# Why Gen Z is More Anxious than Ever? Turning to Social Chats for Answers

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## Introduction

Generation Z (Gen Z), born between 1997 to 2012 (Dimock, 2019), grew up in an era marked by ubiquitous access to digital technologies and drastic transformations in social, political, and economic domains. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2021), a defining attribute of this group centers on their deep concern for various social issues. Such concern is usually associated with major global events (e.g., COVID-19, climate change, etc.) as well as drastic social and economic changes. Consequently, this complex and stressful environment has presented this group with unique challenges that significantly affected their mental health.

As digital natives, constant cravings for connectivity, bombardment of information, and social comparisons on social media have posed a major source of stress and anxiety for Gen Z (e.g., Doucleff, 2023; Haidt, 2024; Stahl & Literat, 2022). Especially, feelings of inadequacy and insecure can be aggravated among this generation by the highly curated, glamorous lives portrayed on social media. The pressure to maintain an idealized image online, coupled with broader social uncertainties, have made mental health an acute problem for this group. There has been an alarming increase in anxiety symptoms among this generation over the last decade (Drinko, 2024; Kelly, 2025; Laws, 2025). Compared to other generations, this cohort is more vulnerable to anxiety and depression (Coe et al., 2023). A 2024 study by Gallup and Walton Family Foundation echoed that Gen Z reported the poorest mental health of any generation. Particularly, anxiety emerges as the most prevalent mental health condition among Gen Z with over 60% being medically diagnosed (O'Connell-Domench, 2023).

Since Gen Z represents the most affected group by anxiety, understanding their experiences and challenges is paramount to help communities and public health organizations design effective intervention programs to assist this vulnerable generation in their struggle to achieve mental well-being. Traditional survey methods may lack the depth to examine Gen Z's experiences with mental health struggles. Social media, however, offers a unique window into Gen Z's candid and real-time expressions of their thoughts and emotions related to anxiety. These social conversations on social media thus can provide rich data in a natural setting to generate deeper insights into how anxiety manifests in this generation's daily lives. This study thus aims to explore Gen Z's experiences with anxiety through their conversations and interactions on social media. Specifically, we examine the following research questions:

**Q1**. What were the general sentiments and emotions surrounding the topic of anxiety among Gen Z?

**Q2**. What were the major themes surrounding social conversations about anxiety among Gen Z?

## Method

This study explored Gen Z' social conversations related to anxiety during the last two weeks of the Mental Health Awareness Month from May 19 to June 1, 2025. *Brandwatch*, a premier social media analytics tool, was used to collect and analyze social conversations. This study specifically targeted the population of Gen-Z. *Brandwatch* allowed us to search through the world's largest

pool of online to identify unique trends and patterns among specific groups with distinct social and/or demographic attributes (e.g., gender, location, interests, etc.).

We included some top-trending hashtags related to anxiety (e.g., #anxietyrelief, #anxietysupport, #anxietyawareness, #anxietyattack, etc.) to build a tailored search query on *Brandwatch* to collect data. Originally, we intended to gather social media discussions from different platforms (e.g., Instagram, X, Facebook, YouTube, etc.). Unfortunately, *Brandwatch* only extracted data from X. This limited scope probably arose from the accessibility issue. Particularly, X's text-based structure may be more compatible with *Brandwatch*'s keyword and hashtag tracking capabilities. Collecting data from Instagram or YouTube may require more complex scraping methods that may fall beyond our subscription tier or *Brandwatch*'s data permission.

Additionally, caution should be exercised as data collected by *Brandwatch* may not exclusively represent the Gen Z population. The dataset included in this study thus may include users beyond the Gen Z cohort. This limitation may arise from the inherent difficulty of accurately determining social media users' demographic information (e.g., age, gender, etc.), compounded by the open-access nature of conversations on social media.

Overall, the total volume of social discussions on X during this study's observation period reached 13,000 (see figure 1), making a 24% increase compared to the previous two weeks. Google Trends data on searches for "anxiety" (see figure 2) shows a striking upward trajectory since 2004, suggesting a sustained growth of public interest in this topic over time.

