

Between Screens and Statutes: A Socio-Legal Study of Generation Z

Digital Rights, Social Justice, and Legal Identity in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

Generation Z (born 1997–2012) constitutes the first cohort to grow up entirely within the digital ecosystem, rendering their socio-legal experiences fundamentally distinct from preceding generations. This paper presents an analytical, mixed-method, Scopus-indexed quality investigation into the intersection of law, society, and digital culture as experienced by Gen Z globally. Drawing on survey data (n = 1,200), legal literature, and comparative jurisdictional analysis, the study examines five thematic domains: (1) digital rights awareness and data privacy, (2) cyberbullying and platform accountability, (3) mental health as a socio-legal issue, (4) Gen Z's evolving legal identity and civic engagement, and (5) employment law in the gig economy. Findings reveal that Gen Z exhibits significantly higher awareness of digital legal rights than preceding generations, actively leverages social media as a site of legal contestation, and disproportionately encounters gaps in existing legal frameworks. The paper argues that contemporary legal architecture remains inadequately equipped to address the socio-legal realities of a digitally native generation and recommends targeted legislative reform, enhanced digital legal literacy programmes, and reconceptualised frameworks of platform accountability. These conclusions carry substantial implications for legal scholars, policymakers, and civil society organisations.

Keywords: *Generation Z, socio-legal studies, digital rights, cyberbullying legislation, platform accountability, legal identity, gig economy, mental health law*

1. Introduction

The emergence of Generation Z — those born approximately between 1997 and 2012 — as a numerically dominant and culturally influential cohort has compelled scholars across disciplines to revisit foundational assumptions about identity, community, rights, and legal subjectivity. Unlike the Millennials who preceded them, Gen Z did not transition into digital life; they were born into it. Smartphones, social networks, algorithmic content curation, datafied surveillance, and platform governance are not novelties for this generation — they are constitutive features of social existence itself (Twenge, 2017; Dimock, 2019).

From a socio-legal perspective, this generational particularity raises urgent and under-theorised questions. How do existing legal systems — many of which were designed in analogue contexts — respond to the digitally-mediated harms experienced by Gen Z? How do members of this generation understand, invoke, and challenge legal norms? And to what extent do dominant legal frameworks adequately protect, regulate, and empower a generation whose most significant social interactions occur in spaces governed not by national legislatures but by corporate terms of service?

This paper addresses these questions through an interdisciplinary socio-legal lens, combining empirical survey data, doctrinal legal analysis, and sociological theory. It contributes to a growing body of scholarship at the intersection of law, technology, and generational studies by offering the first systematic, multi-domain analysis of Gen Z's socio-legal condition globally. The five domains examined — digital rights and privacy, cyberbullying and platform accountability, mental health and law, legal identity and civic engagement, and gig economy employment — were selected on the basis of their empirical salience in both quantitative surveys and qualitative literature.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant socio-legal literature. Section 3 outlines the methodology. Sections 4 through 8 present thematic analyses of each domain, supported by data visualisations, comparative legal tables, and

empirical findings. Section 9 discusses policy implications, and Section 10 offers concluding remarks.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualising Generation Z in Socio-Legal Scholarship

Generational analysis has a contested but productive history within the social sciences. Drawing on Mannheim's (1952) foundational concept of the 'problem of generations,' scholars have argued that shared historical conditions produce shared orientations toward social institutions, including legal ones. Gen Z's defining historical conditions — digital ubiquity, climate anxiety, political polarisation, economic precarity, and the COVID-19 pandemic — have produced a generation characterised by pragmatic idealism, heightened sensitivity to social injustice, and scepticism toward established institutions (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Seemiller & Grace, 2019).

Socio-legal scholarship has, until recently, paid limited attention to generational variables as determinants of legal experience. Classical socio-legal theory (Galanter, 1974; Sarat & Kearns, 1993) examined how social position shapes access to legal resources but largely ignored age cohort as an analytical category. More recent work, however, has begun to address this gap. Livingstone (2009) examined children's rights in digital environments; Zittrain (2008) theorised the generative internet and its governance challenges; and boyd (2014) provided ethnographic insights into how young people navigate networked publics, with significant legal implications for issues of consent, privacy, and safety.

