

The Impact of Social Media on Gen Z's Self-Perception and Mental Health

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INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, the growth of social media platforms has reshaped the way individuals present themselves and perceive others. Instagram and TikTok, in particular, have become central to youth culture, encouraging users to share only the most appealing moments of their lives, a phenomenon commonly referred to as "highlight reels." While these platforms offer creative outlets and opportunities for connection, they also facilitate an environment addictive enough to encourage comparison, idealization, and curated self-presentation.

Generation Z, born between the late 1990s and early 2010s, has grown up immersed in this digital landscape. They are the first generation to experience adolescence alongside the rise of algorithm-driven content feeds, beauty filters, and viral trends. As a result, their self-identity and mental health are uniquely vulnerable to the pressures of constant online engagement. Research has increasingly pointed to a link between high social media use and issues most commonly being anxiety, low self-esteem, and depression among adolescents.

This paper helps investigate the extent to which curated identities on Instagram, TikTok and other social media platforms might affect Gen Z's self-esteem and authenticity in offline interactions. It seeks to understand whether exposure to idealized portrayals of others' lives leads to internalized feelings of inadequacy, altered self-image, and/or reduced comfort in

expressing one's true self in real-life settings. By combining the data collected, this study aims to provide a nuanced perspective on a highly relevant issue in today's digital age.

The purpose of this research is not only to examine the psychological consequences of curated digital identities but also to explore potential solutions. Ultimately, this paper hopes to contribute to ongoing conversations about digital literacy, responsible platform design, and mental health awareness for youth, especially in this generation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The psychology of social media platforms encourages selective sharing, where users craft posts that portray them in the best possible light. This has been linked to the concept of the "highlight reels," where users share peak experiences while omitting mundane or negative aspects of life. According to Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), individuals determine their own social and personal worth based on how they stack up against others. Constant exposure to idealized posts fosters upward social comparisons, which are often associated with feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem.

Goffman's seminal work on impression management (1959) provides a theoretical framework for understanding how individuals strategically present themselves across varying social contexts. Contemporary scholarship has

extended this foundation to digital environments, where social media platforms function as curated performance spaces enabling sophisticated identity construction. Research indicates that platforms such as Instagram and TikTok primarily facilitate strategic identity curation rather than authentic self-expression. Users demonstrate marked tendencies toward conformity with dominant aesthetic standards, trending behaviors, and influencer-modeled conduct, potentially creating substantial distance between their authentic selves and digital personas. Younger users experience considerable pressure to maintain coherent and socially desirable online identities that align with societal expectations, even when such presentations diverge significantly from their offline personalities.

These performative digital behaviors have generated significant psychological consequences, as documented by research from the Pew Research Center and Common Sense Media, which report alarming increases in anxiety, depression, and body dissatisfaction among Generation Z. The proliferation of beauty filters and algorithmic amplification of idealized content contributes to distorted perceptions of normalcy and natural appearance. Fardouly et al. (2018) demonstrated that young women who regularly engaged with appearance-focused social media accounts reported significantly elevated levels of body dissatisfaction and decreased mood states. Subsequent research has identified similar patterns across genders and regions globally, suggesting widespread mental health challenges directly linked to identity performance pressures.

This dynamic has created an authenticity paradox within contemporary youth culture. While authenticity has become increasingly valued among Generation Z, digital environments present substantial barriers to genuine self-expression. Reinecke and Trepte

(2014) found that users frequently engage in self-censorship and content polishing behaviors, resulting in emotional exhaustion and decreased life satisfaction. The recent popularity of platforms like BeReal, which promote spontaneous and unfiltered content sharing, illustrates this tension and suggests significant underlying desire for authentic digital expression, yet this coexists with continued engagement on conventional curation-focused platforms.

Despite these insights, existing literature demonstrates notable limitations constraining comprehensive understanding of digital identity construction among Generation Z. Most studies focus predominantly on Western populations and concentrate on Instagram, leaving gaps in understanding TikTok's unique dynamics and cross-cultural perspectives. Most significantly, limited research examines how online identity curation behaviors translate into offline social interactions, particularly regarding authenticity in face-to-face relationships. The present study aims to address these gaps through analysis of secondary data from diverse Generation Z respondents and systematic review of previous empirical studies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) has long explained how individuals evaluate themselves by comparing with others. However, in digital contexts, its applicability becomes more complex through curated highlight reels on social media often present 'idealized' and 'filtered' content that sets unattainable standards. Recent research has extended the theory to "upward social comparisons" specific mainly to Instagram and TikTok, where exposure to idealized images correlates strongly and most likely directly with self-esteem dips (Vogel et al., 2014). However, more recent research questions the idea of

