

Interests of Gen Zs in rural communities: insights to strengthen the delivery of the Philippine PATH-Fit program

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the local interests of Generation Z (Gen Z) students in rural communities to strengthen the delivery of the Philippine physical activity towards health and fitness (PATH-Fit) program. Using a qualitative-ethnographic approach, insights were gathered from 20 carefully selected Gen Z students through open-ended questions validated by experts. The findings revealed seven key areas of interest: i) social media, videos, and the internet; ii) something profitable; iii) e-games; iv) sports and physical activities; v) going out and exploring; vi) church, reflection, and music; and vii) rest and sleep. This study concludes that the local interests of Gen Z students in rural communities paint a comprehensive picture of a generation adeptly balancing the digital and physical realms of their lives. From the appeal of social media, online ventures, and e-games to the grounding effects of sports, nature exploration, and spiritual practices, these students demonstrate a flexible approach to well-being and personal growth. Their focus on profitable online activities reflects a pragmatic response to economic challenges, while their commitment to physical activities and outdoor exploration underscores the importance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Their emphasis on church, reflection, music, rest, and sleep also highlights a holistic understanding of mental and emotional health. Together, these interests reveal a resourceful, adaptive generation that is deeply aware of the need for balance in an increasingly complex world.

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1. INTRODUCTION

There is a significant crisis of inactivity in the world, as 81% of young people and 27% of adults do not meet the physical activity targets set by the World Health Organization (WHO) [1]. According to Piercy *et al.* [2], it is recommended that individuals participate in 150-300 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity, 75-150 minutes of vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity, or a combination of both, every week. Disturbingly, the Philippines holds the second position worldwide, with a staggering 92% of its young population being physically inactive, which presents a significant threat to public health, according to the WHO [3].

Physical education takes a proactive approach to addressing this worldwide crisis by equipping students with the essential knowledge and skills to embrace and promote a physically active way of life [4]. Physical education fosters lifelong physical activity habits among young people by providing a well-organized curriculum and hands-on experiences. This helps to reduce the negative consequences of a sedentary lifestyle and contributes to better public health outcomes [5].

Generation Z (Gen Z), born between 1995 and the early 2010s, has significantly changed societal norms, cultural landscapes, and educational frameworks in generational dynamics [6]. Gen Z is the initial cohort born in the twenty-first century. They are accustomed to living in a world greatly influenced by technological progress, globalization, and the widespread availability of information [7]. Cilliers [8] emphasized the importance of comprehending the values and characteristics of this demographic for educators, policymakers, and researchers who aim to customize educational programs to meet this generation's distinct needs and interests.

Researchers from the United States have discovered that Gen Z possesses a unique set of values that distinguish them from other generations. This is because they have grown up in an era dominated by digital technology, including the widespread use of smartphones, social media, and instant connectivity [9]. Their inherent technological proficiency has impacted their communication methods and desire for immediate access to information, interactive educational experiences, and a worldwide outlook [10]. Gen Z is defined by their practicality and resilience, shaped by their experiences with economic uncertainties, geopolitical shifts, and a rapidly evolving job market. An intense yearning for genuineness, fairness, and the inclusion of all individuals characterizes this generation. Their values embody a firm conviction in the principles of environmental sustainability, diversity, equity, and social activism [11].

Moreover, the current generation's dependence on digital technology can reduce physical activity and sedentary behaviors among young people. This presents difficulties for traditional physical education programs, mainly based on in-person, instructor-led activities [12]. In rural areas with limited access to technology and internet connectivity, traditional physical education methods focusing on outdoor activities, sports, and group exercises are likely to be more common. Nevertheless, effectively addressing the disparity between Gen Z's inclination towards digital platforms and the conventional physical education methods in rural areas necessitates implementing inventive approaches incorporating technology-driven educational experiences, such as gamification, mobile applications, and online resources. These strategies aim to encourage physical activity and well-being among young individuals while also considering rural settings' distinct cultural and environmental aspects. The physical activity towards health and fitness (PATH-Fit) program can design a learning experience that is dynamic and inclusive, taking into account the distinctive characteristics of Gen Z. This program aims to empower students to adopt active and healthy lifestyles while also fostering a lifelong dedication to physical fitness and wellness.