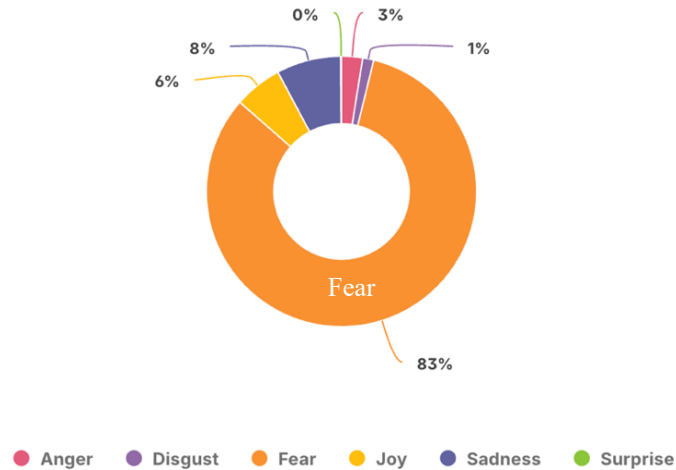**Figure 1**: Total Volume of Social Chats on X from May 19 to June 1, 2025
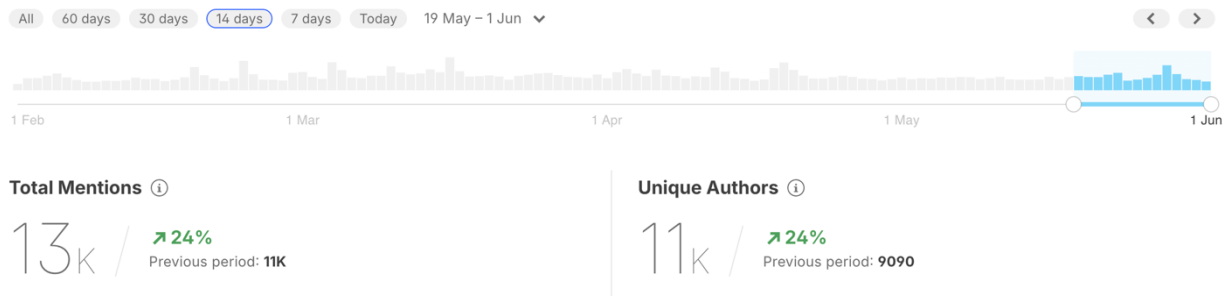


**Figure 2**: Google Trends: Anxiety Search Trends from 2004 - 2025

**Findings**

**Q1. What were the general sentiments and emotions surrounding the topic of anxiety among Gen Z?**



Anxiety is defined as an adverse emotional state characterized by feelings of apprehension, tension, nervousness, and worry (American Psychological Association). Overall, Gen Z users on X expressed largely negative sentiment toward anxiety, with 65% of posts identified as being negative. Notably, fear emerged as a dominant feeling related to conversations on anxiety, comprising 83% of discrete emotions (e.g., anger, sadness, disgust, etc.) identified in the study. This overwhelming presence of fear thus illuminates the pervasive nature of anxiety felt by young adults. Apparently, Gen Z users frequently disclosed on X how anxiety permeates multiple dimensions of their lives, manifesting in fears about financial security, the general economic climate, maintaining relationships, both private and professional social interactions, social judgements, carrying on daily activities, performing in front of others, and among others. Many users lamented that conducting routine activities, such as speaking up in a meeting and socializing with others, can create acute distress. These young adults' self-awareness regarding the crippling effect of anxiety was striking. Many users used emotionally charged language to describe their sufferings, describing anxiety as "unbearable," putting them "in a dark place," "ruining relationships," and even "the worst demon." These expressions signaled a significant emotional burden and frustration regarding how anxiety affects their functioning and well-being.

**Q2. What were the major themes surrounding social conversations about anxiety among Gen Z?**

**Personal Experiences with Anxiety**

As digital natives, Gen Z seemed to feel comfortable to disclose their feelings of anxiety and depression on social media. These discussions often included their worries about schoolwork,

test performance, personal relationships, and health concerns such as remaining fears of COVID. The discussions extend beyond those still in school, and many young professionals also took to X to share their fears related to job performance, job security, and their foreboding of workplace dynamics. They expressed how anxiety affects them psychologically and physically. Some of the conditions mentioned in the social chats are debilitating such as dizziness, rapid breathing, and lightheadedness. Other times, when under panic attack, individuals experienced intense emotional reactions such as panic attack. They described how their physical and emotional manifestations hinder their ability to function while conducting basic responsibilities, such as work interactions or daily socialization. Based on the social discussions, as a result of feeling overwhelmed and pressured in social situations, Gen Z tended to avoid social interactions. Such avoidance in turn generated an increased sense of social isolation, resulting in a vicious cycle.

