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The Authenticity Paradox: A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Generation Z's Self-Presentation on Social Media - A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

Generation Z (Gen Z) experiences a sustained authenticity dilemma within social media environments, characterised by a structural tension between an expressed preference for “genuine” self-presentation and platform architectures that systematically reward curated, idealised forms of performance. Although authenticity has traditionally been approached within psychological and identity-centred literatures, it has been comparatively under-examined as a decision-oriented construct operating within digitally mediated and algorithmically structured environments. Based on a systematic synthesis of 39 peer-reviewed academic studies, this research reconceptualises authenticity as a formally structured evaluative mechanism that emerges through interaction with algorithmically governed social media ecosystems. The study advances the Integrated Authenticity Framework, which posits that perceived authenticity is produced through the dynamic interplay of four interdependent dimensions: consistency, conformity, connection, and continuity. From a multi-criteria decision-making standpoint, authenticity is framed as a graded, situationally contingent outcome shaped by how these dimensions are configured under conditions of bounded rationality. By systematising authenticity as an evaluative decision process rather than a fixed trait, the paper extends theoretical understanding within decision sciences and generates transferable insights for digital communication scholarship, platform governance debates, digital marketing strategy, and organisational communication within algorithmically mediated contexts.

1. Introduction

Generation Z (Gen Z), broadly defined as individuals born between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s, has come of age within digitally saturated social media ecosystems that extend beyond communication functions to actively participate in identity construction and the structuring of social relations. Although this cohort consistently expresses a strong valuation of authenticity, they simultaneously encounter a structural contradiction: platform architectures incentivise curated, optimised self-presentations, even as cultural discourse increasingly demands “realness”, a concept that has itself become unstable and context dependent. Within such algorithmically mediated

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environments—where visibility metrics, audience feedback mechanisms, and engagement-driven incentives intersect—authenticity is better understood as a situationally constructed evaluative judgement shaped by symbolic and social cues, rather than as a stable individual trait.

Scholarly discussions of authenticity frequently originate from Goffman's dramaturgical theory, particularly the distinction between front-stage and backstage performance in identity enactment [1]. Building on this foundation, contemporary research has operationalised authenticity as a multi-dimensional construct. For instance, consistency, conformity, and connection are conceptualised as core dimensions of authenticity [2], while temporal continuity is introduced as an additional dimension capturing longitudinal coherence in self-presentation [3]. However, despite extensive theoretical development, the concept of authenticity becomes increasingly fragmented when applied to digital environments. Platform features such as unfiltered-sharing formats (e.g., BeReal), ephemeral content mechanisms, and Gen Z practices of maintaining multiple identity-specific accounts (e.g., Finsta and Rinsta) intensify conceptual ambiguity regarding what constitutes "authentic" expression [4].

From a strategic perspective, organisations and brands are similarly confronted with interpretive tensions, particularly in distinguishing authentic signalling from deliberate impression management during self-presentation [5], as well as in adapting communication strategies to platform-specific engagement logics [6]. In response to these conceptual and practical inconsistencies, this study aims to systematically synthesise existing literature on Gen Z self-presentation practices and develop an integrative conceptual framework that explains how authenticity is constructed across social media ecosystems. The objective is to provide a structured basis for evaluating differing configurations of authenticity within digitally mediated environments. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What dominant patterns and themes characterise Gen Z self-presentation across social media ecosystems?
2. How do Gen Z users negotiate the tension between authentic self-presentation and idealised self-representation?
3. In what ways do platform affordances shape and constrain these self-presentation strategies?

