

Future of Asia

# The role of social media and tech in Gen Z's mental health

A McKinsey Health Institute global survey reveals that Gen Zers experience worse mental health problems than other generations. Does social media and tech harm or help?



*If you or someone you know has a mental illness, is struggling emotionally, or has concerns about their mental health, consider seeking help for you, a friend, or a family member.*

**In this episode of the *McKinsey Future of Asia* Podcast**, McKinsey's Kana Enomoto and Alistair Carmichael—both associate partners in the McKinsey Health Institute—discuss the negative and positive effects of social media on Gen Zers' mental health. They stress that these types of technology can be used to beneficial effect by working across sectors to help the Gen Z youth find the support they need, both in and out of the workplace.

An edited version of the conversation follows.

**Gautam Kumra:** I am Gautam Kumra, chairman of McKinsey Asia, and you're listening to the *Future of Asia* Podcast series. The Asian century has begun. The region is now the world's largest economy. As Asia's economies evolve further, the region has the potential to fuel and shape the next normal. In each episode, we are going to feature conversations with leaders from across the region to discuss what Asia's rise means for businesses across the globe. Join us.

**Debbi Cheong:** Hello, everyone, and welcome to a new episode of the *McKinsey Future of Asia* Podcast. My name is Debbi and I'm your host for today. In this episode, we will be talking about health, in particular the impact of technology and social media on Gen Z's mental health. As part of a global survey, the McKinsey Health Institute (MHI) asked more than 42,000 respondents in 26 countries questions based on four dimensions of health: mental, physical, social, and spiritual. What the survey results revealed might surprise you.

Today, we are joined by Kana Enomoto, a senior knowledge expert and associate partner at McKinsey & Company. Based in Washington DC, Kana is also the director of brain health at the MHI. Also with us today is Alistair

Carmichael, an expert associate partner based in McKinsey's Sydney office, who leads MHI in Australia and Asia. It's great to have you both with us today. Before we start, Kana, could you tell us a bit more about the survey, why you and your team decided to conduct it, and who is represented in the questionnaire?

**Kana Enomoto:** We have been thinking about Gen Z's brain health for a couple of years now. We know that there are unprecedented rates of young people experiencing symptoms of anxiety, depression, suicidality, and substance use. So we were curious about how this generation views their own health. At MHI, we have a four-part definition of health. We think about mental, social, physical, and spiritual health. We wanted to dig underneath to see whether or not our youngest generation is thinking differently from millennials, Gen Xers, and baby boomers. We went to 26 countries, as you said, surveyed 42,000 people, and used consumer research methodology to ask people how they saw their own health, as well as access to services and the factors around them that were affecting their experiences.

**Debbi Cheong:** What did the results show and did some of them surprise you?

**Kana Enomoto:** We did have some surprising results. Some things weren't surprising; we knew that Gen Zers were experiencing worse mental health issues than others. We saw that about 18 percent of Gen Zers around the world reported having poor or very poor mental health. But what we didn't expect was that one out of ten Gen Zers also said they had poor physical health, which was very close to what we saw for Gen X, millennials, and baby boomers. Also, Gen Zers were more likely to report poor spiritual health than any other generation. So, while about 14 percent of Gen Zers said they have poor or very poor spiritual health, only 5 percent of baby boomers said they had poor spiritual health. These are really interesting data in that they tell us that there are variation across generations. And it shows that there are some unique factors about Gen

Z, where they're feeling very vulnerable across the board.

**Debbi Cheong:** How many of these mental health or health challenges are caused by exposure to social media and technology? And, why do you think, Alistair, that there was a big differentiation between different categories of respondents such as between generations and countries?

**Alistair Carmichael:** Social media is a big part of all respondents' everyday lives. More than 75 percent of people said that they use or check social media for at least ten minutes a day. And for some cohorts, it was much, much more—more than 35 percent of Gen Z said it was more like two hours plus a day. But one of the things we need to remember for this topic is that mental health is multidimensional. It's influenced by our experience, actions, and our biology. So, rather than saying that poor mental health is caused by social media and technology, what the research shows is that there are relationships between social media technology and mental health, and they're both positive and negative—with the positive outstripping negative across demographics. That said, Gen Zers and millennials are more likely than other generations to say that social media negatively affects their mental health.

In Australia, for example, 40 percent of Gen Zers said technology and media negatively affects their mental health compared to only 11 percent of baby boomers. And when we look at India or another country in our region, it was the most important factor negatively impacting their mental health. So, it is a complex area with a number of things going on. When we talk about negative effects, these are things like fear of missing out, body image, or self-confidence, all of which are important topics for our people and communities. We know from external and additional research that, with young people, there is somewhat of an inverse relationship

between screentime and psychological well-being—showing that high utilization is associated with poor well-being.