Interestingly, the discussion focusing on the relationship between anxiety and physical health has gained traction among Gen Z on X. These conversations expanded the conventional connection between anxiety and mental health to include physical well-being. In those personal stories, Gen Zs on X described how anxiety can create problems for sleep, digestion, inflammation, heart functions, and overall health. Connecting anxiety to physical health underlines the importance of developing a comprehensive support and care system for this group of population to manage their anxieties.

As revealed from the social chats, another notable source of anxiety among younger generations stems from social media use. Particularly, Gen Z discussed their elevated anxiety associated with social comparisons on social media, the pressure to maintain a certain image among their followers such as appearing "likable," "trendy," or "cool." Especially, the constant connectivity enabled by social media has aggravated such social comparisons, making Gen Z feel inadequate and stressed.

These personal stories demonstrate the prevalence of anxiety that Gen Z struggles with. Having such open, candid conversations of their personal struggles with anxiety suggests a growing awareness and acceptance among that demographic group. Unfortunately, these young individuals on X also voiced frustration and anger toward social trivialization when anxiety was portrayed as something "cute," "quirky," or "socially trendy." Many users complained that this minimization undermines the seriousness of their experiences and results in a lack of empathy and support for individuals battling with such mental illness. Such sentiment indicates the persistence of social stigma on mental illness and highlights the critical need for continued efforts to address misconceptions about mental illness.

Notably, alongside the social trivialization of anxiety and mental health, there is a troubling rise in the use of r-slurs related to mental health in the social media space. After a prominent online voice (Elon Musk) used this slur in a post, Benton and Peterka-Benton (2025) found a doubling of content using the r-word on X, with a 207.5% increase. While some posting about such slurs on the platform may be critical of the terms, the widespread prevalence still serves a normalizing function. Noting that negative content is regularly shared for purposes of criticizing such content, Zhang et al. (2018) suggest that people may be "reproducing message[s] specifically to add their own comment—likely critique—to it" but doing so still serves an amplification function (p. 3574).

