

DIGITAL CULTURE AND SOCIAL ANXIETY DISORDER AFFECTING KENYAN GEN-Z; IMPLICATIONS FOR MULTICULTURALLY SENSITIVE PSYCHOLOGISTS

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The study sought to examine the impact of digital culture on social anxiety among Kenyan Gen-Z youth, focusing on how increased internet and smartphone access influences identity formation and mental well-being in the context of traditional African values like *Ubuntu*.

Methodology: A qualitative thematic analysis was conducted, drawing on empirical literature, expert opinion, and cultural perspectives. The study integrated theoretical insights with real-life observations to explore the tensions between algorithmic digital influences and traditional communal frameworks. Key constructs examined included digital self-presentation, individualism, and cultural dissonance.

Results: Findings revealed that Gen-Z youth in Kenya experience heightened social anxiety linked to the pressure of maintaining curated online personas. This pressure often leads to feelings of inadequacy, disconnection, and withdrawal from offline social engagements. The contradiction between the digital world's emphasis on individualism and the communal values embodied in *Ubuntu* emerged as a central source of internal conflict. The influence of algorithm-driven platforms was shown to intensify egocentrism and loneliness, undermining collective identity and psychological resilience.

Conclusion: The study concludes that the rise of digital culture is creating a complex identity crisis among Kenyan youth by weakening traditional values of interconnectedness.

Recommendations: The study recommends that multicultural psychologists integrate traditional healing with digital tools in culturally sensitive ways, using technology to reinforce—rather than replace—communal mental health values.

Key Words: *Digital Culture, Social Anxiety Disorder, Gen-Z, Ubuntu, Multicultural Sensitivity.*

THE MULTICULTURALISM OF GROWING UP DIGITAL IN KENYA

The saturation of artificial intelligence and digital mass media technology in our daily lives and culture is one of the most significant shifts in our social environment in the 20th and 21st century. Most young people in Africa and globally living with mental health conditions may lack access to mental health care but have mobile phones (Tafadzwa Mindu et al., 2023). Identity formation and communication have been revolutionized globally shaped by the internet, digital media, and virtual environments (Tianjiao Li, 2024). This has led to the development of a new way of life referred to as “digital culture” in this paper for those who were born and raised with these developments, the digital natives. Digital natives in Kenya face both opportunities for global cultural expression and risks of developing social anxiety in local contexts. Consequently, although there are ethical risks associated with misinformation, privacy concerns, and an overreliance on automated systems, AI and social media have the potential to enhance mental healthcare systems (Ogunwale et al., 2024).

The digital age presents a paradox for Kenyan youth, where growing access to internet and smartphones fosters curated online personas that clash with traditional values of community and togetherness. Rooted in *Ubuntu*, which emphasizes interconnectedness and collective identity (Ébalé & Mulemi, 2023; Taye, 2020), youth face dissonance between digital self-presentation and offline communal expectations. This tension often leads to feelings of alienation and increased social anxiety (Naslund et al., 2020). Recognizing this conflict is essential for addressing the mental health impacts of digital culture.

Culture, as defined by Descola (2012), involves, organizational principles, knowledge systems, and identity boundaries, varying significantly between groups. This diversity, coupled with the interactive nature of cultural components (van Pinxteren et al., 2020), creates a landscape of multiculturalism where individuals navigate diverse belief systems and behavioral norms. Traditionally, familial and peer contexts have facilitated the transmission of cultural values, shaping identity and worldview (Elwakeel, 2024). However, the rise of digital platforms among Gen Z introduces a new dimension to this process, exposing youth to a globalized, multicultural environment that can challenge or contradict their traditional cultural upbringing.

This article examines how exposure to global digital cultures creates internal conflicts in identity formation among Gen-Z, leading to increased social anxiety. It highlights the clash between traditional values and online multicultural influences. The article concludes with

reflections for multicultural psychologists on integrating traditional healing practices with digital mental health tools.

Framged Self-perception and Social Anxiety Disorder: A conflict between the Curated Digital Self and Offline self

Gen Z, are defined as individuals who were born between the late 1990s and early 2010s. They are often described as "digital natives," a term that explains their lifelong involvement with digital technologies (Sadiku et al., 2017). This contrasts earlier generations who experienced the emergence of digital devices and the internet. Gen-Z having grown up with them, experience technology as an essential component of their surroundings. Their worldview, communication patterns, and cultural traditions have all been significantly impacted by this ongoing exposure, giving rise to a distinct "digital culture" (Albescu, 2022).