Authenticity is conceptualised as a four-dimensional construct comprising consistency, conformity, connection, and continuity [2; 3]. These interrelated dimensions collectively capture the mechanisms through which authenticity is both signalled and interpreted within platform-mediated environments. Drawing on the systematic review, this paper proposes the concept of "Integrated Authenticity", a framework that explains how these dimensions interact within distinct digital ecosystems. Rather than identifying a singular optimal configuration, the framework treats authenticity as a graded and context-dependent outcome emerging from varying combinations of these dimensions. In doing so, it reframes authenticity as a multi-dimensional evaluative process within decision-making theory, while also generating insights relevant to digital communication scholarship, platform governance, digital marketing practice, and organisational communication in algorithmically structured environments.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 details the systematic review methodology and study selection process. Section 3 presents the findings of literature synthesis. Section 4 develops the Integrated Authenticity Framework and elaborates its analytical implications. Section 5 concludes by outlining key contributions, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Research Design

2.1 Research Method

This study adopts a systematic literature review design structured in accordance with the SPAR-4-SLR protocol, ensuring methodological rigour, transparency, and replicability across all stages of the review process [7]. The review process was operationalised through three sequential phases: assembling the literature corpus, organising the retrieved studies, and critically assessing their relevance and quality. In addition, a PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1) is incorporated to provide a clear and auditable account of the screening, eligibility, and inclusion process, thereby documenting the step-by-step selection of the final set of studies included in the synthesis.

a. Assembling Phase

The review process began with the delineation of the research domain, specifically Gen Z self-presentation within social media environments, alongside the development of guiding research questions focused on underlying psychological tensions associated with online authenticity. Literature retrieval was conducted using two established and high-impact bibliographic databases, Scopus and Web of Science, as summarised in Table 1. A structured Boolean search strategy was implemented to ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant scholarship. The final search string combined key conceptual clusters: (“Generation Z” OR “Gen Z” OR “Youth”) AND (“Self-presentation” OR “Online Persona” OR “Digital Identity”) AND (“Social Media” OR “Social Networks”) AND (“Authenticity”).

The selection of search terms was systematically justified to maximise domain coverage while maintaining conceptual precision. The inclusion of “Generation Z” alongside its variants (“Gen Z” and “Youth”) was intended to capture the target cohort while minimising contamination from adjacent generational groups, particularly Millennials. The identity-related terms— “Self-presentation,” “Online Persona,” and “Digital Identity”—were incorporated to reflect both psychological interpretations of identity construction and sociological accounts of digital self-representation. Similarly, “Social Media” and “Social Networks” were retained to ensure the retrieval of platform-relevant studies across different terminological conventions, while “Authenticity” functioned as the core analytical construct anchoring the review to tensions between curated and “genuine” self-expression. The Boolean configuration was deliberately structured to optimise retrieval sensitivity across Scopus and Web of Science while filtering out irrelevant domains, including offline identity literature and studies unrelated to Gen Z populations. This carefully engineered search syntax ensures that the resulting dataset is tightly aligned with the most pertinent and conceptually relevant body of scholarship on Gen Z authenticity in social media self-presentation.

b. Arranging Phase

The arranging phase involves organizing and purifying the collected data.

- **Organization:** The initial search yielded 691 articles. These were imported into Mendeley Desktop software (version 2.129.0) to remove all duplicate studies. Following this process 661 records remained for further evaluation.
- **Purification:** To maintain the highest scholarly standards, the researchers applied a multi-stage screening process governed by strict inclusion and exclusion criteria:
- **Temporal Relevance:** Given that social media users constantly adapt to the rapid evolution of technology, online culture, and algorithms, the selection was strictly limited to articles published between January 2020 and February 2025. This timeframe reflects the period leading up to the

commencement of the research in March 2025, ensuring the review excludes outdated behavioural patterns and captures the most current expressions of Generation Z engagement.