## Posts on X containing "retard"
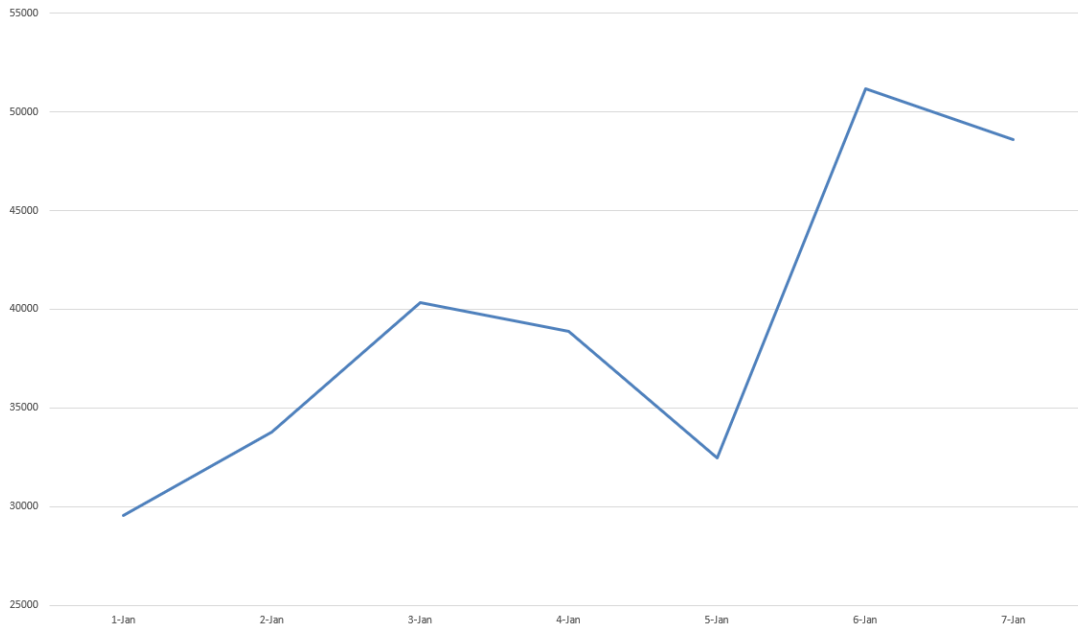


Source: *Tweet Binder*

*Google search activity for r-word (Source: Google Trends)*
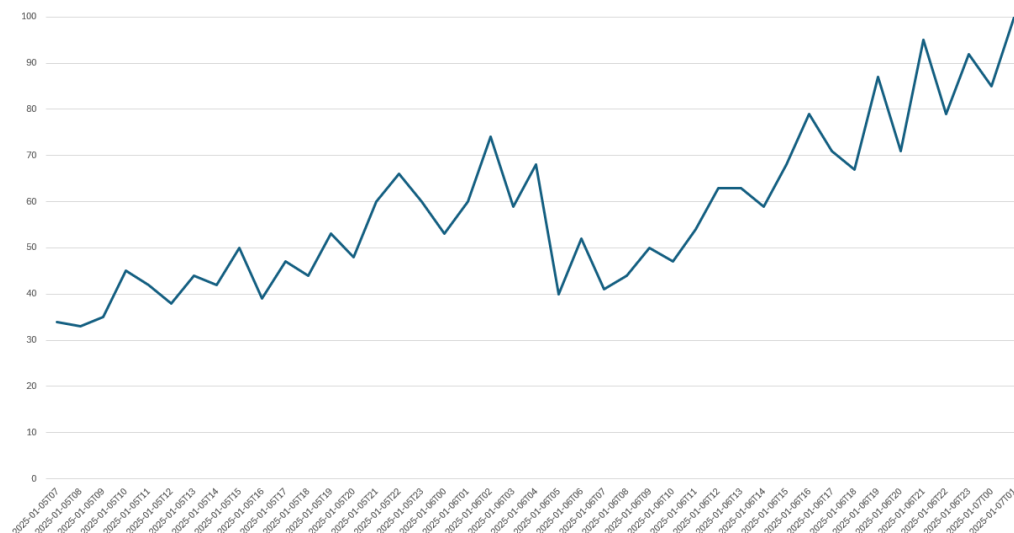


Potentially noteworthy in this spike is the fact that this may be representative of a larger shift against efforts to reduce stigmatizing discourse related to mental health, neurodivergence, and disability (Teitell, 2024). Advocates have already expressed fears related to the broader normalization of such stigmatizing discourse (Klee, 2025). The study on the frequency of the r-word slur by the Joetta Di Bella and Fred C. Sautter III Center for Strategic Communication has been referenced by mental health and disability advocacy groups (*The 'R-Word' is Back. How a*

*Slur Became Renormalized*, 2025) and major media outlets (Andrew, 2025; Kirkland, 2025; Melendez, 2025).

While it might be tempting to view this trend as isolated, indications are that the widespread dissemination of hateful and marginalizing content related to mental health may be an increasingly prominent feature on social media. On January 6, Mark Zuckerberg announced that fact checking systems would be removed from Meta's platforms (Horvath et al., 2025). In conjunction with this change, Meta also "eliminated multiple safeguards against dehumanizing rhetoric, leaving historically marginalized groups increasingly vulnerable" (Wiggins, 2025). Allowance for stigmatizing mental health, neurodivergence, and disability discourse is now overtly codified with no platform repercussions for those making such statements (Conger, 2025).

## Impact of Financial Stability on Anxiety

As Gen Z enters adulthood and constitutes a major segment in the consumer market, financial independence poses a daunting challenge (Bottorff, 2025; Fowler, 2025; Gibbs, 2025). This phenomenon is reflected in Gen Z's social conversations on the relationship between financial stability and mental health (e.g., anxiety, depression). Social chats related to economic concerns and anxiety increased 50% on X, which sparked divisive conversations among Z. One segment of narrative touted financial improvement, rather than wealth, as a pragmatic means to alleviate anxiety and depression. Many users stressed how their financial struggles exacerbated anxiety and depression. Based on the social discussions, a fundamental logic underlying this view states that financial security satisfies individuals' basic needs, making it easier for individuals to deal with their mental health problems.

The above view strongly resonates with the current economic realities. Economists have warned that new college graduates are facing the most challenging job market since the COVID-19 pandemic (Egan, 2025). Recent graduates are already experiencing longer hiring timelines, which may leave many burdened with debt for an extended period. Researchers from a prominent AI firm—Anthropic—predicted that widespread loss of white-collar jobs is on the horizon, as artificial intelligence (AI) is expected to rapidly replace many desk jobs in the coming years (Nolan, 2025). Faced with this uncertain economy and disruption from AI, it is not surprising that Gen Z's financial anxieties are so deeply intertwined with their mental health struggles.

