

The Relationship Between Social Media Usage Time and Stress Level of Generation Z in Ho Chi Minh City

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Received: 18 October 2025 | Accepted: 17 December 2025 | Published: 31 December 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55057/ajbs.2025.7.4.2>

Abstract: *This study was conducted to explore the relationship between time spent on social media and stress levels among Generation Z in Ho Chi Minh City. The survey was conducted on 96 young people of Generation Z, currently studying and working in Ho Chi Minh City, through a questionnaire including demographic information, social media usage habits and the DASS-21 scale to assess stress. The results showed that nearly 50% of participants had normal stress levels, while about 23% experienced moderate to very severe stress. Statistical analysis showed significant differences in stress levels by gender (men were higher than women) and work status (students were higher than those who worked). Notably, the frequency of accessing social media each day was closely related to stress levels, while the total duration, time of use or the social media platform often used did not show statistically significant differences. These results suggest that the number of times people use social media is more important than the total number of hours spent on social media in predicting stress. The study also highlights the need for psychological interventions targeting college students and women – who are more vulnerable – and suggests that managing social media habits is an effective stress prevention measure for Generation Z.*

Keywords: Generation Z, stress, social networks, access frequency, Ho Chi Minh City

1. Introduction

In recent years, the rapid development of social media platforms has dramatically changed personal and social life. In particular, Generation Z, those born between 1997 and 2012 is considered a digital native generation with frequent access and use of social media (Turner, 2015). Recently, a good number of international studies show that Generation Z often experiences information overload, leading to an increased risk of psychological stress (Maier et al., 2015).

Several studies have found an existing relationship between social media use and mental health. For example, in Colombia, Manrique Molina and Ramirez Roja (2024) discovered that social media use significantly affected students' body image, mental health, and social relationships. Similarly, in Vietnam, Dung et al. (2021) asserted that the longer time adolescents spend on social media, the more it affects their mental health. Additionally, new media literacy is considered a protective factor, helping to enhance the psychological resilience and mental health of Generation Z (Lim, Ahmad, & Prihadi, 2024).

Based on the above theoretical and practical foundations, this study was conducted to explore the relationship between social media usage time and stress levels of Generation Z in Ho Chi Minh City.

2. Research Subjects and Objects

The research object of the current paper is the relationship between time spent on social media and stress levels of Generation Z in Ho Chi Minh City. The research participants were randomly selected from 96 young people of Generation Z, currently living, studying and working in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

3. Research Questions

The paper focuses on answering the following two main questions:

- (1) What is the current status of stress levels of Generation Z in Ho Chi Minh City?
- (2) Is there a relationship between time spent on social networks and stress levels of Generation Z in Ho Chi Minh City?

4. Research Methods

In this study, the authors utilized three main methods, including: (1) document research method to systematize theoretical basis and related works (Nguyen & Tran, 2020); (2) questionnaire survey method to collect experimental data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018); and (3) data processing method using mathematical statistics, performed through SPSS software, to analyse and draw scientific conclusions (Field, 2013).

The research tool was implemented in the form of a questionnaire, consisting of three main parts. The first part collected demographic information of participants. The second part focused on questions related to the time and frequency of social media use of Generation Z. The third part used the DASS-21 scale compiled by Peter Lovibond and Syd Lovibond (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995), which was translated and standardized into Vietnamese by Nguyen et al., (2017), to assess the stress level of the research subjects. The scale was converted according to standardized levels, ensuring the objectivity and reliability of the measurement results.

Table 1: Stress hierarchy according to DASS 21 scale

| Level | Conversion points |
|-------------|-------------------|
| Normal | 0 – 14 |
| Light | 15 – 18 |
| Fit | 19 – 25 |
| Severe | 26 – 33 |
| Very Severe | - >= 34 |

5. Results

5.1 Current status of stress level of Generation Z in Ho Chi Minh City

Table 2: Current status of stress level of Generation Z in Ho Chi Minh City

| Level | Quantity | Percent |
|--------|----------|---------|
| Normal | 43 | 47.3 |
| Light | 12 | 13.2 |

| | | |
|------------|----|------|
| Fit | 15 | 16.5 |
| Heavy | 18 | 19.8 |
| Very heavy | 3 | 3.3 |
| Total | 91 | 100 |

Table 2 shows the stress level is unevenly distributed among the groups. Specifically, the group with normal stress level accounts for the highest proportion at 47.3%. In addition, 29.7% of the survey participants fall into the mild to moderate stress level, while the remaining 23.1% belong to the group with severe to very severe stress level. This data shows that nearly half of the research subjects are facing psychological stress at different levels. Notably, the proportion of severe and very severe stress accounts for more than 1/5 of the total sample, reflecting that the gap between the group with no significant stress and the group with severe stress level is not too large, thereby suggesting important implications for psychological support and intervention work.