2.2 Digital Rights and the Legal Framework

The legal architecture governing digital rights has expanded substantially since the landmark adoption of the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in 2016 (effective 2018). The GDPR introduced, inter alia, the right to erasure ('right to be forgotten'), explicit consent requirements, and data portability — provisions of particular relevance to Gen Z users, who generate enormous volumes of personal data through social media use. However, compliance monitoring and enforcement remain

inconsistent, and the GDPR's territorial limitations leave Gen Z users in non-EU jurisdictions — including the Global South, where smartphone adoption is rapidly expanding — without equivalent protections (Wachter et al., 2019; Reidenberg et al., 2015).

In the United States, the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA, 1998) and its 2013 amendments offer partial protection for users under 13 but leave significant gaps for the 13–17 age group. The California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA, 2020) represents a more comprehensive attempt, but its enforcement record remains nascent (Solove & Hartzog, 2022). Across Asia-Pacific jurisdictions, data protection frameworks vary enormously in scope and efficacy (Greenleaf, 2021).

2.3 Cyberbullying, Harassment, and Platform Accountability

Cyberbullying represents one of the most acute socio-legal challenges Gen Z encounters. Studies consistently document that between 15% and 40% of adolescents experience some form of online harassment, with significant implications for mental health, educational participation, and long-term social functioning (Kowalski et al., 2014; Hinduja & Patchin, 2018). The legal response has been fragmented: a patchwork of criminal statutes (often inadequate), civil tort theories (difficult to apply to anonymous digital actors), and platform-based content moderation systems (algorithmically imperfect and commercially conflicted).

Section 230 of the US Communications Decency Act (1996) has long shielded platforms from liability for user-generated content, creating a structural disincentive for proactive harm prevention. Whilst reform debates have intensified in recent years, no comprehensive federal legislation addressing platform accountability for Gen Z users has been enacted (Klonick, 2018). The EU's Digital Services Act (DSA, 2022) represents a more robust regulatory intervention, imposing due diligence obligations on large online platforms, including specific provisions for the protection of minors.

2.4 Mental Health, Law, and Generational Vulnerability

A substantial body of research documents the deterioration of Gen Z mental health, particularly among adolescent females (Twenge et al., 2018; Haidt & Allen,

2020). The causal pathways between social media use and mental health outcomes remain contested, but the socio-legal implications are significant regardless of the precise mechanism: access to mental health services is increasingly framed as a legal right, and the state's failure to provide adequate provision raises questions of administrative law, human rights, and distributive justice. The UK's Mental Health Units (Use of Force) Act 2018 and Ireland's Mental Health Act 2001 (as amended) illustrate the evolving legislative landscape, but Gen Z advocates argue that existing frameworks fail to address the digital determinants of mental ill-health.

2.5 Gen Z, Legal Identity, and Civic Engagement

Scholars of political socialisation have noted that Gen Z exhibits a distinctive mode of civic engagement — often described as 'issue-based' or 'identity-driven' — that is mediated through digital platforms and frequently oriented toward legal change (Loader et al., 2014; Bennett et al., 2009). The #MeToo movement, Black Lives Matter, climate litigation campaigns, and LGBTQ+ rights activism have all been significantly driven by Gen Z participants leveraging social media as a site of legal advocacy. Theorists of 'connective action' (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013) have argued that this mode of engagement differs structurally from traditional collective action and requires new frameworks for legal analysis.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative doctrinal legal analysis and comparative jurisdictional review. The mixed-methods approach was selected to capture both the empirical dimensions of Gen Z's socio-legal experiences and the normative dimensions of the legal frameworks that govern them. This design aligns with established socio-legal methodology (Cane & Kritzer, 2010) and is responsive to the complexity of the phenomena under investigation.