Many young adults felt overwhelmed by their financial situations with surging interest rates and inflation. Understanding financial principles and learning to manage budget within their means were referenced from social media chats as useful tools to enhance financial wellbeing. Gaining control over finances can potentially mitigate anxiety, thus contributing to one's overall mental health. Notably, proponents of this view explicitly claimed that anxiety and depression can be "partly cured" by financial stability. As admitted by many users, although financial wellbeing could alleviate symptoms of anxiety and depression, it cannot serve as a complete solution. Nevertheless, this perspective suggests that improving one's financial situation could lead to better mental health outcomes.

This finding echoed Ernst & Yong's 2023 Gen Z Segmentation Study that financial worry has become a primary driver of anxiety among Gen Z. More than half (52%) of the Gen participants in Ernst & Young's study reported being very or extremely worried about their financial state, placing the prospects of employment opportunities as an underlying concern for Gen Z. The emphasis on the relationship between financial stability and anxiety from the social discussions highlights the necessity to integrate financial services in addressing young adults' emotional needs and building adequate support systems for their mental health. As many users shared their personal experiences related to the impact of financial instability on their anxiety and depression, it is pivotal to approach mental health issues for vulnerable populations from a multi-dimensional approach, involving medical, social, as well as economic facets.

In contrast to the instrumental role of financial stability in improving anxiety and depression, another major theme related to this topic challenged the causal direction in the relationship. Many Gen Z users on X countered that anxiety and mental health problems are to blame for their financial instability, as unstable mental states hinder job performance. Anxiety and depression have been consistently linked to problematic executive function (e.g., LeMoult & Gotlib, 2019; Warren et al., 2021), a multi-faceted cognitive domain involving alternating attention between tasks, retaining working memory, and maintaining task goals (Miyakeetal & Friedman, 2012). As a result of suffering from anxiety and depression, individuals encounter difficulties in controlling information in working memory, concentration, shifting attention between tasks, and regulating emotions (e.g., excessive rumination) (e.g., Dong et al., 2022; O'Rourke et al., 2020; Zainal & Newman, 2018). This stream of social discussions highlight a disturbing reality that poor mental health can result in job loss and underperformance, leading to further financial insecurity. Importantly, the relationship between mental health and financial stability reveals the complexities behind the economic disparity among vulnerable populations.

## Self-Diagnosis of Mental Health
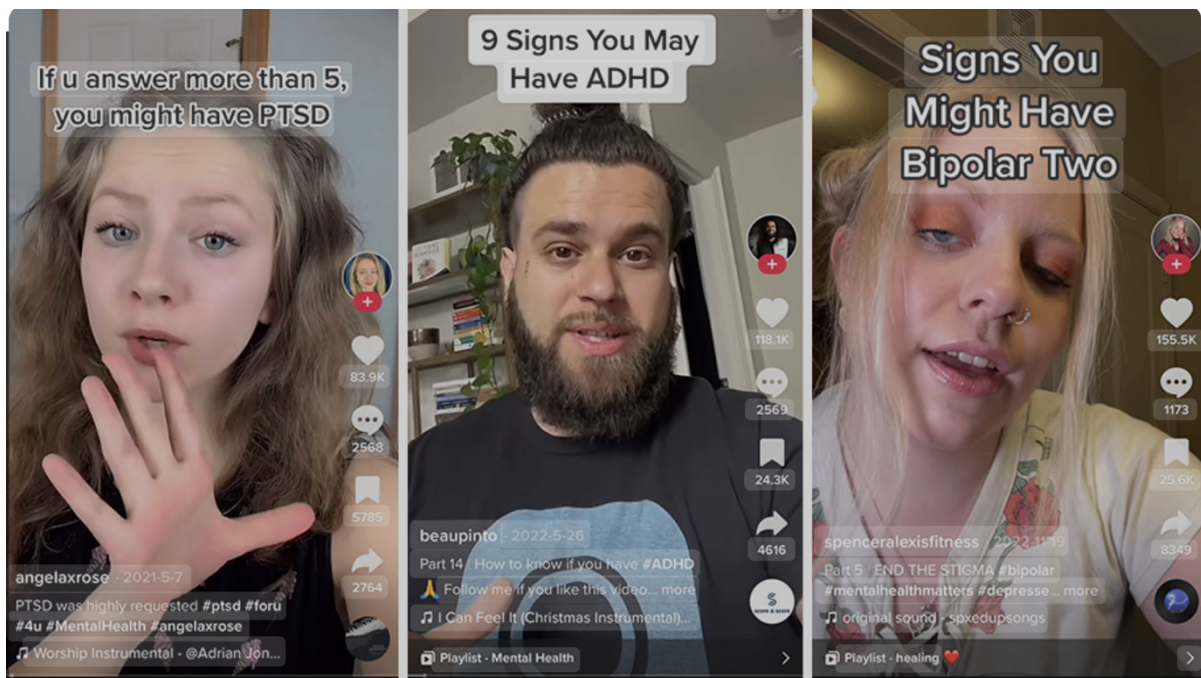
Social media platforms provide a communal space for individuals to openly discuss their mental health experiences. As algorithm-driven digital platforms tend to prioritize content aligned with users' interest and anxieties (Okoronkwo, 2024), platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and X have been flooded with users' anecdotes about symptoms, potential diagnosis, and coping strategies related to mental health issues (Avella, 2023; Kelly, 2023). These posts often invited comments from others who may identify with the same symptoms or even suggest diagnosis. While these revelations may resonate with social media users especially among teens and young adults, such viral content usually oversimplifies complex medical conditions, thus resulting in misinformation (McCashin & Murphy, 2022). Medical professionals provided serious warning of the danger for social media users to hastily self-identify with various mental disorders such as anxiety, depression, or autism.