- **Thematic and Demographic Focus:** Studies were required to be available in English with a full-text option. The scope was restricted to self-presentation or online persona among Gen Z, specifically within social media contexts. Any studies focusing on other demographic groups or non-social media environments were excluded.
- **Quality Benchmarking:** Only studies employing rigorous peer-reviewed methodologies were included. To ensure high scholarly quality, articles were required to be published in journals indexed in Scimago Q1 and Q2 [8]. Consequently, as specified in the PRISMA chart (Figure 1), publications in Q3 or Q4 journals, along with book chapters and grey literature (including reports, white papers, and non-peer-reviewed outputs), were excluded to preserve methodological integrity. However, peer-reviewed conference proceedings were retained where they met the Q1 or Q2 ranking threshold in Scopus or Web of Science, ensuring inclusion of only high-impact research.
- **Screening Workflow:** The selection process was executed in three distinct stages to ensure "pure relevance":
- **Stage 1:** Mendeley Desktop was used to screen the titles and abstracts of the 661 remaining studies against the primary inclusion criteria.
- **Stage 2:** The Catchii tool was employed to further filter studies by evaluating the introductions and conclusions of the shortlisted records.
- **Stage 3 (Eligibility and Quality Check):** Following automated screening, 62 articles were subjected to detailed manual review. The researchers conducted an in-depth assessment of introductions and conclusions to confirm strict alignment with the research objectives, resulting in 46 articles. A further quality filter was applied, leading to the exclusion of seven Q3 or Q4 journal articles to maintain academic rigor [8]. This process ultimately yielded 39 high-quality studies for inclusion in the final systematic review, as illustrated in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1).

c. Assessing Phase

Using the ADO TCM protocol [9], the selected studies were systematically analysed to extract salient information, including theoretical foundations, contextual settings, and reported outcomes relating to Gen Z digital self-presentation and the authenticity paradox (see Appendix A). To enhance transparency and traceability, the reporting stage incorporated structured summary tables alongside the development of the "Integrated Authenticity Framework". This framework is used to reconcile observed tensions between curated and "genuine" digital identities, while also explicitly recognising the limitations present within the included studies. By adhering to the SPAR-4-SLR protocol and applying stringent inclusion criteria—particularly the emphasis on high-impact Q1 and Q2 journal publications, this review ensures methodological robustness and produces a high-quality evidence base for synthesising and consolidating the literature on digital identity.

Table 1

Population of the Study

Research Databases	Initial Results	Final Results
Scopus	50	17
Web of Science	641	22
Total	691	39

