

A Comparative Study of Social Relationships and Risk-Taking Behaviour Between Generation X and Generation Z During Adolescence and Early Adulthood

Sreevalsan M C¹, Dr. Richa Gupta²

²Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, Centre for Distance and Online Education, JAIN (Deemed-to-be University)
Bengaluru, Karnataka, India

Abstract: *Adolescence and early adulthood are formative developmental periods in which social relationships and risk-taking behaviour are shaped by broader social, cultural, and technological contexts. The present study compared social relationships and risk-taking behaviour between Generation X and Generation Z, two cohorts whose adolescent experiences differed substantially in exposure to digital technology and social media. A quantitative, cross-sectional comparative design was adopted. Data were collected from 304 respondents residing in South India, with equal representation from Generation X (n = 152; 45–60 years) and Generation Z (n = 152; 18–28 years). Participants completed a 10-item Social Relationships Scale and a 10-item Risk-Taking Behaviour Scale using behaviourally anchored response options. Descriptive statistics, Shapiro–Wilk tests of normality, independent-samples t tests, and Mann–Whitney U tests were conducted. Social relationship scores did not differ significantly between Generation X (M = 36.01, SD = 2.93) and Generation Z (M = 36.57, SD = 2.93), $t(302) = -1.64$, $p = .102$, $d = -0.19$. In contrast, Generation Z reported significantly higher risk-taking behaviour (M = 21.34, SD = 3.57) than Generation X (M = 18.52, SD = 2.88), $t(302) = -7.58$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.87$. These findings suggest that perceived social connectedness may remain broadly comparable across generations, whereas digitally mediated developmental environments may contribute to elevated risk-taking in younger cohorts. Implications are discussed for counselling, education, family-based support, and digital-literacy interventions.*

Keywords: Generation X, Generation Z, social relationships, risk-taking behaviour, adolescence, social media

1. Introduction

Adolescence and early adulthood represent crucial developmental periods marked by identity exploration, consolidation of peer and family relationships, and the emergence of autonomous decision-making. During this period, individuals negotiate changing social expectations and begin to make decisions that may involve uncertainty, reward, and risk. Although these developmental processes are broadly shared across human development, the social context in which they occur has changed substantially across generations. The transformation from primarily face-to-face forms of interaction to digitally mediated social connection has created an important opportunity to examine how generational context may influence social relationships and risk-taking behaviour.

Members of Generation X, born approximately between 1965 and 1980, experienced adolescence in a comparatively low-technology environment in which peer interaction was largely situated in families, schools, neighbourhoods, and local communities. In contrast, Generation Z, born approximately between 1997 and 2012, has matured in a technologically saturated environment characterised by smartphones, social networking platforms, and continuous digital communication. These radically different formative environments may influence how young people form relationships, compare themselves with others, seek peer approval, and engage in risky behaviour.

Social relationships are central to adolescent development because peer acceptance, trust, family bonds, and social

connectedness contribute to identity formation and psychological well-being. Risk-taking behaviour is also developmentally significant. Some risk-taking reflects exploration and autonomy, but persistent or poorly regulated risk-taking may expose adolescents and young adults to physical, psychological, social, and online harms. In contemporary youth contexts, risk-taking may include traditional behaviours, such as unsafe driving and rule-breaking, as well as digitally mediated practices, such as impulsive online posting or participation in risky online challenges.

The present study compares Generation X and Generation Z on two constructs: perceived social relationships and risk-taking behaviour. The study is situated within South India, where rapid technological change intersects with enduring family and collectivist cultural structures. This setting is important because much of the existing evidence on generational change and digital adolescence comes from Western contexts. By examining both social relationships and risk-taking together, the present study contributes to a more integrated understanding of continuity and change across generations.

2. Theoretical Background

The study is informed by three complementary theoretical perspectives. First, the dual systems model of adolescent risk-taking proposes that adolescence is marked by an imbalance between heightened reward sensitivity and gradually developing cognitive control. This framework helps explain why adolescents and young adults may be

particularly responsive to novelty, peer approval, and immediate reward. The model is relevant across generations; however, the environmental contexts in which reward seeking is expressed can differ considerably. Digital platforms may provide Generation Z with more frequent peer feedback, visible social comparison, and immediate reinforcement than was available to Generation X.