However, the introduction of physical education in many tertiary educational institutions in the Philippines has encountered substantial obstacles [13]. The challenges encompass problems related to curriculum implementation, inadequacies in teacher training, and a lack of focus on the subject, often perceived as having more political significance than cultural significance. According to Cariaga [14], the historical background indicates that factors beyond pedagogical considerations have impacted tertiary physical education. The scholarly discourse on these matters highlights the significance of a comprehensive enhancement approach. In this regard, Abbasov and Mavlyanov [15] underscore the crucial role of augmenting resources, such as investing in the development of the human workforce and improving school facilities, to enhance physical education's overall quality and efficacy. Similar challenges have been observed in Malaysia, where physical education subjects are frequently undervalued and given low priority [16]. These issues are not exclusive to the Philippines. Physical education teachers in Brazilian public schools face challenges, including insufficient remuneration, inadequate facilities, and a scarcity of resources [17].

To tackle these critical problems, the Philippine Commission on Higher Education (CHED) has required all higher education institutions (HEIs) to transition and provide the new tertiary physical education program, PATH-Fit, as mandated by CHED memorandum order 39 (CMO 39), series of 2021. PATH-Fit is specifically designed to offer a thorough and uniform curriculum, making it a proactive solution to urgent matters like the demand for consistent teaching methods. The framework prioritizes physical fitness, fundamental life skills, and comprehensive development. Moreover, the program aligns with current educational requirements by introducing innovative strategies that can enhance higher education's overall caliber and efficacy in physical education [18].

The main objective of PATH-Fit is to revolutionize and enhance the state of physical education in Philippine higher education by surpassing conventional frameworks. This will be achieved by implementing a comprehensive program combining physical fitness and cultivating crucial life skills to tackle persistent difficulties [19]. The CMO 39 (s. 2021) elaborates on the curriculum's objective of offering students a comprehensive educational experience that prioritizes physical well-being, collaboration, effective

communication, and overall development. PATH-Fit aims to enhance the standard and efficiency of higher education in Physical Education by adapting to current educational demands and implementing creative methods. This ensures that graduates possess the necessary knowledge and abilities for their well-being and active social engagement.

Multiple studies have explored the intricate terrain of Gen Z, examining their behaviors in various industries and educational settings. Bhore and Pandita [20] compared Gen Z and Gen Y and found that social media significantly influences Gen Zs career choices. Ajmain [21] highlighted the impact of technology on Gen Zs social communication abilities and emphasized the importance of implementing effective communication strategies. Shorey *et al.* [22] conducted a review to determine the learning styles, preferences, and needs of healthcare students from Gen Z. They emphasized the importance of integrating technology and self-care strategies into the education of these students. Research by Arkhipova *et al.* [23] found that Gen Z students exhibit a favorable disposition towards technology in education, suggesting that a reasonable utilization of technology can enhance their academic achievement. Giunta [24] highlighted the elevated expectations of trust and dependence on social media among college students belonging to Gen Z. This underscores the importance for educators to comprehend and adjust to their distinct attributes and preferences.

In addition, recent research conducted in the field of tertiary physical education in the Philippines has concentrated on evaluating the effectiveness of current curricula [25], teaching methods [26], and the overall educational experience [27]. The studies examined student engagement, teacher practices, curriculum design, and the influence of technology on physical education [28]. Panganiban [29] has highlighted the significance of program curriculum adaptability and rigorous quality evaluation. Meanwhile, Graciano [30] has identified the preferences and attitudes of students towards physical education, focusing on aligning it with their needs. In addition, Lobo *et al.* [31] highlighted the importance of student interests, suggesting the necessity for innovative methods to enhance the educational process.

Although there have been various studies and literature on Gen Z and tertiary physical education, there is still a notable lack of comprehension regarding the specific interests of Gen Z students, especially in rural communities in the Philippines. Therefore, this study aimed to address this deficiency by examining the factors influencing students' interests in rural environments. This research provides valuable insights into educational practices and student engagement, contributing to the broader academic discourse. The objective of this research was to answer the general question: what are the local interests of Gen Z students in rural communities that could be used as input in enhancing the tertiary physical education program in the Philippines? The goal was to create a more engaging, relevant, and satisfying educational experience. The results of this investigation can be utilized to develop student-focused initiatives, customized learning approaches, and culturally aware practices that cater to the distinct requirements of rural Gen Z students.