Source: Authors' Own Elaboration

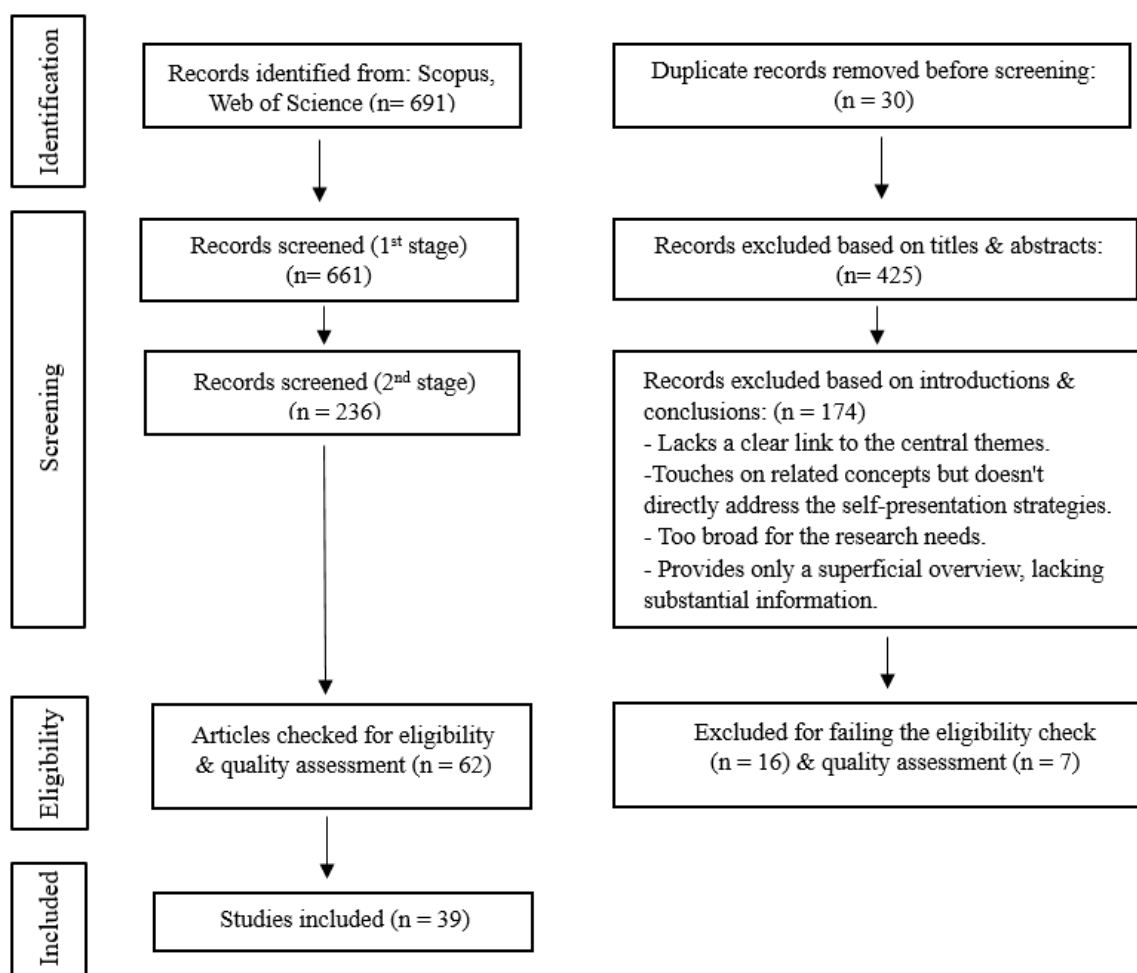


Fig.1: PRISMA Flow Diagram
Source: Authors' Own Elaboration

2.2. Data Analysis Procedure

To ensure a rigorous and transparent evaluation of the 39 included studies, this research implemented a multi-stage analytical procedure aligned with the SPAR-4-SLR protocol [7]. The analytical strategy adopted a hybrid deductive–inductive design, moving from structured descriptive mapping towards interpretive thematic synthesis across three sequential phases:

Phase 1: Basic Bibliometric Analysis

Initially, a descriptive bibliometric analysis was undertaken to map the “performance” of the research domain. This involved examining publication trajectories over time, identifying growth dynamics, and determining key dissemination outlets through systematic tabulation of annual publication counts and journal-wise distribution of articles [10]. This stage offered an objective, structured overview of the field’s developmental progression and its scholarly positioning in relation to Gen Z-focused research.

Phase 2: Methodological Classification (Deductive Structural Mapping)

Using the TCM (Theory, Context, Methods) dimensions of the ADO–TCM framework [9], the selected studies were systematically classified to establish a structured analytical taxonomy. This enabled the identification and organisation of underlying theoretical perspectives, the contextual settings (including geographical and digital environments), and the methodological orientations employed across the literature. Accordingly, studies were categorised as conceptual/theoretical,

quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods designs, facilitating a systematic evaluation of methodological rigour as well as the breadth and diversity of approaches applied in examining Gen Z digital personas.

Phase 3: Thematic Assessment (Inductive Synthesis)

Finally, an in-depth thematic analysis was undertaken to develop fine-grained insights into Gen Z digital identity construction. Whereas the TCM pillars of the ADO–TCM framework structured the categorical organisation of studies in Phase 2, the thematic analysis itself followed the six-phase inductive procedure proposed by Braun & Clarke [11], subsequently refined within a reflexive analytical orientation in Braun, Clarke & Hayfield [12], which functioned as the study’s interpretive engine (see Figure 2). During the initial coding stage, the ADO dimensions (Antecedents, Decisions, and Outcomes) were applied as a sensitising analytical frame to orient attention towards behavioural drivers, self-presentation practices, and identity-related outcomes, while still preserving inductive openness to emergent patterns rather than imposing rigid predefined categories. As depicted in Figure 2, the analytic trajectory was iterative and non-linear, allowing continuous refinement, reconfiguration, and consolidation of codes into higher-order themes. This hybrid analytical strategy—integrating inductive thematic analysis with a theoretically informed sensitising lens—enabled a rich, thick description of the dataset and supported the identification of robust conceptual insights as well as prospective directions for future research.