This artificial culture which requires one to socialize, work & even get informed through technology means Gen Z individuals are "always on," resulting in higher rates of depression, attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and technology addiction (Odgers & Jensen, 2020). Technology addiction has been linked to high rates of social anxiety in Kenya (Turgeman et al, 2020). Furthermore, because digital culture is built on a foundation of constant connectivity and a seamless integration of online and offline experiences. Gen Z's fluency with social media platforms, instant messaging, and online content creation has fostered a presentation of life highlights that are often visual and concise. Gen Z are required to navigate artificial landscapes, by curating their online identities, and engaging in online communities (Abidin, 2018). This has led to unhealthy upward social comparisons within the digital spaces that can contribute to social anxiety disorder.

Several global studies have shown that upward social comparisons arise due to exposure to curated online personas on platforms like Instagram/TikTok fuelling inadequacy and fear of judgment. A study by Gao et al. (2023) examined the causal relationship between social media use and social anxiety. It found that upward social comparison based on curated online personas creates this relationship, with additional factors involving low self-esteem. The experimental findings demonstrated that exposure to social media content increases social anxiety by fostering upward comparisons online and fear of offline negative evaluations.

Another study by Yixuan et al. (2022) investigated the impact of social media selfie behavior on social anxiety in Chinese youth. It identified intermediating effects of social comparison

and body image, showing that selfie-taking behavior can trigger social anxiety through these elements. The study also discussed how idealized online self-presentation leads to body dissatisfaction and negative emotions because of inconsistencies between online and offline identities. This is believed to be the reason why some young people may avoid offline social spaces.

In Kenya Ong'are & Nyangwencha (2022) showed that there is a relationship between problematic smartphone use and social anxiety among university students, because most young people use smartphone social networking sites more often to connect with friends. In addition, it showed that lack of social networks and peer support have the likelihood of increasing smartphone use. Young people have the need to connect, however due to inability to translate online self into offline selves it has led to an addiction to phone use which is both a symptom and by-product of social anxiety.

An additional experiment in Kenya (Turgeman et al, 2020) investigated whether abstinence from smartphone use and sensation seeking have an effect on problematic smartphone use with 140 participants—73 male and 67 female university students—who completed the Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale and the Smartphone Addiction Scale (SAS). The findings indicated a favorable correlation between excessive smartphone use and social anxiety. The group who abstained (for a period) had higher levels of excessive smartphone use than the group that did not, according to the results.

The explored studies confirm that excessive smartphone use means limited time spent off-line, suggesting avoidance of offline social environments. This pattern of behavior can further be interrogated where the development of social anxiety and conflicted self-perception is experienced through digital age parenting (Shokeen & P. N. Ruwali, 2024). Parenting presents the opportunity to examine the digital and offline cultural conflicts for those growing up digital. In the Kenyan context, this clash between traditional parenting practices and the prevalent influence of digital culture is particularly becoming significant (Turgeman et al, 2020).

Ubuntu vs. the Algorithm: Digital Parenting, Multiculturalism, and Adolescent Identity Conflict in Kenya

The clash between Ubuntu and digital algorithms manifests in Kenyan parenting. This section analyzes how evolving communication, shifting authority, and globalized inputs, created by digital platforms, contribute to conflicting self-perceptions and social anxiety in youth

(Ong'ong'a et al., 2021). Specifically, it explores how digital integration disrupts traditional cultural transmission, creating a disconnect between Ubuntu-based familial expectations and online realities. The process of parenting adolescents in the digital age has significant challenges. The Kenyan parent struggles to culturally educate his/her adolescent child a few hours per day due to career pressures, while social media gives 24 hours of social media parenting (Brosnan et al., 2025). The intersection of traditional African parenting practices and the emergence of social media parenting is a point of concern for most Kenyan parents with their adolescents. Digital age parenting seems to produce a melting pot for all forms of global cultures as a result of the internet. However, less emphasis is on traditional Kenyan cultural values like; respect for elders, obedience to the parents, strong family ties, the role of extended family members and the collectivism of living (Ubuntu) (Kupangwa, 2024; Nakitare et al., 2024). In as much as social media also enlightens the Kenyan traditional parents on the researched-based and informed parenting styles, parental perceptions, values and traditional indigenous wisdom and knowledge seem to be disappearing from Kenyan homes, with much emphasis being placed on what is being learnt and observed from the social media even by the parents themselves (Nakitare et al., 2024).