Second, social comparison theory proposes that individuals evaluate their abilities, attributes, and social standing by comparing themselves with others. In digitally mediated environments, social comparison may become more continuous and more visible. Social media platforms can expose users to idealised representations of peers, celebrities, lifestyles, achievements, and appearance. Although the present study did not directly measure social comparison, the theoretical perspective is useful for interpreting how online environments may influence relationship experiences and risk-related behaviour among younger cohorts.

Third, ecological and sociocultural perspectives emphasise that development occurs within nested systems that include family, peers, schools, community structures, media environments, and cultural values. In the Indian context, family influence, intergenerational bonds, and collectivist expectations may continue to shape social relationships even as digital platforms provide new spaces for peer interaction and self-expression. This ecological perspective allows for a balanced interpretation: digitalisation may change the channels and risks of social life without necessarily eliminating traditional sources of support.

3. Review of Literature

Prior research has consistently shown that social and technological contexts shape adolescent experiences. Greater screen exposure has been associated in some studies with lower psychological well-being and self-regulation difficulties among young people. Other research highlights the role of social media in intensifying social comparison, particularly when adolescents compare themselves with idealised upward comparison targets. These patterns suggest that digital contexts may influence both perceived social connectedness and vulnerability to social pressure.

At the same time, research cautions against overstating generational differences. Certain interpersonal competencies may remain stable across generations, even when their forms of expression change. Generation X may have relied more heavily on direct interaction and community-based relationships, while Generation Z may maintain broader digitally mediated networks. As a result, the quality of perceived social relationships may not necessarily decline merely because the medium of interaction changes.

Evidence regarding risk-taking indicates that peer influence, reward sensitivity, and social approval are important drivers of adolescent behaviour. Digital environments may amplify these processes by increasing the visibility of peer responses and expanding the audience for behaviour. Online challenges, impulsive posting, reputation management, and cyber-victimisation represent newer risk arenas that may

supplement rather than replace traditional forms of adolescent risk-taking. Consequently, Generation Z may exhibit higher levels of risk-taking because opportunities and reinforcements for risky choices are more frequent and immediate.

A key gap in the literature is the limited number of empirical comparisons between Generation X and Generation Z that examine social relationships and risk-taking together, particularly in Indian samples. The present study addresses this gap by comparing two balanced generational cohorts from South India using structured measures of social relationships and risk-taking behaviour.

4. Objectives and Hypotheses

The study had three objectives: to compare Generation X and Generation Z on the quality of social relationships, to compare the two cohorts on risk-taking behaviour, and to consider how generational and digital contexts may help explain observed differences. Two null hypotheses were tested. First, there would be no significant difference between Generation X and Generation Z in social relationship scores. Second, there would be no significant difference between Generation X and Generation Z in risk-taking behaviour scores.

5. Method

Research Design

A quantitative, cross-sectional, comparative research design was used. Generational cohort served as the grouping variable and could not be experimentally manipulated. The design was therefore appropriate for comparing naturally occurring groups on social relationship and risk-taking behaviour scores at a single point in time.

Participants

The sample consisted of 304 respondents residing in South India. The design was balanced, with 152 participants classified as Generation X and 152 participants classified as Generation Z. Generation X participants were aged 45–60 years, while Generation Z participants were aged 18–28 years. Participants in the intermediate 29–44 age band were excluded from the comparison because they did not belong to either target cohort.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling supplemented by snowball referral. The survey was distributed electronically, and participants were included if they belonged to one of the target age groups, resided in South India, were able to respond in English, and provided informed consent. Incomplete or inconsistent responses and responses from the excluded Millennial age band were not included in the final analysis.

6. Measures

Social Relationships Scale.

Social relationships were measured using a 10-item self-constructed scale that assessed peer interaction, peer acceptance, trust, conflict, social support, and perceived connectedness. Items were scored from 1 to 5, with items 4,

5, and 7 reverse-scored. Total scores ranged from 10 to 50, with higher scores indicating healthier and more positive social relationships.