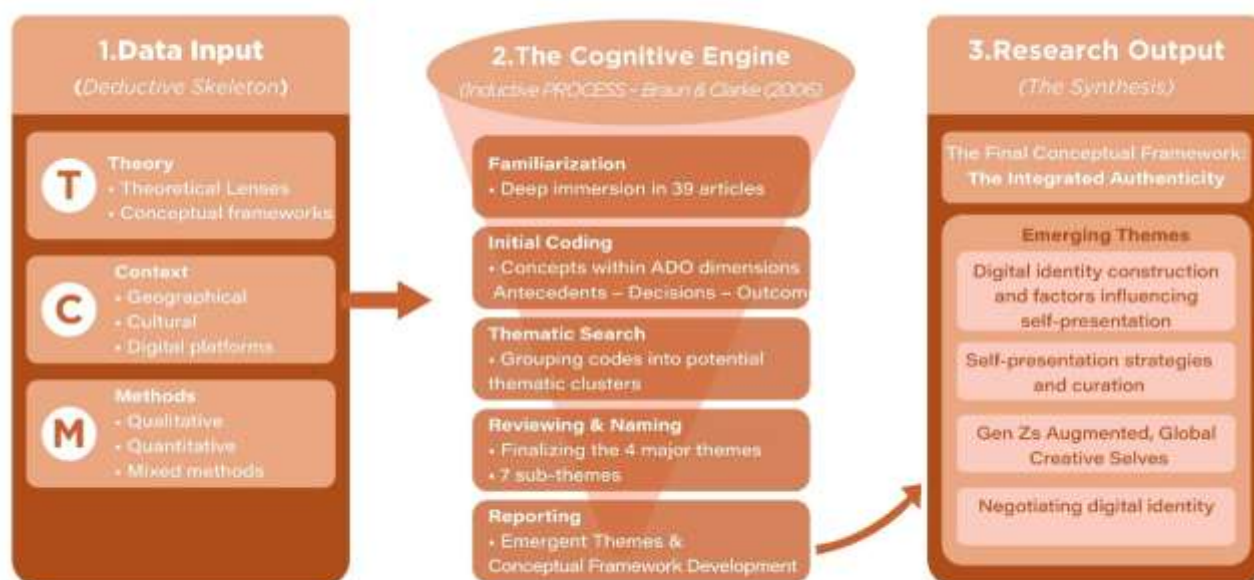


Fig.2: Integrated Analytical Process: Combining ADO-TCM Framework with Braun & Clarke’s Thematic Analysis Steps

Source: Authors’ Own Elaboration

3. Findings

3.1. Overview of Literature

Information regarding authorship, research methods, publication outlets, geographical distribution, key findings, and relevance to the study topic is presented in Appendix B. The table demonstrates considerable diversity in study contexts and evidence of international collaboration, alongside the dissemination of findings across reputable academic journals. It also indicates a sustained and increasing scholarly interest in this research area over time.

3.2. Descriptive Analysis

The complexity of the authenticity paradox, coupled with the need to understand Gen Z online behaviour in a holistic manner, necessitated an interdisciplinary analytical lens and a broad conceptual scope (see Figure 3). Gen Z self-presentation on social media was primarily examined within communication and social media scholarship, including journals such as *Social Media and Society* and *Media and Communication*, which focus on platform-mediated interaction and digital identity formation. Complementing this, psychological and behavioural research—drawn from outlets such as *Psychology & Marketing* and *Frontiers in Psychology*—provided insights into the cognitive and affective mechanisms underpinning self-presentation strategies and authenticity negotiation.