As shown from the social discussions examined in this study, young adults' self diagnosis of mental health problems has been reinforced by peer affirmation. Many social media users responded to others' disclosure of experiences or "symptoms" by providing or confirming informal diagnosis such as ADHD, anxiety, or autism. These informal interactions appeared to serve as a crowdsourced diagnostic process where collective experiences of the online community afford credibility to individuals' self-evaluation on their mental health conditions. On a positive note, this peer-driven validation can raise mental health awareness and offer emotional support especially for those who lack access to formal healthcare. The reasons why self-diagnosis of mental health issues is popular among adolescents and young adults can be complex. Based on existing studies (e.g., Armstrong et al., 2025; Foster & Ellis, 2024; Hasan eta l., 2023) on self-diagnosis of mental health problems on social media, teens and young adults' psychological factors coupled with systemic and financial barriers contributed to Gen Z's preference for self-diagnosis. Particularly, Gen Z tends to prioritize peer feedback, especially through social media, over professional opinions from adults. As their brain is still undergoing maturation, adolescence and young adulthood are also marked by risk-taking behaviors. Gen Z also faces systemic obstacles such as complex processes for referrals, biased diagnosis based on race and gender, and lengthy waiting times for diagnosis. These barriers unfortunately have prevented young adults from seeking professional help with their mental health problems.

However, this peer affirmation raises concern about the accuracy and appropriateness of these diagnoses. Particularly, equating peer suggestions with professional advice can lead individuals to label themselves with mental disorders that they do not fully understand or have not been officially diagnosed yet (Corzine & Roy, 2024). The viral nature of content distribution on digital platforms may lead to a problematic diagnostic contagion, bypassing formal, clinical evaluation in interpreting symptoms. This finding demonstrates a salient trend on how Gen Z navigates identity and mental health in digital spaces. Instead of relying on evaluation by medical professionals, young adults have turned to community-based sense making to understand their health issues. Gen Z's preference of self-diagnosis on social media underscores the importance and urgency of adequate digital literacy education on mental health. Through education, young adults can critically discern health content on social media. Additionally, there is an urgent need to provide affordable, accessible mental health services to vulnerable populations to break the financial barriers faced by Gen Z.