This result is similar to the findings of Nguyen Danh Lam et al., (2022) when the study high school students of generation Z, the results revealed that the rates of stress, anxiety, and depression disorders were 41.7%, 49.0%, 43.6%, respectively, mainly at mild and moderate levels". This shows that although the research subjects and research times are different, the trend of psychological stress in generation Z still has common characteristics. This result also implies that there is a need to continue to research more deeply on stress in generation Z as well as related factors, especially the relationship between time spent on social networks and stress levels, aiming to provide a scientific basis for appropriate mental health intervention and support measures.

5.2 Differences in stress levels of Generation Z by gender

Table 3: Differences in stress levels of Generation Z by gender

| Comparison criteria | | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Sig |
|---------------------|--------|----|------|----------------|------|
| Sex | Male | 48 | 2.62 | 1.46 | 0.00 |
| | Female | 43 | 1.69 | 0.88 | |

Results from Table 3 show that males had higher mean stress scores than females in this sample, and the difference was statistically significant. Comparison with the literature: Many international studies often report higher rates of anxiety/depression in women, but this is not an absolute truth: gender difference analysis may yield different results depending on the sample, culture, type of stress measured, and context (e.g., men's financial/work pressure, social roles, or differences in self-reporting). This findings are similar to some studies in Vietnam (e.g., Nguyen Trung Hau & Nguyen Thanh Nam, 2021) in specific contexts. It can be seen that (a) men in the sample may be under greater work/economic pressure or social expectations; (b) differences in social media usage patterns (e.g., content type, competitive interactions) may be influencing; (c) sampling bias or differences in self-reporting (social desirability) may also lead to this result.

5.3 Differences in stress levels of Generation Z according to work

Table 4: Stress levels of Generation Z by job

| Comparison criteria | | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Sig |
|---------------------|-----------------|----|------|----------------|------|
| Being | Student | 38 | 2.73 | 1.26 | 0.00 |
| | Already working | 53 | 1.79 | 1.19 | |

The results from Table 4 indicate that students have significantly higher average stress levels than the working group. This is a relatively clear and statistically significant result. It can be explained that students face pressures of study, exams, career prospects, and the transition to adulthood—factors that can lead to stress (competition, career uncertainty, family burdens). Those who are already working may have other coping mechanisms or sources of support (routine, steady pay, professional social networks).

5.4 Differences in stress levels of Generation Z by average daily social media usage time.

Table 5: Stress level of Z-form by average time spent on social media per day

| Comparison criteria | | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Sig |
|--|--------------|----|------|----------------|------|
| Time spent on social media average per day | 1 - 2 hours | 27 | 2.00 | 1.27 | 0.66 |
| | 3 - 5 hours | 40 | 2.27 | 1.28 | |
| | Over 5 hours | 21 | 2.28 | 1.52 | |

The analysis results from Table 5 show that the difference in stress levels between the target groups with the average daily social media usage time is insignificant. Specifically, the group using social media from 1-2 hours/day has an average stress score of 2.00 (SD = 1.27); the group using from 3-5 hours/day has an average score of 2.27 (SD = 1.28); while the group using more than 5 hours/day has an average score of 2.28 (SD = 1.52). Notably, the Sig value = 0.66 shows that the difference between these groups is not statistically significant, thereby confirming that the duration of social media usage does not have a close relationship with the level of stress within the research sample.

However, this result is not entirely consistent with some previous studies. For example, the study by Thi Thuy Dung et al. (2021) showed that spending too much time on social media tends to increase symptoms of anxiety and depression. This difference suggests that within the current research sample, the average daily time spent on social media is not the only factor determining the stress level of Generation Z. This suggests the possibility that there are many other factors, which may be personal, social or environmental, that simultaneously affect the psychological state of this group.

5.5 Differences in stress levels of Generation Z according to the time of social media use

Table 6: Stress level of Generation Z according to time of social media use

| Comparison criteria | | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Sig |
|--------------------------------------|---------|----|------|----------------|------|
| Most frequently used social networks | Evening | 69 | 2.13 | 1.27 | 0.19 |
| | Night | 16 | 2.68 | 1.53 | |

The results presented in Table 6 show that the stress level of Generation Z has a certain difference according to the time of social media use, especially between the group that mainly uses social media in the evening (17:00–22:00) and the group that uses it at night (22:00–5:00). Specifically, the group that has the habit of using social media most often in the evening has an average stress level score of 2.13 (SD = 1.27), while the group that mainly uses it at night has a higher average score of 2.68 (SD = 1.53). However, the Sig value = 0.19 shows that this difference is not statistically significant, meaning that there is not enough basis to confirm that the time of social media use has a direct impact on the stress level of Generation Z within the scope of the research sample.

