 3. Multi-Level Intervention Strategy

Level	Strategy	Goals
Individual	Digital Literacy, time manajement	Increasing personal resilience
family	open communication, monitoring	reducing exposure to harmful content
School	media literacy curriculum	Developing critical competencies
government	Content Regulation, Awareness Campaigns	redusing structural risks

The strategies outlined in Table 3 provide a structured view of multi-level interventions, ranging from individual digital literacy to government regulation. This Table 3 complements the discussion by showing how resilience can be strengthened at different levels, personal, family, school, and societal, thereby addressing the cycle of vulnerability identified in the informants' testimonies. By linking these strategies to the lived experiences of Generation Z, the table reinforces the argument that coordinated interventions are essential to mitigate the psychological and social risks of harmful media consumption.

Through interviews with six informants, this study found that media consumption contributes significantly to social vulnerability and mental health challenges among generation z. exposure to pornography, experiences of cyberbullying, addiction to digital devices, and susceptibility to hoax news form a cycle of vulnerability that weakens psychological and social resilience.

This discussion highlights the need for interventions at multiple levels (individual, familial, educational, and governmental) to mitigate risks and promote resilience. By addressing harmful media consumption patterns, society can support the mental health of generation z in the digital era.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that media consumption among generation z significantly contributes to both social vulnerability and mental health challenges. Exposure to pornographic content, experiences with cyberbullying, digital addiction and susceptibility to misinformation are interconnected patterns that weaken individual resilience and collective well being. The testimonies of informants demonstrate that these behaviors are not merely casual habits but have become normalized aspects of lifestyle, shaping identity and social interaction in ways that increase vulnerability.

Thus, media consumption affects not only psychological stability but also broadens the scope of social vulnerability among generation z. Addressing these issues requires multi level interventions, families must strengthen communication and supervision, schools should implement systematic digital literacy education, and government needs to regulate harmful content while promoting literacy campaigns. Without such measures, generation z will continue to face increasing complex risks in the digital era.

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Author Contributions Statement

Name of Author	C	M	So	Va	Fo	I	R	D	O	E	Vi	Su	P	Fu
Dini Safitri	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

C : **C**onceptualization
M : **M**ethodology
So : **So**ftware
Va : **Va**lidation
Fo : **Fo**rmal analysis
I : **I**nvestigation
R : **R**esources
D : **D**ata Curation
O : Writing - **O**riginal Draft
E : Writing - Review & **E**diting
Vi : **Vi**sualization
Su : **Su**pervision
P : **P**roject administration
Fu : **Fu**nding acquisition

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Informed Consent

All participants in this study were informed about the purpose, scope and procedures prior to the interviews. They were assured that participation was voluntary, that they could decline to answer any question and that they could withdraw at any time without consequence. The interview questin were presented in advance and participants explicity agreed to respond only to those questions they felt comfortable answering. Confidentiality was strictly maintained; names and personal identifiers were excluded only by the research team. By providing verbal consent, each participant acknowledges their understanding of the study and agrees to participate under these conditions.

Ethical Approval

This study was conducted in accordance with established athical guidelines for social science research. Prior to data collection, participants were informed about the purpose and scope of the study, and they provided voluntary consent to participate. They were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any time. All interviewers' questions were reviewed and agreed upon by informants before being asked, ensuring that participation was based on informed choice. The research protocol was reviewed internally and adhered to the ethical standards of Universitas Negeri Jakarta. As the study involved minimal risk and focused on voluntary interviews without sensitive personal data, formal institutional ethical clearance was deemed sufficient under the university research ethics framework.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are derived from qualitative interviews with generation z informants. Due to confidentiality agreements and ethical considerations, the raw interview transcripts are not publicly available. Anonymized excerpts relevant to the analysis have been included within the article. Further details may be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, provided that such access does not compromise participant privacy or violate ethical approval conditions.

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