Traditionally, African societies, including many in Kenya, have relied on the communal framework of Ubuntu to guide parenting, where children are seen as a collective responsibility (Kupangwa, 2024). This approach fostered a strong sense of belonging and social support. However, the encroachment of digital culture, driven by algorithmic influences, presents a stark contrast to these traditional values. Recent research in Kisumu, Kenya, reveals a correlation between parental individualism and diminished expectations regarding children's familial obligations (Oburu, 2024), indicating a shift away from Ubuntu principles. This shift, intensified by globalization and increased digital exposure, disrupts the established social networks that traditionally provided adolescents with security and cultural grounding.

Oburu (2024) observed, individuals increasingly prioritize personal desires and self-concepts independent of traditional groupings, reflecting a growing disconnect from cultural customs and support structures. This detachment, fuelled by the algorithmic prioritization of individual engagement over communal cohesion, leaves adolescents vulnerable to social anxiety and a diminished sense of belonging. The carefully crafted online worlds fostered by algorithms can clash with the Ubuntu emphasis on genuine, face-to-face community. This creates a discrepancy that contributes to social anxiety.

Digital culture plays a significant role in the formation of self-concept and self-identity of the Kenyan adolescents and their mental health challenges. The Kenyan adolescents seem to be losing their self-identity through their inability to effectively combine both the traditional Kenyan culture and the digital culture in their day to day living (McKenzie, 2025). This has become a source of anxiety for the adolescents, including their parents. Parenting in a Kenyan traditional setting is a very special and privileged role that requires the fulfilment of certain expectations, societal norms and the active participation of both the nuclear and the extended families, whereas, the digital culture is less involved for the parents and especially more so for the extended family systems (Kopecka-Piech, 2024). The African adage of it takes a village to raise a child as affirmed by Bitalo et al., (2024) is defeated in a digital culture parenting, depriving the growing adolescents from developing a self-identity that is relevant to his/her traditional cultural background.

In traditional African societies, children were viewed as social investments for future familial support (Adeyeye, 2024), and fatherhood was deeply rooted in cultural norms of provision and presence (Bitalo et al., 2024). Despite disruptions from colonial and digital influences, communal values like *Ubuntu* still shape familial expectations (Kupangwa, 2024). Extended family systems remain central in Nigeria, providing social welfare during key life events (Nwanmuoh et al., 2024; Jill Brown et al., 2020). However, the rise of digital culture is gradually eroding these roles, contributing to youth social anxiety.

Further, in traditional African society, children were viewed as a source of investment for parents' old age, siblings and the extended family relatives (Oppong, 2006). This view is different with digital parenting, where the young individualistically emerge themselves in social media with little or no interaction with other people around them. Digital parenting prevents the balancing of the physical family reality with that of the digital world (Tove Lafton et al., 2024). This further increases their social anxiety as the adolescents tries to interact with family members without the same response he/she receives from the digital culture and world, pushing them to suffer from the effects of delayed gratifications they receive from the digital culture (Dejenie et al., 2024). This is a great concern for multicultural psychologists in relation to addictive behaviours.

The multiculturalism of growing up digital and learning the same cultural values as their parents poses a challenging situation when it comes to intergenerational transmission of some traditional African cultural beliefs, values and customs (Kathleen Murphy et al., 2021). The

question then begs: how and where will the adolescent learn the value of growing up in community? Extended African systems have been found to promote bonding, build understanding, curb loneliness, cooperation, child care and support, inculcate values like unity and social socialization (Nwanmuoh et al., 2024). Digital culture removes the adolescent from this socialization contributing to individualised suffering and mental health issues including social anxiety.