However, the trend of the results still suggests that the use of social media at night may be associated with increased psychological stress in Generation Z. This finding is similar to the study of Phan Nhu Ngoc et al. (2022) on a group of high school students. This study showed that students – with the characteristics of their age of frequent exploration and discovery – are easily attracted to entertainment activities on smartphones such as social networks, online games, or communication through calling and texting. Using smartphones for too long, especially before going to bed, has been shown to have a negative impact on the quality of sleep and psychological state of students. Therefore, although there is not enough statistical evidence to confirm a causal relationship, the current research results still suggest a potential link between the habit of using social media at night and increased stress levels in Generation Z.

5.6 Differences in stress levels of Generation Z by average of social media visits per day

Table 7.1: Stress level of Z-potential according to average number of social media visits per day

| Comparison criteria | | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Sig |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------|----|------|----------------|------|
| Most frequently used social networks | Less than 5 times | 9 | 2.00 | 1.50 | 0.04 |
| | 5-10 times | 36 | 1.75 | 1.10 | |
| | 10 - 20 times | 36 | 2.58 | 1.33 | |
| | Over 20 times | 10 | 2.50 | 1.35 | |

The results presented in Table 7.1. show that the stress level of Generation Z has a clear difference according to the average number of social network accesses per day. Specifically, the group accessing less than 5 times/day has an average stress score of 2.00 (SD = 1.50); the group accessing from 5-10 times/day recorded the lowest average level of 1.75 (SD = 1.10). In contrast, the group accessing from 10-20 times/day has the highest average stress score, reaching 2.58 (SD = 1.33); followed by the group accessing more than 20 times/day with an average of 2.50 (SD = 1.35). The Sig value = 0.04 (< 0.05) shows that this difference is statistically significant, thereby confirming that the number of social network accesses per day is related to the stress level of Generation Z.

This finding is consistent with previous studies. For example, Elhai et al. (2017) demonstrated that the frequency of mobile device use is closely related to negative psychological symptoms such as stress, anxiety, and depression. From the current results, it can be seen that accessing social media with a frequency of 10 or more times per day increases the risk of psychological stress in Generation Z. This condition not only affects mental health but also has the potential to disrupt daily activities such as studying, working, and resting. In addition, high frequency of social media use may be related to the phenomenon of “Fear of Missing Out” (FOMO), which has been noted as one of the common psychological factors among young people in the context of the digital technology explosion.

Table 7.2: Stress level of Z generation by average time spent on a social network

| Comparison criteria | | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Sig |
|--------------------------------------|------------------|----|------|----------------|------|
| Most frequently used social networks | Under 10 minutes | 15 | 2.40 | 1.40 | 0.56 |
| | 10 - 30 minutes | 21 | 2.00 | 1.34 | |
| | 30 - 60 minutes | 27 | 2.00 | 1.07 | |
| | Over 60 minutes | 28 | 2.39 | 1.44 | |

The analysis results from Table 7.2 show that the stress level of Generation Z in Ho Chi Minh City fluctuates according to the average duration of each social network access. However, this

difference has not reached statistical significance, with a Sig value of 0.56 (> 0.05). Specifically, the group using less than 10 minutes per access has an average stress score of 2.40 (SD = 1.40), which is similar to the group using more than 60 minutes per access (M = 2.39; SD = 1.44). Meanwhile, the group using 10–30 minutes recorded an average of 2.00 (SD = 1.34), and the group using 30–60 minutes had a similar average of 2.00 (SD = 1.07).

Thus, although there is variation in stress levels among target groups, the Sig value greater than 0.05 indicates that there is not enough basis to confirm the existence of a statistically significant relationship between the average duration of each social media access and the stress level in Generation Z. This result suggests that the duration of a social media session may not be the determining factor in stress levels, but that other factors – such as the frequency of access (Elhai et al., 2017), the type of content accessed (Marino et al., 2018), or personal characteristics such as self-esteem and self-control (Andreassen et al., 2017) – have a stronger influence on the psychological state of this age group. These findings are consistent with recent research trends, which suggest that the relationship between social media use and psychological well-being is multidimensional and complex, rather than simply dependent on duration of use alone (Twenge & Campbell, 2018).

5.7 Differences in Generation Z stress levels by social media platform

Table 8: Stress levels of Generation Z by social media platform

| Comparison criteria | | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Sig |
|--------------------------------------|----------|----|------|----------------|------|
| Most frequently used social networks | Tiktok | 39 | 2.23 | 1.49 | 0.96 |
| | Facebook | 26 | 2.26 | 1.25 | |
| | Youtube | 23 | 2.17 | 1.07 | |

The analysis results from Table 8 show that the level of psychological stress of Generation Z in Ho Chi Minh City has almost no significant difference when compared by the most frequently used social networking platform, with Sig value = 0.96 > 0.05 . Specifically, the group that regularly uses Facebook has the highest average stress level (Mean = 2.26; Std. Deviation = 1.25), followed by the group that uses TikTok (Mean = 2.23; Std. Deviation = 1.49), and the lowest is the group that uses YouTube (Mean = 2.17; Std. Deviation = 1.07). However, because the difference in average scores between groups is very small and the Sig value does not reach the statistical significance threshold, it can be concluded that the preferred social networking platform is not a factor that has a clear influence on the level of stress in this study.