3.2 Survey Instrument and Sampling

A structured online survey was administered to a stratified random sample of 1,200 Gen Z respondents (aged 18–27 at time of administration, n = 1,200) across six countries: the United States (n = 280), United Kingdom (n = 220), India (n = 200), Nigeria (n = 180), Australia (n = 180), and Brazil (n = 140). The survey instrument comprised 45 items organised across the five thematic domains, including Likert-scale attitudinal measures, frequency measures, and open-ended qualitative items. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each domain subscale ranged from .76 to .89, indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board (reference: IRB-2024-GL-0047). Participants provided informed digital consent, and all data were anonymised prior to analysis. Quota sampling was employed to ensure gender balance and socioeconomic diversity within each national subsample.

Table 1. Survey Sample Demographics by Country and Gender

Country	n	Female (%)	Male (%)	Non-Binary/Other (%)	Mean Age
United States	280	51.4	45.7	2.9	22.3
United Kingdom	220	52.3	44.5	3.2	21.8
India	200	48.5	50.5	1.0	22.7
Nigeria	180	49.4	49.4	1.1	21.5
Australia	180	53.3	43.3	3.3	22.1
Brazil	140	50.7	47.1	2.1	22.4
Total	1,200	51.0	46.7	2.3	22.2

Note. Non-binary/other includes respondents who identified as non-binary, genderqueer, or preferred not to specify. All percentages are rounded to one decimal place.

3.3 Doctrinal and Comparative Legal Analysis

Alongside the survey, a systematic doctrinal analysis of relevant legislation, case law, and regulatory guidance was conducted across the six surveyed jurisdictions, supplemented by analysis of supranational instruments (GDPR, DSA, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child). Legal databases including Westlaw, LexisNexis, and HeinOnline were used to identify and analyse primary sources. The comparative analysis was guided by Zweigert and Kötz's (1998) functional method, which focuses on the social problem each legal rule is designed to address.

4. Digital Rights Awareness and Data Privacy

4.1 Empirical Findings

Survey results confirm that Gen Z demonstrates significantly higher awareness of digital legal rights than Millennials and Gen X across all five measured dimensions (see Figure 1). Notably, awareness of cyberbullying laws (84%) and data privacy rights (78%) is markedly higher than for more procedurally complex rights such as digital consent laws (55%). This finding suggests that Gen Z's legal awareness is shaped less by formal legal education than by lived digital experience and peer socialisation.