This study contributed to the ongoing discussion on inclusive and fair education by offering valuable insights into the intricacies of Gen Z students in rural areas. It provided a basis for conversations about modifying teaching methods to accommodate various student demographics, promoting a feeling of inclusion, and promoting ongoing engagement in physical activity. By identifying deficiencies in the existing literature and proposing a methodology to study the preferences of Gen Z in the context of tertiary physical education, scholars will be motivated to expand on this groundwork by further investigating effective techniques, inventive methods, and culturally sensitive strategies to enhance the field of physical education research.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research design

This study employed qualitative research design, specifically an ethnographic approach. Creswell and Poth [32] defined qualitative research as a method that seeks to comprehend human phenomena' intricacies by thoroughly analyzing non-numerical data. Ethnographic research is a qualitative research approach where the researcher fully engages in the natural surroundings of a specific social group or culture to comprehend and analyze its intricacies [33]. Ethnographic research aims to understand the regularities of everyday existence, behaviors, convictions, and customs within the examined community, employing participant observation, interviews, and immersion. Gobo [34] emphasized that this approach involves thorough and in-depth on-site research, enabling the researcher to obtain an internal viewpoint, build a strong relationship with participants, and reveal insights that would not be evident through alternative research methods. Ethnographic research aims to thoroughly comprehend culture by examining the social interactions and symbolic significance inherent in the experiences of the individuals under investigation [35].

This research utilized this design because it is highly suitable for comprehending the specific interests of the local population and enabled the researcher to depict the types of students in rural

communities comprehensively. This research aimed to improve the implementation of the PATH-Fit program. Ethnography was used to comprehensively understand the local environment, ensuring that the program will align with the specific requirements, cultural values, and educational goals of Gen Z in rural areas.

2.2. Sampling method (locale, population, and technique)

The primary data source for this study consisted of 20 Gen Z participants who were selected using a purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling is a method of selecting participants in a study based on specific characteristics, experiences, or perspectives highly relevant to the research [36]. This sampling technique is commonly employed when studies aim to obtain a comprehensive understanding from individuals possessing distinctive or specialized expertise, ensuring that the selected participants can contribute substantially to the research subject [37]. To be eligible for inclusion in the study, participants must satisfy specific criteria, including belonging to Gen Z (born between 1995–2010), currently enrolled in PATH-Fit courses, and residing in a rural community.

For the study of Gen Z students in the Cotabato Province in the Philippines, the chosen sample size was considered adequate to encompass the various characteristics of this population. In qualitative research, the main objective is to obtain in-depth and comprehensive data from each participant rather than aiming for a broad representation. The selection criteria were sufficiently specific to target individuals with shared interests while allowing for some degree of variability within these parameters. Although the sample size of 20 participants may seem small, it is adequate for capturing the wide range of perspectives, experiences, and diversities within Cotabato's rural Gen Z population. This aligns with the qualitative nature and purpose of the study.

2.3. Research instrument

The primary research tool utilized in this study consisted of a series of open-ended guide questions specifically crafted to explore the varied viewpoints of Gen Z students. Open-ended questions enabled participants to openly and comprehensively analyze their interests, leading to a more genuine and in-depth examination of their thoughts. This set of open-ended guide questions underwent a validation process by experts to assess its content and suitability.

A variety of materials were utilized for data collection to complement the interviews. A camera and voice recorder were used to capture verbal cues, facial expressions, and contextual factors that could aid in interpreting the participants' responses. These multimedia tools enhanced the qualitative data by comprehensively representing the participants' surroundings and experiences.

2.4. Data analysis

This study's data analysis and interpretation were conducted using the Colaizzi method [38]. This approach entailed extracting significant insights from participants' experiences through a meticulous data reduction, categorization, and abstraction process. The Colaizzi method comprises steps, including transcribing interviews or data and identifying noteworthy statements and phrases pertinent to the research questions. The subsequent procedures entail extracting significances and motifs from these statements, categorizing these motifs into clusters, and, ultimately, composing a comprehensive depiction of the phenomenon being examined. The Colaizzi method was particularly appropriate for this study due to its alignment with the exploratory nature of the research, which aims to comprehend the interests of Gen Z students in rural communities. The collected data was rigorously analyzed systematically, facilitating a comprehensive comprehension of the participants' experiences and perspectives. The method's adaptability facilitated the emergence of themes directly from participants' viewpoints, a crucial aspect for capturing the abundant and varied insights of Gen Z students in rural environments.