In parallel, marketing and consumer behaviour literature, including the *Journal of International Consumer Marketing* and the *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, contributed to understanding the implications of Gen Z authenticity dynamics for consumer engagement, brand interaction, and strategic marketing communication. Additional disciplinary perspectives further enriched the analysis by capturing the influence of broader structural factors such as societal norms, peer pressure, cultural variability, and technological advancement on identity construction in digital environments. The integration of these diverse scholarly domains produced a more comprehensive and theoretically coherent understanding of Gen Z self-presentation as a multi-dimensional phenomenon. The increasing dynamism of Gen Z self-presentation practices, alongside the rapidly evolving nature of social media ecosystems, is reflected in the growing academic attention to this topic over time. This trend is evidenced by the rising number of publications between 2020 and the first two months of 2025 (Figure 4). Furthermore, the geographic distribution of studies (Figure 5) highlights a strong global research interest, with a notable concentration of contributions originating from the United States. These international spread underscores the relevance of cultural context in shaping interpretations of authenticity, reinforcing its importance for developing context-sensitive marketing and communication strategies.

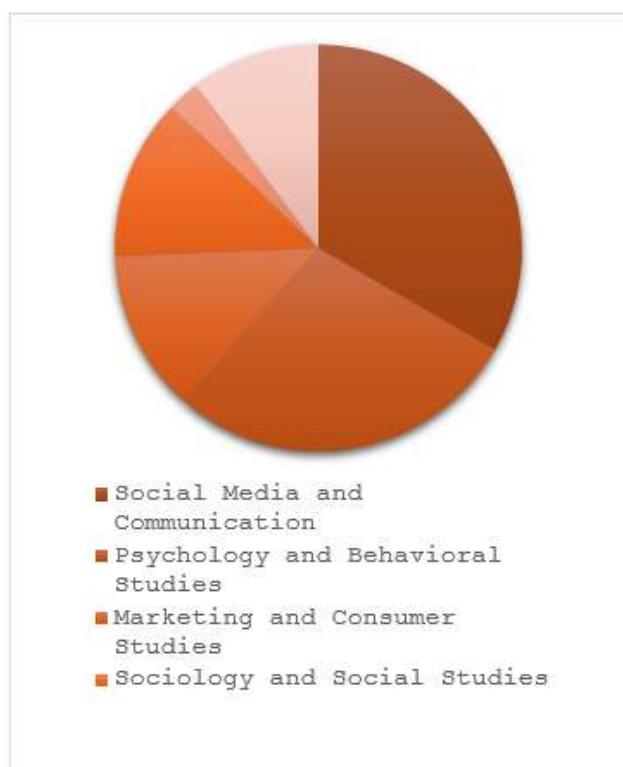


Fig.3: Frequency of Articles Across Journal Fields

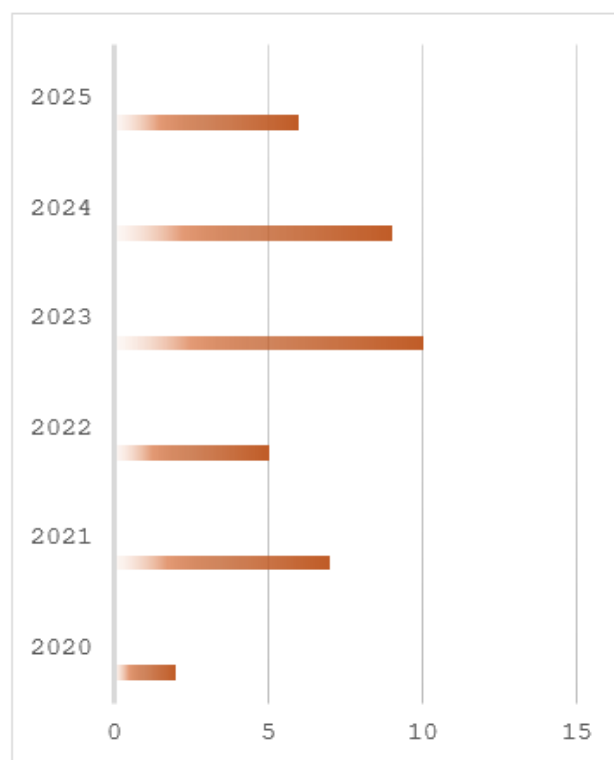


Fig.4: Distribution of Articles Published by Year

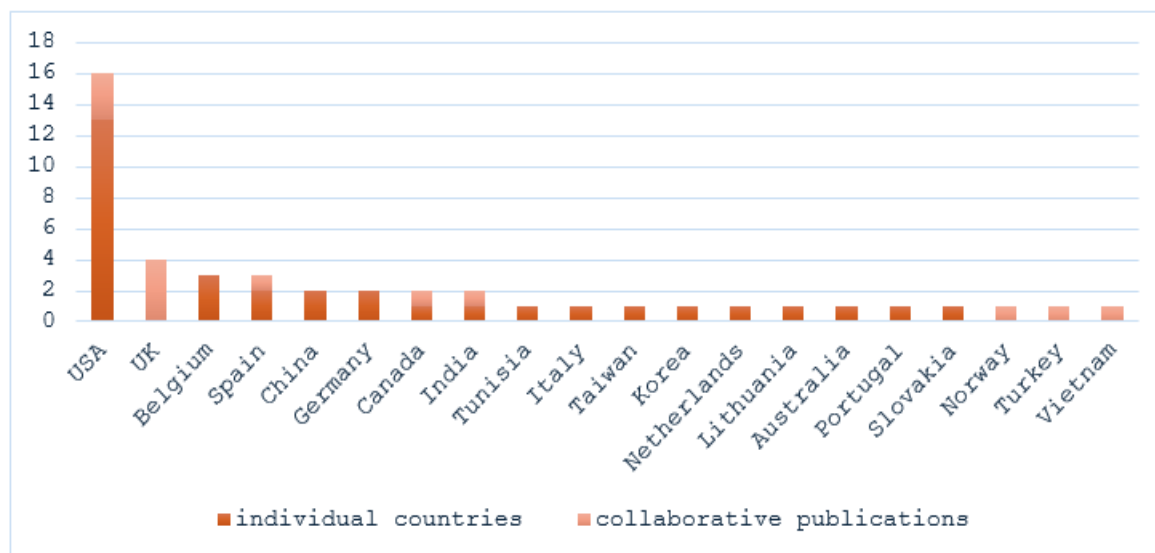


Fig.5: Distribution of Articles by Location
Source: Authors' Own Elaboration

3.3. Emergent Themes