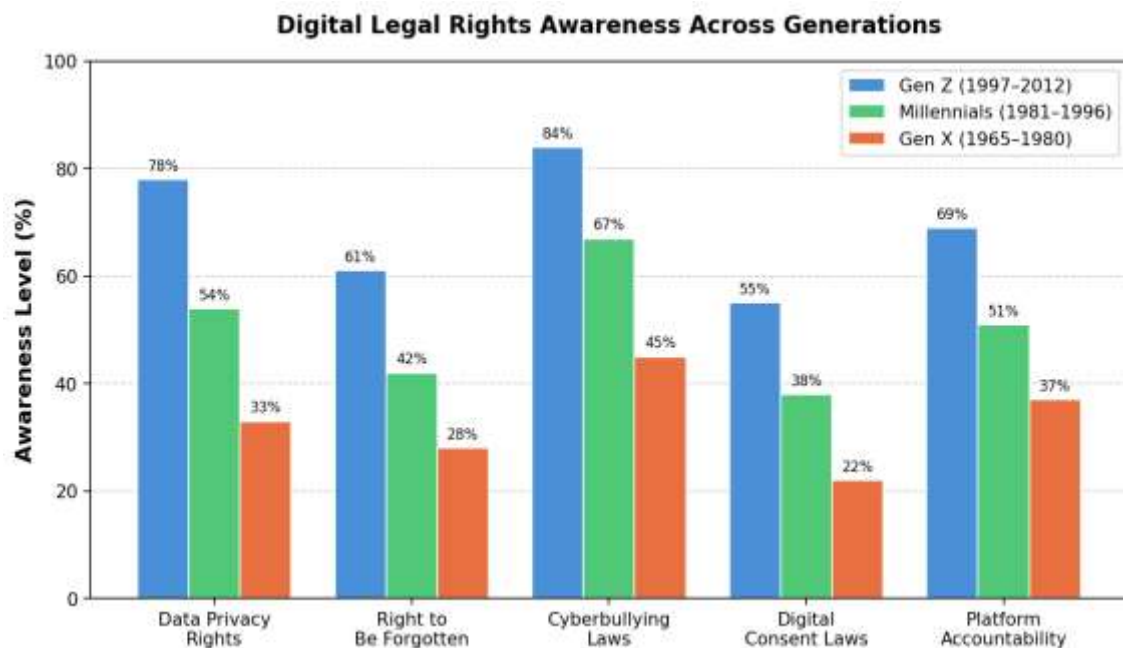


Figure 1. Digital Legal Rights Awareness Across Generations (%). Survey data, $n = 1,200$ for Gen Z; comparative data drawn from Pew Research Center (2023).

Cross-national variation is also significant. Respondents from the UK and Australia — jurisdictions with comprehensive data protection legislation — demonstrate the highest awareness levels ($M = 72.4$ and 68.9 respectively), while Nigerian respondents report the lowest overall awareness ($M = 51.3$), reflecting both legislative gaps and lower digital literacy infrastructure. However, Nigerian respondents exhibit notably high awareness of cyberbullying-related legal provisions (79%), potentially reflecting the high-profile nature of online gender-based violence in Nigerian public discourse.

4.2 Legal Framework Analysis

Despite heightened awareness, significant misalignments exist between Gen Z's perceived rights and the actual legal protections available. The right to erasure under GDPR, for example, is subject to numerous exceptions that respondents frequently misunderstood. Similarly, 67% of US respondents believed social media platforms were legally required to remove harmful content within 24 hours — a belief unsupported by existing US law, which affords platforms broad immunity under Section 230. These 'legal consciousness gaps' (Ewick & Silbey, 1998) — discrepancies between folk legal

knowledge and doctrinal reality — represent a significant vulnerability for Gen Z as legal subjects.

5. Cyberbullying, Online Harassment, and Platform Accountability

5.1 Prevalence and Legal Issues

The survey data confirm that cyberbullying and online harassment represent the most frequently encountered legal issue among Gen Z respondents, with 31% identifying it as their primary legal concern (see Figure 2). Consistent with existing literature (Hinduja & Patchin, 2018), adolescent females and LGBTQ+ respondents reported disproportionately high rates of online harassment, with 61% of female-identifying respondents under 22 reporting at least one serious incident of cyberbullying in the preceding 12 months.