Risk-Taking Behaviour Scale.

Risk-taking behaviour was measured using a 10-item self-constructed scale assessing substance use, thrill-seeking, impulsivity, rule-breaking, peer-pressured risk, unsafe driving, physical risk, and online risk. Items were scored from 1 to 5, with item 10 reverse-scored. Total scores ranged from 10 to 50, with higher scores indicating greater risk-taking tendency. Scores from 10 to 20 were interpreted as low risk-taking, 21 to 35 as moderate risk-taking, and 36 to 50 as high risk-taking.

Procedure

After the questionnaire was finalised, the online survey link was circulated through social-media platforms, messaging applications, and personal networks. The opening section of the form explained the purpose of the study, assured confidentiality and anonymity, and obtained informed consent. Only respondents who consented proceeded to the questionnaire. After data collection, responses were screened according to inclusion and exclusion criteria, reverse-scored items were recoded, and composite social relationship and risk-taking scores were computed.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics summarised the sample composition and the distribution of social relationship and risk-taking scores. Shapiro–Wilk tests were used to examine normality. Independent-samples t tests were used to compare

Generation X and Generation Z, and Mann–Whitney U tests were conducted as non-parametric corroboration. Cohen's d was used to interpret effect size for mean differences.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from every respondent before data collection. Respondents were informed that they could withdraw without penalty. No personally identifying information was collected, preserving anonymity and confidentiality. The data were used only for academic research purposes. Because the Generation Z cohort included respondents older than 17 years, the study avoided ethical complexities associated with surveying minors.

7. Results

The results are presented in three stages: sample composition, descriptive statistics, and inferential comparisons between the two generational cohorts.

Table 1: Demographic Composition of the Sample

Cohort	Age Band (Years)	n	%
Generation X	45–60	152	50.0
Generation Z	18–28	152	50.0
Total	—	304	100.0

Note. n = number of respondents; % = percentage of total sample.

As shown in Table 1, the sample included equal representation from Generation X and Generation Z. This balanced composition supported direct between-cohort comparison.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Social Relationships and Risk-Taking Scores Across Generational Cohorts

Variable	Cohort	M	SD	Min	Max
Social Relationships	Generation X	36.01	2.93	28	43
Social Relationships	Generation Z	36.57	2.93	29	45
Risk-Taking Behaviour	Generation X	18.52	2.88	12	28
Risk-Taking Behaviour	Generation Z	21.34	3.57	12	34

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation; Min = minimum score; Max = maximum score. Possible score range for each scale = 10 to 50.

The mean social relationship scores were similar across cohorts. Generation Z scored marginally higher than Generation X, but the difference was small. For risk-taking behaviour, Generation Z obtained a higher mean score than Generation X, with Generation Z falling in the moderate range and Generation X near the low-to-moderate boundary.

Table 3: Shapiro–Wilk Test of Normality

Variable	Cohort	W	df	p
Social Relationships	Generation X	.980	152	.025
Social Relationships	Generation Z	.987	152	.154
Risk-Taking Behaviour	Generation X	.985	152	.110
Risk-Taking Behaviour	Generation Z	.986	152	.119

Note. A non-significant Shapiro–Wilk result indicates that the normality assumption is tenable.

Three of the four distributions did not significantly depart from normality. The Generation X social relationship distribution showed a minor deviation from normality. Given the large and balanced sample, independent-samples t tests were retained and were supplemented with Mann–Whitney U tests.

Table 4: Independent-Samples t Test and Mann–Whitney U Test Comparing Generation X and Generation Z

Variable	t	df	p (t)	Cohen's d	U	p (U)
Social Relationships	-1.64	302	0.102	-0.19	10254	0.089
Risk-Taking Behaviour	-7.58	302	< .001	-0.87	6161	< .001

Note. Negative t and d values indicate that Generation Z scored higher than Generation X. U = Mann–Whitney U statistic.