## Pop Culture and Hashtag Community for Mental Health
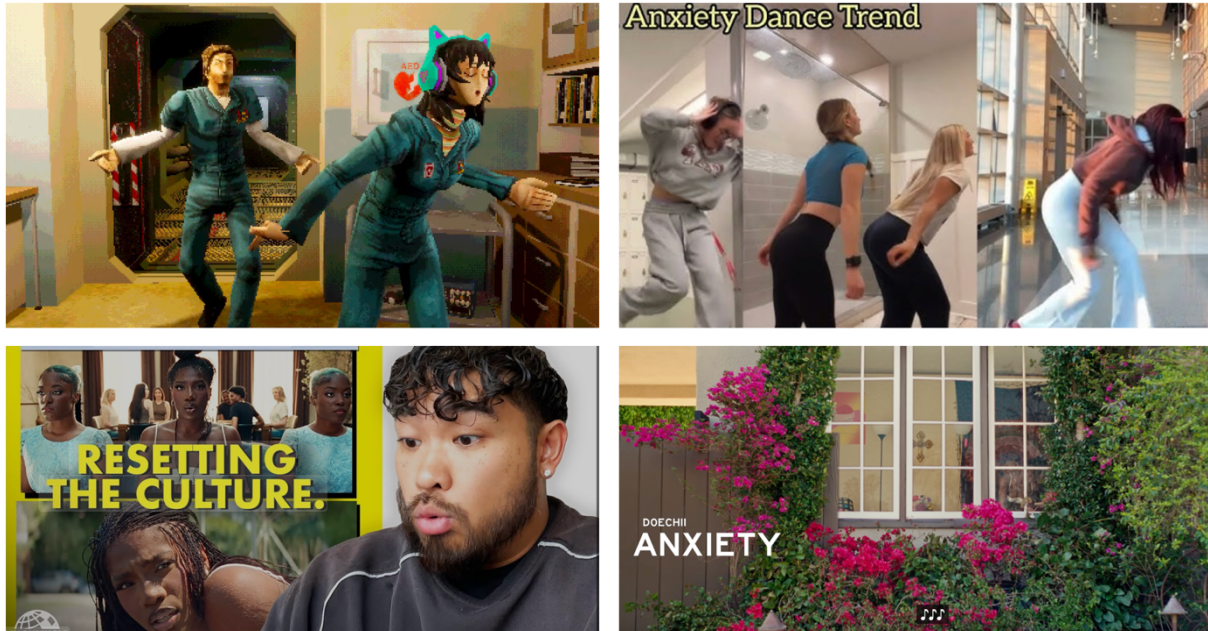


Inspired by her own personal journey with anxiety, Grammy-winning rapper Doechii's song "Anxiety" sparked a firestorm on social media as people recreated dance moves from an iconic '90s show "The Fresh Prince of Bel Air " following its re-release in March, 2025 (Wood & Kaplan, 2025). The rapper has been candid about her own mental health struggles. In an interview with women's magazine , *The Cut*, Doechii shared how she overcame suicidal thoughts resulted from being bullied in middle school (Issawi, 2025). The song and its accompanying music video present a compelling portrayal of how individuals feel in their minds and bodies when struggling with anxiety (Chafouleas, 2025). Lyrics such as —"Breathing shallow, mind won't settle/Tomorrow's problems here today—vividly illustrate the defining features (e.g., short breaths, racing thoughts, fear about future events, etc.) of anxiety. Going beyond describing the symptoms of anxiety, Doechii encouraged listeners to break free from anxiety by the empowering lines in the song such as: "Notice it, name it, watch it go / It's not you, it's just passing through." The song's relatable lyrics has clearly resonated with global fans and social media users, gaining over 20 billion views across social media (Eggleston, 2025).

Gen Z's discussion on X related to Doechii and her song "Anxiety" increased 100% during the observation period. Particularly, Gen Z cheered for Doechii's song "Anxiety" winning the coveted "Social Song of the Year" award at the 2025 American Music Awards (AMAs). This prestigious recognition indicates the song's cultural significance and its deep connection with listeners on both personal and emotional levels. Many X users raved about the song's relatable lyrics and catchy beat.

Another notable theme relates to the animation work titled "Her Anxiety" by Joetastic, a top-ranked content creator who makes animations and gameplay videos about indie games. Casted in the context of a horror game titled Mouthwashing, the short animation, "Her Anxiety," features

two crew members (i.e., Jimmy and Anya) of the stranded freighter spaceship performing the iconic dance moves from the show "The Fresh Prince of Bel Air" while Doechii's song "Anxiety" plays as the background music. Such adaption implies a novel, thematic exploration of mental health and the process of dealing with anxiety. Joetastic's "Her Anxiety" received numerous engagement (e.g., retweets, likes, and comments) from X users with over 974,000 views. Many fans reacted to Joetastic's adaption with praises such as "Exceedingly important," "cool," "perfect," "wonderful," and "amazing." Notably, a fan's response with a link to an article on how to distract oneself during anxiety attacks received 6.5k likes and created enthusiastic discussions on strategies and personal experiences to deal with anxiety attacks. These dialogues seemed to have fostered a supportive community characterized by personal narratives related to mental health, thus reaching a broader social media community.