In the modern world of today, there is a need to have a positive intersection between parenting by the traditional Kenyan parents and being parented by the digital culture. There is an urgent need to strike a balance between traditional Kenyan parenting styles and that of digital parenting (Tove Lafton et al., 2024). There is need for the African continent to promulgate laws that can protect and promote African values, costumes and traditions around the many digital cultural influences of native adolescents and their families (Hidayati, 2024).

Bridging the gap between traditional Kenyan parenting and digital parenting has to be tackled in a multidimensional way. For example, a study done in Tanzania found that Culturally-Responsive Instruction (CRI) is beneficial to children, in relation to fostering inclusive classrooms and supporting meaningful learning through the use of practices such as “use of native language discourse, traditional songs and dances, story-telling, local and cultural learning materials and domestic animals” (Amani & Mgaiwa, 2025, p. 1). This makes learning meaningful, applicable and interesting to the young people and may help in keeping them away from digital invasion. Helping the adolescent to learn from natural materials, which are real, teaching them cultures that applicable to their social environment, training them in life skills and traditional cultural practices may help them reduce social anxiety of the new, unfamiliar and unknown cultures. (Duuki, 2023)

Traditional Psychology Vs Modern Technology; Bridging Healing Practices

Social media is fast replacing the traditional methods of communication, shaping social interactions and cultural perceptions of self-concept and communal ideologies. Although it contributes to the rise of social anxiety for digital natives in Kenya, it also presents an opportunity for psychological interventions (Christoph Augner et al., 2021). The socio-cultural issues arising from this leap are evident for multicultural psychologists; this is a justification for the need to adopt ways of offering their services to this significant population (Elias G. Konyana et al., 2021). The challenge, however, is how to develop therapeutic interventions that

are relevant to the Gen Z population as well as their parents and the digital society that is already engaged. A critical component of strong multicultural psychological intervention is the inclusion of anchoring theories of psychology that are rooted in socio-cultural-political context (Stephen Molldrem et al., 2025).

Research findings suggest that it is essential to take an objective approach when examining the impact of social media on young people's mental health and well-being, for each aspect is complementary to the other (Sam Kirschner et al., 1997). There are notably very few or no guidelines on how to maximize the utility of social media engagement for psychological interventions that are targeted to the youth, hence the need for more research in this area of study to uncover the challenges and how to mitigate them (Shokeen & P. N. Ruwali, 2024). Treatment of social anxiety typically involves psychotherapy, especially cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), which helps one identify negative thought patterns and behaviors and change them; this can be done individually, with a therapist, or in a group (Mona M. Garvert et al., 2023) . In severe cases, medication may be required. The goal of therapy is to help the individuals identify and change negative thought patterns and behaviors. CBT is often considered the first-line treatment for social anxiety (Samantha Coyle-Eastwick et al., 2024).

A randomized controlled trial study done in Australia and New Zealand to examine an online interdisciplinary intervention that integrated evidence-based strategies from the disciplines of lifestyle medicine and Positive Psychology was found to improve measures of mental health and emotional well-being (Geraldine Przybylko et al., 2021). The remarkable improvement in mental health and emotional wellness, suggesting that such interventions may be useful for mental health promotion and illness prevention owing to this fact, the Gen Z in Kenya can benefit from digital-culturally tailored interventions that target youth mental health care. As social media platforms leverage complex algorithms to curate one's feed, ensuring that the content seen is tailored to the interests and engagement patterns of the user, algorithms can be used to conceptualize, identify and treat social anxiety (Anna L. Trella et al., 2022).

One of the major benefits of online intervention is that it is fast, and accessible to many. It is available sometimes even in the most remote areas where traditional therapy may not be readily available. This makes it accessible to more people than other traditional interventions. According to Philip J. Batterham et al., (2020), a brief internet-based engagement facilitation interventions-EFI did not increase the uptake of or adherence to an existing internet-based program for depression and anxiety, individuals' motivation to initiate and complete internet-

based self-guided interventions was found to be complex and a significant challenge for self-guided interventions (Jessica M. Lipschitz et al., 2023) . This gives room for more research on how to understand the complex nature of self-guided interventions, which is the very root of Gen-Z cultural difference and way of life.