The difference between Generation X and Generation Z in social relationship scores was not statistically significant, $t(302) = -1.64$, $p = .102$, $d = -0.19$. The Mann–Whitney U test produced a similar non-significant result, $U = 10254$, $p = .089$. Therefore, the null hypothesis stating that there is no significant difference between Generation X and Generation Z in social relationship scores was retained.

The difference between cohorts in risk-taking behaviour was statistically significant, $t(302) = -7.58$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.87$. The Mann–Whitney U test confirmed this result, $U = 6161$, $p < .001$. Generation Z reported significantly higher risk-taking behaviour than Generation X. Therefore, the null hypothesis stating that there is no significant difference between Generation X and Generation Z in risk-taking behaviour scores was rejected.

8. Discussion

The present study examined generational differences in social relationships and risk-taking behaviour between Generation X and Generation Z. The results revealed two central findings. First, the two cohorts did not differ significantly in perceived social relationship quality. Second, Generation Z reported significantly higher risk-taking behaviour than Generation X, with a large effect size. These findings suggest continuity in the perceived quality of social connectedness across generations but generational change in the expression of risk-taking behaviour.

The absence of a significant generational difference in social relationships suggests that the basic experience of social connectedness may be maintained through different relational channels. Generation X experienced adolescence in environments where relationships were more likely to be maintained through face-to-face interaction and local community networks. Generation Z, in contrast, has access to broader digitally mediated networks. The present findings indicate that these different forms of interaction may both support perceived acceptance, trust, and peer support, even if the structure and medium of interaction differ.

The significantly higher risk-taking score among Generation Z is consistent with theoretical perspectives that emphasise peer influence, reward sensitivity, and immediate social feedback. Digital environments may increase the visibility and speed of peer reinforcement. Online platforms also create newer contexts for risk, such as impulsive posting, risky sharing, viral challenges, and reputation-based behaviour. Thus, the generational difference observed in risk-taking may reflect not only individual tendencies but also the greater availability of digitally mediated risk opportunities during Generation Z's formative years.

The findings should be interpreted cautiously because generational comparisons may reflect a combination of cohort effects, historical period effects, and retrospective recall. Generation X participants reported on experiences from an earlier developmental period, while Generation Z participants were closer in age to adolescence and early adulthood. The design therefore supports between-cohort comparison but cannot establish causality. Even so, the large effect observed for risk-taking indicates a meaningful

difference that warrants further research and practical attention.

9. Practical Implications

The findings have practical implications for educators, counsellors, parents, and mental-health practitioners. Because Generation Z reported higher risk-taking behaviour, prevention programmes for young adults may benefit from integrating digital-literacy training, online safety awareness, social-comparison education, and peer-pressure resistance skills. Such programmes should address both offline and online risks rather than treating risk-taking as only a traditional behavioural problem.

Counsellors working with adolescents and young adults may also consider the role of social media visibility, peer approval, and online identity management in risk-related decisions. Interventions that strengthen reflective decision-making, emotional regulation, and awareness of consequences may be especially useful. At the same time, the comparable social relationship scores across cohorts suggest that family and peer support remain valuable protective resources across generations.

Within the Indian sociocultural context, family-based and community-based approaches may remain particularly relevant. Programmes that involve parents, educators, and peer groups can support healthier digital engagement while preserving supportive social relationships. Rather than framing digital technology as uniformly harmful, interventions should help young people use digital platforms in ways that support connection, safety, and psychological well-being.

10. Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was restricted to South India, which may limit generalisability to other regions and cultural contexts. Second, the study relied on self-report data, which may be affected by response bias and inaccurate recall. Third, the cross-sectional design does not permit causal conclusions. Fourth, Generation X participants responded retrospectively about developmental experiences, introducing the possibility of recall bias. Fifth, the study used self-constructed measures; future research should examine reliability and validity more extensively or incorporate established standardised instruments.

Future research could extend the present findings through longitudinal designs that track social relationships and risk-taking over time. Larger and more geographically diverse samples would improve external validity. Future studies may also include qualitative interviews to understand how participants interpret digital influence, peer pressure, family relationships, and risk. Additional generational cohorts, including Millennials and Generation Alpha, could be included to map broader developmental trends across technological transitions.