A unique feature in Joetastic's "Her Anxiety" post involved the use of playful yet emotionally charged emojis--🎧🔫🥰—as part of the video caption. Each emoji serves as a symbolic device to deepen the engagement with the audience. The headphone emoji (🎧) references Anya listening to Doechii's "Anxiety" in the video, symbolizing music as both a coping tool and an emotional anchor. The gun emoji (🔫) alludes to the shocking and tragic ending, metaphorically hinting the possible brutal outcome of unaddressed internal turmoil. The smiling face with hearts emoji (🥰) inserts another layer of emotional complexity, suggesting the incongruence between outward expressions of joy and the internal battles of anxiety. Adopting these seemingly conflicting symbols may mirror the unpredictable nature of anxiety; moments of joy can abruptly cave in to darker feelings. This visual language prompted many X users to discuss the emotional twists and turns embedded in the video and to draw parallels to their own rapid emotional shifts with anxiety. Through this emotionally resonant portrayal of "Her Anxiety," Joetastic's post represents how pop culture can promote meaningful dialogues on a serious topic such as anxiety, thus cultivating a supportive online community for mental health.

**Conclusion**

As social media has evolved into a prominent part of Gen Z's social interaction, this study attempted to enrich our current understanding of Gen Z's mental health through their engagements with the topic of anxiety on X. Specifically, we explored the emotions and major thematic topics demonstrated from Gen Z's social conversations surrounding anxiety. Regarding emotions, the overwhelming presence of fear (83%) illustrates that anxiety is an emotionally draining experience for many Gen Z users. The use of emotionally charged language to publicly share their struggles with anxiety reflect increasing self-awareness and a cultural shift toward normalizing mental health conversations. The intensity of such negative feeling, unfortunately, also imply that self-stigma against mental health issues remains strong. It is thus critical for public health campaigns to integrate fear management and emotional resilience into mental health intervention as well as shift the mental health conversation from merely recognizing anxiety to foster hope and recovery. Accordingly, mental health organizations should consider using social media platforms strategically to promote more positive, supportive, and evidence-based content to counteract the fear-driven narratives for this population.

Strikingly, the open, candid conversations on anxiety indicate that anxiety is experienced as a threat to many Gen Z's basic life functioning, from financial security to work performance to

daily interactions. Especially, many Gen Zs recounted how financial insecurity worsens their mental health; while others reasoned that their mental health struggles hinder their ability to achieve financial independence. This complicated dynamic highlights the impact of economic factors on young adults' mental well-being. Mental health is clearly not just a medical issue. Future initiatives to address youth mental health thus must include policies and programs aimed at improving this group's financial literacy, job security, and economic equity. Relatedly, an alarming connection of anxiety with physical health--such as digestion, sleep, and heart function—suggests an important trend in how young people view well-being. Gen Z's social conversations related to this topic calls for integrated models to address both mind and body, thus recognizing the complex influence of social, physical, and emotional factors on anxiety.

The popular trend of self-diagnosis and peer affirmation on social media does demonstrate the value of peer support on youth's journey to combat anxiety as indicated from our findings. This widespread self-diagnosis signals some troubling barriers that youth face to professional mental health care, such as cost, access, and trust in authority. Although peer support has its merits, over-reliance on informal validation poses danger to misdiagnosis and mistreatment. Essentially, peer validation can not replace professional diagnosis. It is therefore urgent for health organizations and advocates to improve youth's access to affordable mental health care and importantly to empower Gen Z with medical literacy and critical thinking skills to evaluate the accuracy and quality of mental health content flooded on social media.

Impressively, the viral praises of Doechii's "Anxiety" and creative fan adaptations such as Joetastic's "Her Anxiety" illuminate the power of pop culture and hashtag communities to foster meaningful dialogues on mental health. The positive and strong reactions from X users demonstrated the effectiveness of Joetastic's creative combination of video games and mental health promotion. Reactions for Joetastic's adaptation indicate that X users not only consumed the relatable content but also actively participated in conversations related to anxiety and mental health. This finding particularly mirrored a stream of academic research that has consistently discovered the positive association between creative expressions (e.g., music) and improvement on anxiety. Future mental health campaigns thus should explore strategic partnerships with pop artists and influencers to reach young audiences through creative and relatable content.

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