3. RESULTS

Table 1 presents the key interests of Gen Z students in rural communities, highlighting the activities and pursuits that resonate with this demographic. The table categorizes these interests into various themes, providing insight into both their digital and traditional preferences. This overview serves as a foundation for understanding the factors that influence their engagement and lifestyle choices.

Table 1. Interests of Gen Z students in rural communities

Themes	Description	Sample transcript
a. Social media, videos, and the internet	This theme explores how research participants engage with current trends on social media platforms, video content, and the internet.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – “I just watch reels and videos on social media platforms like Facebook or TikTok.” – “On social media, mostly Facebook or TikTok.”
b. Something profitable	This theme focuses on Gen Z students in rural communities and their interest in online activities that can provide financial benefits.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – “I am interested in baking and doing make-up during my free time.” – “At my age, I have an online business, so I use social media to earn money.” – “I focus more on anything where I can earn money.”
c. E-games	This theme delves into the fascination of Gen Z students in rural communities with e-games or online games.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – “I also enjoy Dota or computers because it affects me in terms of skill and tactics.” – “I really like it because it's a form of expression for me, like releasing emotions through trash-talking and bonding while discussing strategies.”
d. Sports and physical activities	This theme highlights the enthusiasm of Gen Z students for participating in sports and physical activities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – “I play sports or do activities that make me sweat, like basketball or jogging.” – “I mostly ride my bike or jog because it helps me release my tension and think about what to do during stressful days.” – “I like sports because they help with my mental health and make me physically fit.”
e. Going out and exploring	This theme explores the inclination of Gen Z students in rural communities to go out, hang out, and explore their surroundings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – “When I'm with my friends, they also like to go out, so I vibe with them.” – “I am interested in wandering everywhere, trekking, and exploring.” – “I'm more interested in wandering and adventures because I'm from the city, and life there is like that.”
f. Church, reflection, and music	This theme examines the interest of Gen Z students in rural communities in attending church, engaging in moments of reflection, and enjoying music.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – “The feeling inside and outside is really different when I'm in church.” – “Being inside the church is very relaxing because of the discipline inside the convent.” – “I really enjoy playing the guitar and keyboard because it helps me relax.” – “Music helps me because I always have music playing whenever I do something.”
g. Rest and sleep	This theme emphasizes Gen Z students' importance of having adequate time for rest and sleep.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – “When I have nothing else to do, I just sleep because it helps me a lot in catching up on lost sleep.” – “I also spend time sleeping because I lack sleep.”

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Social media, videos, and the internet

This theme describes the interests of research participants in the latest trends on social media, videos, and the internet in general. Most of their vacant time is spent on social media, which is becoming increasingly accessible for some of their academic requirements. It serves to alleviate boredom and offers a break from their educational activities. Additionally, social media platforms and online videos are significant sources of entertainment and information, influencing their daily routines and social interactions. The internet provides them with vast resources, enabling them to stay updated with current trends and connect with peers, thus playing a pivotal role in shaping their interests and activities.

“...I just watch reels and videos on social media platforms like Facebook or TikTok. Although there are times when I follow the 5-second rule to be productive—when I count from 1 to 5, I should start doing what I need to do—if I have free time, I can't avoid it. Being tech-savvy has become part of my life, and when I have gadgets, I go straight to them...” (Yan)

“...on social media, mostly Facebook or TikTok. So, I just look; I don't perform because I'm shy. The internet helps me because it's accessible for students' needs like research or school-related stuff. But in my personal space, it helps me calm down and not think about stress or what is happening. It's like my escape...” (Benjamin)

This implies how deeply digital platforms affect the daily lives of Gen Z students in rural areas. Their constant use of these technologies changes how they find information, talk to others, and have fun. This digital focus can impact their social skills, mental health, and school performance, as they often mix educational activities with leisure time online. It also shows how essential digital skills and an online presence are becoming.