Closer home, a study to assess the effectiveness of an 8-week Internet-based positive psychology intervention for healthcare students was done in Tunisia. The study was a two-armed randomized controlled trial conducted among health care students, the majority of whom were women. The results showed a significant improvement immediately after the intervention compared to the control group, which was maintained three months later. The program was promising means of improving students' mental health and study engagement (Anne Theurel et al., 2022). This proved how cost-effective large-scale interventions disseminated online to reach a wide range of participants can be. It's effectiveness prove the justification for appropriate approaches to prevent the development of social anxiety among the Gen Zs and promote mental health wellness.

The use of media and AI to help young people learn about mental health and promote positive relationships among themselves in terms of emerging cartoons and other media can augment mental health awareness and online mental health education to curb social anxiety (Gulliver et al., 2020). A case of the cartoon show, where cartoon characters have human values that promote mental health resilience, healthy coping mechanisms, a positive life outlook in the phase of adversity. This research reveals the many social values that can be picked from such media materials (Syifa Fauzia, 2022). This can be a valuable tool for disseminating mental health awareness information, and an avenue for seeking help for Gen Z and the generations after them. Through conventional entertainment media, cartoon shows that may be considered trivial by others can be produced with social and cultural values to pass to the viewer.

Implications for Multiculturalism Psychologist

The World Health Organization recognizes the potential of evidence-based online mental health services to enhance universal health coverage (Sit et al., 2022). Step-by-step, a 5-session digital intervention designed to treat depression through an internet-connected device, with weekly support is one of the pilot programmes that was rolled out by the WHO to improve accessibility and flexibility of mental health services (Kenneth Carswell et al., 2018). Given the pervasive use of social media among youth, the digital health field is exploring its

integration into tailored therapeutic platforms (Marilon van Doorn et al., 2022). However, maximizing the positive impact of social media requires culturally sensitive strategies that acknowledge and address the unique socio-cultural contexts of diverse populations, including African youth (Vainola, 2024).

Social media's capacity for consistent communication, regardless of distance, presents a unique opportunity for mental health interventions. While challenges exist, it's potential for positive change among Gen Z is undeniable (Vainola, 2024). Integrating social media into mental health practice can streamline interventions that were previously complex and time-consuming. Moderated Online Social Therapy (MOST) demonstrates the potential of web-based interventions, incorporating peer-to-peer networking to address social anxiety and related mental health conditions (van Doorn et al., 2023). By leveraging the positive psychology framework and youth's social media engagement, MOST aims to minimize negative impacts while maximizing therapeutic benefits. The Netherlands' adaptation of MOST, ENYOY, highlights the importance of culturally tailored interventions, developed with local experts to meet the specific needs of their youth. The ENYOY-platform was found to have adequate usability and positive user experiences were reported. It has potency for youth engagement and treatment of social anxiety and other mental illnesses (Marilon van Doorn et al., 2023).

Similarly, African researchers, clinicians, and peer workers could develop Afrocentric programs that resonate with African youth, drawing upon culturally relevant values and communication styles. Vainola (2024) emphasizes the importance of an integrated approach that combines technological and socio-cultural elements when using social media to strengthen family values, a crucial aspect of mental well-being in many African contexts. This aligns with findings from a study in Northern Ghana, which revealed both the benefits and challenges of social media use in family communication (Adam & Adam, 2020).

Further research is essential to balance safety and therapeutic efficacy in social media-based mental health interventions, especially for culturally diverse youth facing social anxiety (Rayland & Andrews, 2023). Ethical, evidence-based design must guide eligibility, data handling, and treatment transparency (Hornstein et al., 2023; Konyana et al., 2021). Digital tools, including AI, should complement—never replace—human empathy in care settings (Asman et al., 2024). Responsible use demands strong ethical oversight and culturally aligned governance frameworks.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the integration of culturally sensitive psychological interventions is critical in addressing the mental health challenges faced by youth in Kenya's evolving digital landscape. It emphasizes that psychologists must recognize the tension between global digital influences and local cultural values, ensuring that technology supports rather than undermines youth well-being.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that psychologists engage in culturally informed, community-based research and practice to develop relevant mental health interventions. It advocates for collaboration with local stakeholders and tech developers to ensure culturally significant and evidence-based solutions. Such efforts can help youth embrace digital culture while maintaining strong traditional identities and mental resilience.

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