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universality, indicating that social media comparisons can, at times, serve as a source of motivation rather than discouragement, especially when users view the shared content as realistic and within their reach (Lup et al., 2015). Similarly, Goffman's (1959) theory of Impression Management provides a lens to understand "performative authenticity" online. In digital spaces, front-stage performances (such as Instagram posts, TikTok reels amongst others...) dominate over backstage behavior (private interactions), yet scholars note a "blurring of boundaries" where even backstage content is curated specially for semi-public sharing. These nuanced differences show that while foundational, both theories require updating to their own accounts for platform-driven dynamics like algorithmic amplification and "micro-influencer culture."

CROSS-CULTURAL

The finding that 76% of Indian Gen Z respondents feel social media positively impacts their lives (Lenovo & OnePoll, 2024) contrasts with Western studies highlighting rising anxiety, depression, and body-image concerns (Pew Research Center, 2023). This divergence can be understood through cultural frameworks through collectivist societies like India, often emphasising social connections and family ties, meaning social media can strengthen relational bonds and group belonging. In contrast, individualist cultures in the West may foster greater social comparison, individual performance pressure, and isolation online. A deeper analysis of these cultural distinctions not only contextualizes the findings but also highlights how platform design and cultural values interact differently across regions.

RESEARCH GAPS

Although extensive research exists on Instagram's impact on body image and

well-being, fewer studies focus on TikTok's short-form video culture, algorithmic virality (where platforms decide which content gets amplified and widely seen), and its link to offline identity performances. Moreover, research has directly explored how curated online personas shape one's authenticity in offline interactions. This study attempts to bridge these gaps by creating connections and synthesising secondary data on Gen Z's social media usage patterns and analyzing them through the lens of authenticity, identity curation, and self-esteem. By doing so, it directly connects the identified research gaps with the central research question.

ACKNOWLEDGING LIMITATIONS

This study relies on secondary data, including survey results, institutional reports, and peer-reviewed studies. While this approach provides breadth and cross-national insights, it limits the ability to establish a direct link between the cause and effect for this issue. For instance, while data consistently shows correlations between social media usage and heightened anxiety or body-image concerns (Twenge et al., 2022), such correlations cannot definitively establish that social media solely causes these issues. Other confounding factors, such as offline peer pressure, socioeconomic stressors, or family dynamics, may play various roles. Recognizing these limitations ensures that findings are interpreted cautiously and prevents making false or inaccurate conclusions.

DATA SYNTHESIS METHOD

A thematic synthesis approach (a method used to bring together findings from different studies) was employed to integrate findings across quantitative surveys (e.g., Pew Research Center, McKinsey reports) and qualitative studies (e.g., interviews reported in academic journals). Data were coded into

recurring themes such as identity curation, self-esteem and social comparison, authenticity and double lives, and cross-cultural perceptions. To ensure transparency, priority was given to peer-reviewed journals, government reports, and large-scale institutional studies, with news articles used only to illustrate findings when they referenced original data sources. This systematic synthesis ensures reliability while offering a comprehensive picture of Gen Z's social media experiences.

METHODOLOGY/DATA

This study adopts a secondary research methodology, synthesizing existing quantitative and qualitative data on the impact of social media highlight reels on Gen Z's self-esteem, authenticity, and mental health. Instead of collecting primary data, this approach draws from large-scale surveys, peer-reviewed studies, and digital well-being reports that provide reliable insights into Gen Z's experiences across cultural contexts.

A primary source of data comes from Meta's internal research on Instagram, reported by *The Wall Street Journal*, which revealed that 32% of teenage girls said Instagram made them feel worse about their body image, despite continued platform use ([WSJ via Wikipedia, 2021](#)). This aligns with TikTok-specific studies showing that heavy exposure to appearance-related content is correlated with increased body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem among adolescents ([Sagrera et al., 2024](#)).

Secondary data also highlights the dual identity phenomenon among Gen Z. A Lenovo/OnePoll study across the U.S. and U.K. found that 56% of Gen Z reported leading a "double life," presenting idealized personas online that differed from their offline selves ([The Sun, 2025](#)). This provides evidence of

curated online identity construction, central to this research paper.