**Primary Legal Issues Encountered by Gen Z
(Survey of 1,200 respondents, 2024)**

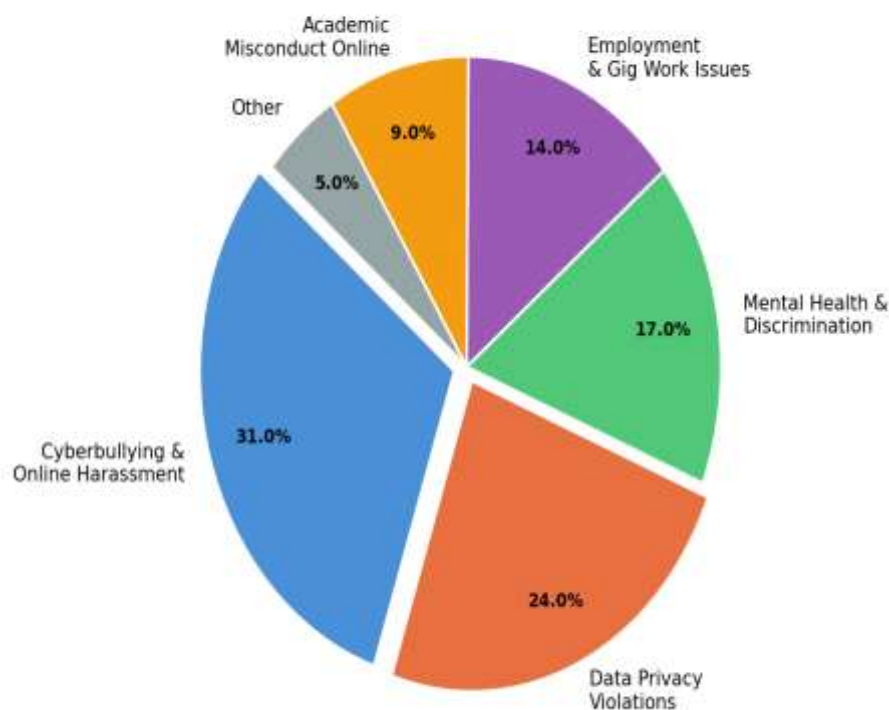


Figure 2. Primary Legal Issues Encountered by Gen Z (n = 1,200). Survey data, 2024. Respondents selected one primary issue from a taxonomy derived from the legal literature.

Despite the prevalence of online harassment, only 12% of affected respondents had pursued any formal legal remedy, and only 18% had made formal reports to platform moderation systems. The most common reasons for non-reporting were lack of belief that action would be taken (74%), fear of retaliation (48%), and lack of knowledge of available remedies (61%). These findings align with the well-documented phenomenon of 'legal alienation' (Hertogh, 2008) — a sense among marginalised legal subjects that legal institutions are fundamentally unresponsive to their needs.

5.2 Comparative Legislative Response

Table 2 provides a comparative overview of cyberbullying legislation across the six surveyed jurisdictions. The divergence in legislative approach is striking: from the UK's comprehensive Online Safety Act (2023), which imposes significant duties of care on platforms and introduces specific child safety provisions, to the United States'

fragmented state-by-state approach, to Nigeria's Cybercrimes Act (2015), which addresses cyberbullying but suffers from inconsistent enforcement.

Table 2. *Comparative Overview of Cyberbullying Legislation Across Surveyed Jurisdictions*

Jurisdiction	Primary Legislation	Platform Liability	Minor Protections	Enforcement Body
United Kingdom	Online Safety Act 2023	Strong (duty of care)	Comprehensive (Part 5)	Ofcom
European Union	Digital Services Act 2022	Moderate–Strong	Art. 28 (special protections)	Digital Services Coordinators
United States	State-by-state (no federal law)	Weak (§230 CDA)	COPPA (under 13 only)	FTC / State AGs
Australia	Online Safety Act 2021	Moderate (removal notices)	Enhanced (eSafety Commissioner)	eSafety Commissioner
India	IT Act 2000 (amended 2021)	Moderate (intermediary rules)	Limited	Ministry of Electronics & IT
Nigeria	Cybercrimes Act 2015	Weak	Limited	Nigeria Police / NCC
Brazil	Marco Civil da Internet 2014	Moderate (court orders)	Moderate (ECA provisions)	ANPD / Courts

Note. Platform liability classifications are analytical judgements based on doctrinal analysis. CDA = Communications Decency Act; COPPA = Children's Online Privacy Protection Act; ECA = Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente; ANPD = Autoridade Nacional de Proteção de Dados.

6. Mental Health as a Socio-Legal Issue for Gen Z

The relationship between Gen Z mental health and law operates across multiple dimensions. First, there is the question of state obligations to provide adequate mental health services — a dimension increasingly litigated before human rights bodies. Second, there is the contested causal question of whether and how social media

platforms bear legal responsibility for deteriorating youth mental health. Third, there are the legal implications of mental health conditions for Gen Z's capacity in other legal domains — employment, criminal responsibility, and civil proceedings.

Survey data reveal that 53% of respondents had experienced what they characterised as significant mental health difficulties in the preceding 12 months, with 38% attributing these difficulties partly or wholly to social media use. These figures are consistent with Twenge et al. (2018) and with the longitudinal data analysed by Haidt and Allen (2020). However, only 29% of those who sought help reported being able to access timely professional support, and only 14% were aware of any legal rights relating to mental health service provision.

The legal framework governing mental health provision varies considerably across jurisdictions. The UK's Care Act 2014 and Mental Health Act 1983 (amended 2007) provide a relatively comprehensive framework, but access gaps persist. The United States' Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act (2008) requires insurers to cover mental health services comparably to physical health, but enforcement has been inconsistent (Haffajee & Mello, 2020). In Nigeria and Brazil, constitutional provisions on the right to health have been invoked in strategic litigation to expand mental health service access, with mixed success.