Further, Greenhow and Chapman [39] explained that students today are very interested in social media, videos, and the internet because these tools are a big part of their daily lives. Social media helps them connect with friends, share experiences, and find information quickly. Brown *et al.* [40] stated that videos on sites like YouTube and TikTok are fun and easy to watch, covering many topics they care about. The internet is a vast resource for learning, talking to others, and having fun. With smartphones and other devices, students can access all these things efficiently, making them a big part of how they spend their time and interact with the world [41].

4.2. Something profitable through online

This theme describes the interests of Gen Z students in rural communities in engaging in activities that can generate income or be financially beneficial. They often pursue these ventures and use social media to promote their small businesses. This entrepreneurial spirit helps them relieve stress and sometimes support their families despite their young age. This means they are leveraging the accessibility and reach of online platforms to create and sustain income-generating opportunities, demonstrating resourcefulness and adaptability in their efforts to achieve financial stability. Based on the research participants:

“I am interested in baking and doing make-up during my free time. Baking helps me because I can earn money from it since it's profitable. It has also helped me grow emotionally and mentally because it relieves my stress—I enjoy doing it. Baking releases my stress and boredom. If I get bored at home, I'll bake because I have ready-to-use ingredients...” (Nica)

“...at my age, I have an online business, so I use social media to earn money. They say that Gen Z is all about social media, but with the help of social media, it helps us earn. Social media greatly impacts me because that's where I earn money through things like live streaming...” (Gelay)

This theme denotes that their engagement in online income-generating activities highlights a blend of entrepreneurial initiative and financial necessity. This trend suggests that digital literacy and business acumen are becoming crucial among these students, potentially altering traditional pathways to economic stability. It also indicates a growing reliance on digital platforms for financial opportunities, which can impact their time management, social interactions, and educational priorities. The pursuit of online profitability reflects broader economic pressures and a proactive approach to addressing financial challenges from a young age.

Furthermore, students today often want to earn money and support their families while managing their studies because of financial pressures and a strong sense of responsibility. Many families face economic challenges, and students feel the need to contribute to household expenses [42]. Earning money can help them pay for their educational needs and personal expenses. Balancing work and academics teach them valuable time management skills and builds a sense of independence and resilience [43]. This drive is also influenced by the desire to reduce their parents' financial burdens and prepare for their future financial stability [44].

4.3. E-games

This theme explains the interests of Gen Z students in rural communities in e-games or online games. They are drawn to these games because they offer a platform for social interaction, emotional expression, and entertainment. E-games provide a space for connecting with friends, exploring different virtual worlds, and engaging in activities that bring them joy. These games also serve as a form of escape, allowing them to take a break from their daily routines and academic pressures while fostering a sense of community and shared experiences with fellow players. As said:

“...I also enjoy Dota or computers because they affect me regarding skill and tactics. I really like it because it's a form of expression for me, like releasing emotions through trash-talking and bonding while discussing strategies. It's a way for me to express myself. I enjoy it because it brings mixed emotions—sometimes frustration, sometimes happiness.” (Andrew)

This indicates that their engagement with e-games suggests a significant shift in how they socialize and find enjoyment, revealing the growing importance of virtual spaces for personal connection and emotional well-being. This trend underscores the potential for e-games to influence social dynamics and emotional health as these platforms become central to their recreational activities. Additionally, it points to the increasing integration of digital leisure activities into their everyday lives, which may impact their overall balance between online and offline experiences.

Moreover, Viscione and D'Elia [45] highlighted that Gen Z students are drawn to e-games and online games because they offer immersive and interactive experiences that blend entertainment with social connections. These games provide a way to relax, compete, and bond with friends, often in a shared virtual space. The benefits include improved hand-eye coordination, problem-solving skills, and opportunities for teamwork and strategic thinking. However, excessive gaming can lead to adverse outcomes such as reduced academic performance, sleep problems, and social isolation. Balancing gaming with other activities is essential to ensure students enjoy the benefits while minimizing potential harm [46].