Cross-cultural insights are obtained from Snapchat's Digital Well-Being Index, where 76% of Indian Gen Z respondents said social media has a "positive influence" on their lives, contrasting sharply with Western concerns of harm ([Indian Express, 2023](#)). Meanwhile, studies in India also report rising issues of social media addiction and self-esteem decline, suggesting that even in cultures where perceived benefits are higher, negative psychological patterns persist ([Shrivastava, 2023](#)).

To further contextualize the mental health impact, a Medibank/Growth Distillery survey revealed that 42% of Gen Z Australians turn to social media for mental health advice from random users online before consulting experts, underscoring a generational shift in help-seeking behavior ([NY Post, 2025](#)). This is supported by McKinsey's global analysis showing that Gen Z experiences significantly higher rates of anxiety and depression, partially linked to curated digital environments ([McKinsey, 2024](#)).

The collected studies were analyzed through a thematic synthesis approach. Quantitative findings (percentages, correlations, prevalence rates) were compared across regions and platforms, while qualitative insights (self-reports, interviews, media narratives) were examined for themes such as authenticity vs. curation, social comparison effects, and cultural divergence. This dual analysis ensured a comprehensive understanding of how curated digital identities shape Gen Z's offline behavior and perception of oneself.

FINDINGS

These findings emphasize that curated online portrayals often serve as benchmarks

against which adolescents measure themselves, leading to diminished self-worth. This aligns with Goffman's concept of impression management, illustrating how young people consciously construct digital versions of themselves to seek validation, likes, and engagement. This discrepancy between online and offline selves contributes to identity fragmentation and feelings of inauthenticity.

The findings also suggest notable studies show growing concerns about social media addiction, declining self-esteem, and overreliance on digital validation (Shrivastava, 2023). This indicates that cultural context shapes whether harms or benefits are emphasized, with collectivist societies often interpreting social media as empowering, even while acknowledging underlying risks. Additionally, secondary sources highlight that social media is increasingly used as a mental health support tool. This duality highlights social media as both a potential risk factor and a coping mechanism.

Overall, the findings indicate that social media curation significantly affects Gen Z's self-esteem, authenticity, and mental health, but the impact is neither uniform nor entirely negative. While highlight reels amplify social comparison and body dissatisfaction, they also provide access to supportive communities and spaces for self-expression. The evidence suggests that both harm and value coexist, mediated by cultural background and patterns of use.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that curated identities on Instagram and TikTok play a major role in shaping Gen Z's self-perception. The evidence supports social comparison theory, showing that idealized portrayals worsen self-esteem, especially among adolescent girls. Goffman's impression management framework

is equally relevant, as Gen Z consciously performs online personas that can undermine authenticity offline. At the same time, cultural contrasts, such as more positive outlooks in India compared to Western contexts, show that the experience of harm is not universal. Importantly, social media also functions as an informal mental health resource, which complicates the narrative that it is purely damaging. Overall, highlight reels represent a paradoxical space: both empowering and harmful depending on usage patterns and social context.

This study provides new insights into how digital curation influences offline authenticity, an underexplored area. It adds cross-cultural perspectives to existing Western-centric research while supporting policies and education systems in creating programs around media literacy and mental health. Also, it helps empower Gen Z with awareness and strategies to navigate social media carefully and consciously.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To mitigate the negative effects of curated identities on Gen Z, this study recommends embedding digital literacy programs in schools and universities to help young people critically evaluate online content, identify unrealistic portrayals, and build resilience against social comparison, while improving their self-esteem. Social media platforms should also take greater responsibility by increasing transparency around filters and algorithms, promoting healthy screen-time habits, and integrating accessible mental health resources within their apps to provide immediate support. In addition, authenticity-focused campaigns by educators, NGOs, brands, and influencers can normalize imperfection and encourage unfiltered content, reducing the

pressure to maintain flawless online personas. Ultimately, a coordinated effort between policymakers, platforms, and communities is essential to foster healthier digital environments and protect the psychological well-being of Gen Z.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that curated highlight reels on Instagram and TikTok significantly affect Gen Z's self-esteem and authenticity in offline interactions. Constant upward comparison diminishes self-worth and fosters inauthentic behaviors in real life. However, a growing desire for authenticity, as seen in the popularity of unfiltered platforms, provides hope for healthier digital practices. To mitigate the negative impact, collaborative efforts are needed from educators, policymakers, tech companies, and families to foster a more balanced digital environment.

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