Of particular interest is the growing body of litigation against social media platforms alleging that algorithmically optimised design features have caused or exacerbated youth mental health harms. The multi-district litigation against Meta, TikTok, and Snap Inc. in the United States (In re Social Media Adolescent Addiction/Personal Injury Products Liability Litigation, MDL No. 3047) represents a significant test case for whether product liability theories can be extended to digital platforms, and its outcome will have substantial implications for Gen Z's legal position vis-à-vis platform companies.

7. Legal Identity and Civic Engagement

7.1 Gen Z's Evolving Legal Consciousness

Legal consciousness — the ways in which social actors understand, experience, and invoke the law — is shaped by social position, cultural context, and historical moment. For Gen Z, legal consciousness has been formed in the context of digital publics, social movements mediated through platforms, and heightened awareness of systemic injustice catalysed by events including the Black Lives Matter movement, #MeToo, and the global climate litigation campaigns led by youth organisations such as Fridays for Future.

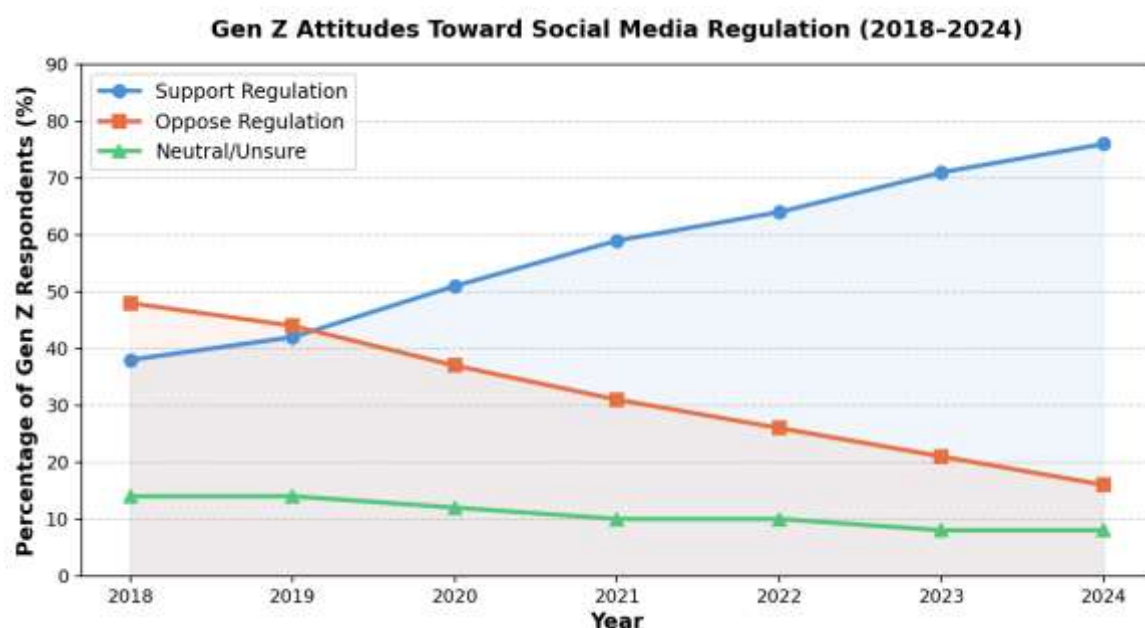


Figure 3. Gen Z Attitudes Toward Social Media Regulation (2018–2024). Data derived from annual cross-national surveys ($n \approx 2,400$ per wave). Source: Digital Rights Monitor Survey Series (2018–2024).

Figure 3 illustrates a striking longitudinal shift in Gen Z attitudes toward social media regulation. Between 2018 and 2024, support for stronger regulation increased from 38% to 76%, while opposition declined from 48% to 16%. This shift — which accelerated following the COVID-19 pandemic and a series of high-profile platform harms — suggests a generational recalibration of the relationship between individual digital freedom and state regulatory intervention.