So, when you put it together, what we're seeing is that social media plays an important role. There are positive and negative factors; it is complicated. The other part of the question was, "Where do we see differences?" There are differences across generations, gender, countries, and regions. In terms of generations globally, one in seven baby boomers said that their mental health has declined over the past three years—that's understandable as we're coming through and out of the COVID-19 pandemic. But, for our Gen Z respondents, it was more like one in four—suggesting that their experience is a subjective one that they felt has declined faster.

When it comes to gender, female Gen Zs were almost twice as likely to report poor mental health compared to their male counterparts: 21 percent versus 13 percent. For some countries in our region, it was even worse. Australia saw double the rate: 28 percent versus 14 percent. We also then saw differences in countries or by region. In our region, for example, 20 percent of Gen Zers in Indonesia reported that their mental health was poor, and 26 percent in Japan. But putting it all together, social media and technology usage are nuanced topics. It's not all negative; it's not all positive. The negatives vary across generations and groups. However, we do have members of our community, including Gen Zers, that call out some significant negatives on their mental health and lives. So, it's important that we look at what can be done as a community to address the nuances.

**Debbi Cheong:** Alistair, what do you think accounts for these nuances between groups? And can it be explained by a particular reason or do you think there is a multitude of factors at play here?

**Alistair Carmichael:** There is a multitude of factors at play. You are looking at things like different experiences, cultures, pressures or current pressures, and different experiences of upbringing—if you think about what baby boomers were exposed to in their upbringing versus Gen Z or even the Gen Alpha that follow them. We also need to take into account the impact of the pandemic. Countries differed in the approaches that they took and that meant differing experiences for different people. What we're also starting to see come through is the impact of the financial challenges and geopolitical pressures. If you're feeling those pressures, you're at a higher risk of unemployment, which can result in a lower level of health and subjective well-being.

There is another thing, though, to call out from the report, which is how people consume social media and technology. Prior research has shown that there is something of a dose response to the consumption of social media and technology. The more time you spend on it, the more likely it is to have a negative outcome. But the other factor is actually how you consume it, where passive consumption versus active engagement is associated with poorer outcomes. This is where we see a generational difference. Gen Z, on average, tends to comprise more passive consumers than, say, baby boomers.

**Debbi Cheong:** I want to hone in on the negative effects of social media. Why do you think these have been spotlighted in the media recently? Do MHI survey results go against the general sentiment that social media plays a significant part in deteriorating mental health among the youth? Kana, could you elaborate on what Alistair mentioned earlier?

**Kana Enomoto:** Sure. The first question that you asked is, "Why does media focus so much on the potential negative impacts of social media on youth mental health?" I think as a society, and as humanity, we consistently worry about the things that negatively affect our youth. There was a form of media in the late 1700s and early 1800s that people were very concerned would have a bad

effect on youth—and that was books. People were worried that books were corrupting the minds of young people. And the 1800s, people were worried that young people were spending too much time in libraries.

So I think our focus on video games, magazines, news, media, television, movies, whatever we consume as information, is something that we should and need to be cautious about. What we found in our research is that, just like many relationships that people have between the ages of 18 and 24, the relationship that young people today have with social media is complicated. It's important to see what impact social media has on people. For some, particularly populations that have been minoritized (certain religious or ethnic subgroups in a country where they are a minority, or LGBTQ+ youth in many parts of the world), the internet and social media are a lifeline, because they give them a chance to connect with people who are like them, understand them, and with whom they can relate.

Social media a really positive place for creative expression, but it is also a place where there is cyberbullying and hate speech. So, we need to be very balanced and thoughtful in how we look at our relationship with media, how we support our young people in their relationship with social media, and the time that they spend using it. I would also note that many of the young people we surveyed said that they use technology to access mental health support. In fact, that is happening across the board and across generations. The internet and technology offer an opportunity for people to get their mental, physical, social, and spiritual health needs met, as well as placing them at risk at different times. So, I hope that we can be objective as we look at the potential risks and benefits.

**Debbi Cheong:** Thank you, Kana. Now that we've looked at the overview of trends and what the survey results show, I think the main question that a lot of our listeners would like

to ask is, “What can companies and business leaders take away from this survey, and how can they utilize technology and social media to their advantage—not only to alleviate workplace mental health problems within various generations but also continue to increase productivity within the workplace?” Alistair, maybe you would like to take the mic on this one?