4.4. Sports and physical activities

This theme describes the interests of Gen Z students in sports and physical activities. Despite growing up in the digital age and being digital natives, they still recognize the importance of staying physically active. According to the research participants, engaging in sports and physical activities helps them focus better and improves their sleep quality. These activities also foster self-control and self-discipline, contributing to their overall well-being. This means they value the balance between digital engagement and physical health, understanding that physical activity is crucial in maintaining mental and physical fitness. Based on them:

"...I play sports or do activities that make me sweat, like basketball or jogging. It helps because I can focus more and unwind. It also helps me sleep better because playing or jogging makes me tired. This improves my self-control and self-discipline..." (Bogart)

"In my vacant times, I mostly just rode my bike or jogged because it helped me release my tension and think about what to do during stressful days. I usually do it early in the morning because it's quiet, and I can think better. It's like I reflect and meditate, rejuvenating me..." (Benjamin)

This suggests their commitment to sports and physical activities highlights a conscious effort to balance digital consumption with physical well-being. These students recognize the benefits of physical exercise for their physical health, mental focus, and emotional stability. It indicates that despite the allure of digital entertainment, there is a strong appreciation for the holistic advantages physical activity brings, which can significantly shape their lifestyle choices and overall health outcomes.

Additionally, Gen Z is enthusiastic about sports and physical activities because they offer a way to stay fit, relieve stress, and connect with others. Sports participation provides physical health benefits, such as improved cardiovascular health, strength, and flexibility [47]. It also promotes mental well-being by reducing anxiety and boosting mood by releasing endorphins [48]. Draine [49] also explains that sports foster teamwork, discipline, and leadership skills, which are valuable in personal and professional life. For many Gen Z individuals, sports and physical activities are a fun and engaging way to balance the sedentary aspects of their digital lives.

4.5. They were going out and exploring

This theme describes the interests of Gen Z students in rural communities in the habit of going out, hanging out, and exploring. For these students, it serves as a form of bonding and a way to reflect on themselves while reconnecting with nature. This activity allows them to experience new environments, engage with their surroundings, and build stronger social connections. This means they place significant value on outdoor experiences for personal growth, social interaction, and rejuvenation, highlighting the importance of exploration and physical presence. As they said:

"I like to go out and about, but sometimes I just want to stay home. When I'm with my friends, they also like to go out, so I vibe with them..." (Bryan)

"I am interested in wandering everywhere, trekking, and exploring because I don't like exercise. I prefer wandering because I enjoy connecting with nature. When I'm in nature, I reflect more on myself, and I should connect with nature rather than socialize with other people in the city or our place because I meditate more..." (Arden)

This entails that their inclination to go out and explore underscores the importance of direct interactions with their environment and social circles. This tendency suggests that, despite the rise of digital engagement, there is a persistent value in physical exploration and nature, which can contribute to their emotional well-being, social cohesion, and personal development. It highlights a balanced lifestyle where digital and real-world experiences are integral to their overall quality of life, emphasizing the enduring relevance of outdoor activities in fostering a well-rounded and fulfilling existence.

Also, Priporas *et al.* [50] elaborated that Gen Z tends to be interested in exploring and wandering because these activities satisfy their curiosity and desire for new experiences. Traveling and discovering new places allow them to learn about different cultures, broaden their perspectives, and gain a deeper understanding of the world. These experiences foster independence, adaptability, and problem-solving skills as they navigate unfamiliar environments. Exploring and wandering provide opportunities for personal growth, self-discovery, and building lasting memories. This sense of adventure also helps them develop resilience and confidence, preparing them for future challenges and opportunities [51].

4.6. Church, reflection, and music

This theme explains the interests of Gen Z students in rural communities in attending church, having moments of reflection, and indulging in music. For many, the church is a comfortable space to relieve stress, cultivate self-discipline, and contemplate personal growth and future aspirations. Music also plays a significant role in bonding and aiding in greater focus and emotional regulation. This means these activities are integral to their well-being, offering spiritual, emotional, and mental support and helping them navigate the challenges of their daily lives. Based on their responses:

“Sometimes, I also go to church to play instruments. I invite our neighbors to play music or jam together. I really enjoy playing the guitar and keyboard because it helps me relax. It also boosts my self-confidence.” (Nica)

“...music helps me because I always have music playing whenever I do something. I am more productive in what I do when there is music, whether it's jazz, classical, pop, or waltz music. The world seems colorless without music. I don't feel the world has color without music, even when studying...” (Namikazee)

This conveys that their engagement in church activities, moments of reflection, and immersion in music underscores a holistic approach to managing stress and fostering personal growth. These practices suggest a firm reliance on spiritual and reflective activities to achieve emotional balance and mental clarity. The use of music as a bonding tool and a focus aid reflects its significant role in their social and academic lives. These interests highlight the importance of integrating spiritual, reflective, and musical elements into their daily routines to enhance their well-being.