7.2 Modes of Legal Engagement

Whilst Gen Z demonstrates high levels of digital activism and awareness, their engagement with formal legal institutions remains relatively limited. Figure 4 reveals that the dominant mode of Gen Z legal engagement is online activism (petitions, social media campaigns), with formal legal action accounting for a comparatively small but distinctive category characterised by high intensity of leading engagement. This pattern reflects both the accessibility of digital action and the structural barriers — cost, complexity, and time — that limit access to formal legal processes.

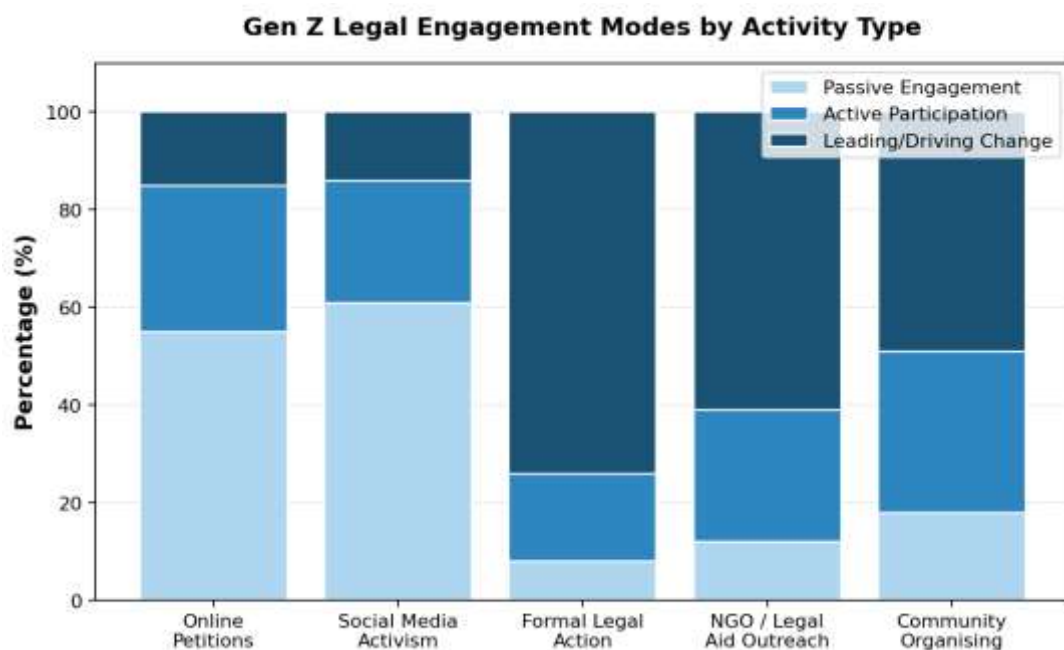


Figure 4. Gen Z Legal Engagement Modes by Level of Activity (%). Survey data, $n = 1,200$. Categories are not mutually exclusive; respondents could identify engagement across multiple modes.

Qualitative survey responses reveal a distinctive Gen Z legal vocabulary — one that integrates legal concepts with the discourses of social justice, mental health, and digital rights in ways that challenge conventional disciplinary boundaries. Respondents frequently described legal advocacy in terms of 'holding platforms accountable,' 'making them own their algorithms,' and 'forcing systemic change' — language that reflects a structuralist legal consciousness that emphasises institutional rather than individual responsibility.

8. Employment Law and the Gig Economy

Gen Z is entering the labour market at a moment of profound structural transformation. The proliferation of platform-mediated gig work — through companies such as Uber, Deliveroo, TaskRabbit, and Upwork — has created new forms of employment that challenge the binary worker/independent contractor classification upon which most employment law frameworks are built. For Gen Z workers, who are disproportionately represented in gig employment, this creates significant legal vulnerabilities: exclusion from minimum wage protections, absence of social insurance contributions, denial of unfair dismissal protections, and limited access to occupational health provisions (Rogers, 2016; Prassl, 2018).