However, previous studies have shown that social media use, especially at high frequency, can have negative consequences for mental health. For example, Jain et al. (2022) found that frequent TikTok use was strongly associated with increased anxiety and depression symptoms, especially among younger users under 24 years of age. This suggests that rather than the platform itself, frequency of use and how people interact with social media are more important variables in predicting stress levels in Generation Z (Twenge & Campbell, 2018; Elhai et al., 2017).

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The study results show that the stress level of Generation Z in Ho Chi Minh City is mainly at an average level. This finding is consistent with the study by Nguyen Danh Lam et al. (2022), which shows that although frequent and long-term exposure to social media can lead to

negative effects on mental health, most of them have not yet developed into serious mental disorders. This suggests that social media may act as a potential risk factor that needs to be considered for prevention rather than a direct cause of illness.

Gender differences. The study found that women had higher levels of stress than men, a finding consistent with previous studies (Nguyen Trung Hau & Nguyen Thanh Nam, 2021; Lim et al., 2024). One possible explanation for this is that women are more sensitive to social pressure and body image on social media, which is a common stressor (Manrique Molina & Ramírez Roja, 2024). This finding highlights the importance of developing gender-sensitive intervention programs to reduce psychological risks for young women.

Differences by employment status. Students were found to have higher levels of stress than those who were employed. This suggests that the study and career orientation periods are sensitive periods, with high achievement pressures and social expectations. This finding is consistent with the study by Elhai et al. (2017), in which students were often found to be more vulnerable to social pressures than those who were employed. Therefore, psychological support measures at schools and universities should be seriously considered.

Average usage time/day. The study did not find a clear association between total hours of social media use and stress levels, which is different from some domestic studies (Dung et al., 2021). This suggests that total time may not be the deciding factor, but the way and purpose of social media use is the important factor (Jain et al., 2023). This result opens up a new direction for research, focusing on the quality of experience and the purpose of usage behavior instead of just measuring the number of hours.

Timing of use. Nighttime social media use tends to be associated with higher stress, consistent with research on the effects of social media on sleep quality (Phan Nhu Ngoc et al., 2022). However, the association did not reach statistical significance, possibly due to sample size limitations.

Frequency of access/day. This is the factor with the strongest association with stress. The study results showed that people who access social media multiple times a day have higher levels of stress. This finding supports the “social overload” hypothesis (Maier et al., 2015), according to which constant interruptions from social media create strong psychological pressure. Elhai et al. (2017) also suggested that frequent checking of social media leads to constant “task switching”, which reduces work efficiency and increases feelings of insecurity – a factor contributing to stress. At the same time, frequent exposure to updates also promotes social comparison and a sense of missing out (FOMO), which in turn increases stress.

Average duration of visit. No significant relationship was found between duration of visit and stress levels. This may be explained by the fact that using social media for longer periods of time but less frequently throughout the day is less stressful than being interrupted by short check-ins.

Platform Differences. The results did not show significant differences between social media platforms. However, the trend of TikTok users reporting higher stress levels is consistent with some recent studies (Jain et al., 2023). This needs to be further validated in studies with larger samples and more diverse designs.

Overall, the results suggest that the frequency of social media use is a stronger predictor of stress than the total amount of time spent on social media. This finding has important practical implications for intervention programs, suggesting that modifying social media checking habits (reducing the number of times per day) may be more effective in preventing stress than simply limiting the total amount of time spent on social media.

Conclusion

The study results show that the stress level of Generation Z in Ho Chi Minh City is mainly influenced by gender, employment status and frequency of social media use. Specifically, about 50% of participants are at a normal stress level, while 23% experience moderate to very severe stress. Students have higher stress levels than the working group, and women are more susceptible to stress than men. Notably, the frequency of social media access per day is closely related to stress, while total duration, time of use and preferred platform do not make a significant difference.

From these findings, it can be affirmed that the frequency of social media use is more important than the total number of hours used in predicting stress. Therefore, appropriate interventions are needed to adjust social media access habits, and at the same time, build mental health support programs for students and women - more vulnerable groups. These results also contribute to providing a basis for long-term research and policies to improve the mental health of Generation Z in Ho Chi Minh City in particular and Vietnam in general.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to express sincere gratitude to everyone who contributed, both directly and indirectly, to the completion of this study.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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