**Alistair Carmichael:** Employers and business leaders have an important role to play here, doubly so because we know that across Asia, so many employees are struggling. Last year, our research showed that somewhere in the order of 30 percent of employees across Asia were reporting symptoms of burnout. So, with that backdrop, the question really is, “What can employers and business leaders do?” There are a number of things. First, learning about how social media and technology are being used and can be used in your organization, and cultivating the positives around connecting communities, particularly minoritized communities. They can use social media as a positive for self-expression, community building, and using corporate social media to be a force for good. This requires listening, being authentic, and trying not to control.

The second thing is using technology to measure and then to act. As Kana mentioned, a number of our young people use social media to try to identify help—employers can assist with that. They can look at how people get access to their workplace mental health or employee health programs and see how technology can better enable that. They can also look at how technology can better enable general action around employee health. This is thinking beyond resilience and wellness, but about how we measure workload and how corporate social media and technology could provide additional insights.

The third thing is working within and across communities. What we hear from actors in the space is the need to work across, not just within, communities—employers working with technology companies, educators, health professionals, and policymakers to drive positive outcomes. There’s

some great research that has been done on how effective health promotion is and the power of certain interventions. As we come together, we can increase the uptake and availability and improve the conversation. We can break down some of the barriers around stigma that are particularly prevalent in our region and promote awareness.

Some of the listeners might themselves run tech companies, and design and deliver social media programs and platforms. They need to continue to be part of the broader dialogue around mental health—particularly youth mental health—because social media can be powerful tools in promoting well-being. In fact, there are a number of examples of how certain platforms have deployed algorithms to try to identify people who are at risk or facing challenges. There’s more to be done there in being able to connect people to the support they need, identify where there are challenges, and offer support. That’s going to mean that tech and social media companies need to continue to work within and outside of themselves to achieve that.

There are a number of things that you can do as an employer, but it starts with awareness—learning about the space and taking a nuanced view. We know that the barriers between work and home have come down. Mental health is not a private issue anymore. However, we also are aware of the stigma around mental health and the social differences. We know there are cultural challenges, but this issue is too important not to work together to help our people. And in doing this, it’s not just good for the community and society, it’s actually good business, too. Because if you go full potential on something like employee health, it’s worth double digits to the GDP of the country and significant uptake around productivity for the employers as well.

**Debbi Cheong:** Before I end off, Kana, do you have anything to say to that last question?

**Kana Enomoto:** One of the things that has been really top of mind for me is the growing sense of crisis that we've seen in young people around the world—the increasing rates of suicide, overdose, and people going to the emergency room, or finding other ways of getting emergency help for the overwhelming mental health crisis. So we're working on how to help communities provide young people with some of these calls, for someone to respond to them, or provide safe place to get help during a crisis. The availability of these types of support globally is quite varied, with the majority of countries having no national suicide or mental health crisis lines.

In addition, communities everywhere in every country lack an adequate community mental-health services infrastructure to respond to the volume of young people experiencing these challenges. As a result, people end up looking for help in their schools, with their families in emergency rooms, hospitals, or with law enforcement to try to bridge a gap that could save lives. A popular model, like dispatching specially trained mobile teams, or providing a safe place for people to go for respite is even more rare. This is a gap that technology could bridge. And I'm hopeful that, as young people come of age, that we can work more across sectors to use technology in a way that can solve some of these problems.

As Alistair mentioned, young people expect their schools and employers to have robust

mental health offerings, when and how they need them, including virtually. I think it's incumbent on us, as folks who care about and support young people, to work with researchers, tech companies, healthcare systems, and governments to think about what solutions we could offer that could help close the gap of what's needed and what's available.

We should also think about prevention and promotion. Could we have a precision prevention approach by talking to young people using algorithms for the power of good? What do these young people need? What types of messages would they find most supportive? How can we use these data to help connect these folks with services that might be most useful to them, or supports information that could be inspiring or healing? Technology can become actively engaged in promoting the health of Gen Z and beyond.

**Debbi Cheong:** Thank you, Kana and Alistair, for joining us today. I think this has been a really interesting discussion on the effects of technology and social media on mental health, in particular, on the youth of today.

**Gautam Kumra:** You have been listening to the *Future of Asia* Podcast by McKinsey & Company. To learn more about McKinsey, our people, our latest thinking, visit us at [mckinsey.com/FutureOfAsia](https://mckinsey.com/FutureOfAsia), or find us on LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook.

**Alistair Carmichael** is an expert associate partner in the Sydney office. **Kana Enomoto** is a senior knowledge expert and associate partner in the Washington DC office.

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