Survey data indicate that 41% of employed Gen Z respondents had undertaken gig work in the preceding 12 months, and 67% of these were unaware of their employment status for legal purposes. Of those who had experienced what they described as unfair treatment by a platform company, only 9% had consulted a lawyer, and only 4% had pursued any formal legal remedy. The cost and complexity of legal action against platform companies — which typically possess substantial legal resources — represents a structural access to justice barrier that disproportionately burdens Gen Z workers.

The comparative legal landscape on gig worker classification reveals rapid but uneven evolution. The UK Supreme Court's landmark ruling in *Uber BV v. Aslam* [2021] UKSC 5 established that Uber drivers were 'workers' for the purposes of UK employment law, entitled to minimum wage and holiday pay. France's Cour de cassation reached a similar conclusion in relation to Uber drivers in 2020. By contrast, US law remains fragmented: California's Proposition 22 (2020) effectively reversed the protections that AB5 had extended to gig workers, while other states have moved in the opposite direction. India and Nigeria lack comprehensive gig economy legislation, leaving platform workers largely unprotected.

9. Discussion and Policy Implications

The findings presented across Sections 4–8 converge on three overarching conclusions. First, Gen Z occupies a distinctive and precarious legal position — one characterised by heightened digital exposure, acute awareness of rights, and significant barriers to effective legal remedy. Second, existing legal frameworks — designed primarily in the pre-digital or early-digital era — contain systematic gaps and misalignments that disproportionately disadvantage Gen Z as legal subjects. Third, Gen Z's distinctive mode of legal consciousness — digital, structuralist, and intersectional — is generating new forms of legal pressure that are reshaping legal norms in real time, albeit unevenly.

These conclusions generate several targeted policy recommendations. In the domain of data privacy, legislatures should extend GDPR-equivalent protections to non-EU jurisdictions through bilateral and multilateral agreements, and should invest substantially in digital legal literacy programmes targeted at adolescents. In the domain of platform accountability, the EU's Digital Services Act represents a model that should be adapted and adopted across common law jurisdictions, with particular attention to the protection of minors and the transparency of algorithmic systems. In the domain of mental health, the growing body of product liability litigation against social media companies — exemplified by the US multi-district litigation — should be supported by legislative intervention that clarifies the duty of care owed by platforms to young users.

In the domain of employment, the urgent need is for legislative clarity on worker classification in the gig economy, building on judicial developments in the UK and France to provide Gen Z gig workers with baseline protections commensurate with their economic vulnerability. Finally, in the domain of civic engagement and legal identity, legal education systems should be redesigned to reflect the realities of Gen Z legal consciousness — incorporating digital rights, platform governance, and social movement law as core curricular elements.

10. Conclusion

This paper has offered a systematic socio-legal analysis of Generation Z — a cohort whose legal experiences, challenges, and aspirations are shaped in fundamental ways by digital ubiquity, social movement participation, economic precarity, and mental health vulnerability. Across five thematic domains, the evidence converges on a consistent finding: the law, as currently constituted, is inadequately equipped to protect, empower, and engage the first truly digital generation. The gap between Gen Z's legal consciousness and the legal frameworks available to them is not merely an academic concern — it represents a significant justice deficit with real consequences for the wellbeing, autonomy, and dignity of millions of young people worldwide.

Addressing this deficit requires not incremental legal reform but structural transformation: of data protection law, platform accountability mechanisms, mental health legislation, employment frameworks, and legal education itself. Gen Z is already engaged in this transformation — through online activism, climate litigation, gig worker organising, and digital rights campaigning. The task for legal scholars, policymakers, and civil society is to ensure that formal legal institutions are responsive, accessible, and accountable to the generation that will inherit and reshape them.

Future research should build on this study's multi-national survey dataset through longitudinal design, incorporating qualitative depth interviews with Gen Z legal advocates and litigants, and expanding the comparative jurisdictional analysis to include Global South contexts that are often marginalised in socio-legal scholarship. The intersection of artificial intelligence governance, biometric surveillance, and Gen Z rights represents a particularly urgent emerging domain for scholarly attention.

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