11. Conclusion

The present study found that Generation X and Generation Z did not differ significantly in perceived social relationship quality, but Generation Z reported significantly higher risk-taking behaviour. These results indicate that generational context may have a stronger influence on the expression of risk-taking than on perceived social connectedness. In a digitally saturated developmental environment, young people may experience increased opportunities for impulsive, peer-influenced, and online risk-related behaviour. At the same time, the enduring importance of social connection, family support, and peer acceptance remains evident across generations. Understanding both continuity and change is essential for developing generation-sensitive counselling, educational, and digital-well-being interventions.

Author Note

This manuscript is derived from the author's Master of Science in Psychology dissertation completed under the guidance of Dr. Richa Gupta, Professor, Department of Psychology, Centre for Distance and Online Education, JAIN (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru.

The author declares no conflict of interest. No external funding was reported for this study.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Sreevalsan M. C., Department of Psychology, Centre for Distance and Online Education, JAIN (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru, India.

References

- [1] Arnett, J. J. (1992). Reckless behavior in adolescence: A developmental perspective. *Developmental Review*, 12(4), 339–373. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0273-2297\(92\)90013-R](https://doi.org/10.1016/0273-2297(92)90013-R)
- [2] Bukowski, W. M., Laursen, B., & Rubin, K. H. (Eds.). (2018). *Handbook of peer interactions, relationships, and groups* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
- [3] Burnell, K., Treksels, J., Prinsein, M. J., & Telzer, E. H. (2024). Adolescents' social comparison on social media: Links with momentary self-evaluations. *Affective Science*, 5(4), 295–299. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42761-024-00240-6>
- [4] Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations*, 7(2), 117–140. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001872675400700202>
- [5] Gardner, M., & Steinberg, L. (2005). Peer influence on risk taking, risk preference, and risky decision making in adolescence and adulthood: An experimental study. *Developmental Psychology*, 41(4), 625–635. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.41.4.625>
- [6] McComb, C. A., Vanman, E. J., & Tobin, S. J. (2023). A meta-analysis of the effects of social media exposure to upward comparison targets on self-evaluations and emotions. *Media Psychology*, 26(5), 612–635. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2023.2180647>
- [7] Shulman, E. P., Smith, A. R., Silva, K., Icenogle, G., Duell, N., Chein, J., & Steinberg, L. (2016). The dual systems model: Review, reappraisal, and reaffirmation.

Developmental Cognitive Neuroscience, 17, 103–117. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcn.2015.12.010>

- [8] Steinberg, L. (2008). A social neuroscience perspective on adolescent risk-taking. *Developmental Review*, 28(1), 78–106. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dr.2007.08.002>
- [9] Steinberg, L. (2014). *Age of opportunity: Lessons from the new science of adolescence*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- [10] Twenge, J. M. (2017). *iGen: Why today's super-connected kids are growing up less rebellious, more tolerant, less happy—and completely unprepared for adulthood*. Atria Books.
- [11] Twenge, J. M., & Campbell, W. K. (2018). Associations between screen time and lower psychological well-being among children and adolescents: Evidence from a population-based study. *Preventive Medicine Reports*, 12, 271–283. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pmedr.2018.10.003>
- [12] Valkenburg, P. M., & Peter, J. (2011). Online communication among adolescents: An integrated model of its attraction, opportunities, and risks. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 48(2), 121–127. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2010.08.020>

Appendix A

Survey Instrument Summary

The study used two behaviourally anchored 10-item questionnaires: the Social Relationships Scale and the Risk-Taking Behaviour Scale. The Social Relationships Scale assessed comfort discussing problems with friends, peer acceptance, trust, exclusion, conflict, peer support, pressure to conform, quality time with friends, freedom of expression, and respect for boundaries. The Risk-Taking Behaviour Scale assessed substance use, thrill-seeking, impulsivity, skipping class, peer-pressured risk, unsafe driving, rule-breaking, risky online posting, physical risk, and consideration of consequences.