Consequently, attending church can offer spiritual guidance, community support, and a feeling of belonging [52]. Reflection, whether through meditation, prayer, or quiet contemplation, helps individuals process their thoughts, reduce stress, and clarify their goals and values [53]. Music, with its emotional and therapeutic qualities, can uplift the spirit, reduce anxiety, and improve mood [54].

4.7. Rest and sleep

This theme illustrates the interests of Gen Z students in having time to rest and sleep. With their hectic schedules and demanding academic activities, sleep becomes essential for them to regenerate and maintain productivity. According to the students, adequate rest helps them recover from sleep deficits and enhances their ability to perform daily tasks efficiently. This means they recognize the importance of prioritizing sleep as a crucial component of their overall well-being and academic success, understanding that proper rest is vital for maintaining their physical and mental health. Based on them:

“...I love to sleep. When I have nothing else to do, I just sleep because it helps me a lot in catching up on lost sleep. After sleeping, I feel very energetic. I enjoy sleeping whenever I have free time.” (Andrew)

“...I also spend time sleeping because I lack sleep, always facing my laptop and cellphones.” (Jasmin)

This suggests that their sleep prioritization amidst busy schedules and academic pressures highlights a growing awareness of the need for proper rest to sustain their physical and mental health. This focus on rest and sleep indicates a recognition of its impact on their productivity, cognitive function, and overall well-being. It underscores the importance of balancing work and rest, suggesting that these students understand the necessity of recovery to manage their academic and personal responsibilities effectively.

Sleep and rest are also crucial for youths as they support physical health, cognitive function, and emotional well-being. Adequate sleep helps with growth and development, boosts the immune system, and aids muscle repair and recovery [55]. It enhances memory, learning, and concentration, essential for academic performance. Quality sleep regulates mood, reduces stress, and prevents mental health issues like anxiety and depression [56]. Tarokh *et al.* [57] also pointed out that prioritizing rest ensures youths have the energy and resilience to navigate daily challenges and maintain overall health and well-being.

5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the local interests of Gen Z students in rural communities paint a comprehensive picture of a generation adeptly balancing the digital and physical realms of their lives. From the appeal of social media, online ventures, and e-games to the grounding effects of sports, nature exploration, and spiritual practices, these students demonstrate a flexible approach to well-being and personal growth. Their focus on profitable online activities reflects a pragmatic response to economic challenges. In contrast, their commitment to physical activities and outdoor exploration underscores a recognition of the benefits of maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Their importance on church, reflection, music, rest, and sleep highlights their holistic understanding of mental and emotional health. These interests reveal a resourceful, adaptive generation that is deeply aware of the need for balance in an increasingly complex world.

Future research could deepen understanding of these interests by exploring how local and global trends impact the personal and academic growth of rural Gen Z students over time. Longitudinal studies would provide insight into the evolving role of digital engagement and physical activities in their lives, particularly how these shape their educational and career pathways. Additionally, examining the impact of economic conditions on their digital entrepreneurial interests and physical activities could reveal targeted ways to support this generation's unique blend of digital and traditional pursuits in rural settings.

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C : **C**onceptualization

M : **M**ethodology

So : **S**oftware

Va : **V**alidation

Fo : **F**ormal analysis

I : **I**nvestigation

R : **R**esources

D : **D**ata Curation

O : **O**riting - **O**riginal Draft

E : **E**riting - **R**eview & **E**editing

Vi : **V**isualization

Su : **S**upervision

P : **P**roject administration

Fu : **F**unding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors state no conflict of interest.

INFORMED CONSENT

We have obtained informed consent from all individuals included in this study.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The research related to human use has been complied with all the relevant national regulations and institutional policies in accordance with the tenets of the Helsinki Declaration and has been approved by the authors' institutional review board or equivalent committee.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.




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