Digital Identity Construction and Factors Influencing Self-Presentation

Identity Development

Generation Z's online personas are shaped by their digital environments and levels of platform engagement, both of which are closely linked to offline identity formation processes [13]. Individuals characterised by less adaptive identity styles, such as ruminative moratorium, diffused status, or diffused-avoidant orientations, are more likely to seek external validation and distraction through social media use. By contrast, individuals with more adaptive identity configurations tend to demonstrate greater regulatory control over their engagement behaviours and online self-presentation strategies [14]. Social media platforms also function as spaces for identity exploration and developmental negotiation [15], even among users exhibiting maladaptive identity styles, particularly in relation to career-related identity formation, which represents a central component of broader self-concept development [16]. In addition, digital platforms enable processes of self-expansion through positively valenced experiences such as travel-related content sharing, which can enhance self-esteem and reinforce identity development trajectories [17].

Algorithmic Influence

Algorithms play a central role in shaping Gen Z's digital experience by curating personalised, emotionally salient, and contextually relevant content streams [18; 19]. This algorithmic feedback loop, often described as a form of "co-creation", can constrain user agency among individuals with lower levels of algorithmic literacy [20], whereas users with higher levels of platform knowledge are more capable of actively shaping and optimising their informational environments [18; 21]. Nevertheless, in both cases, these dynamics may contribute to the formation of "filter bubbles" and "echo chambers", which reinforce pre-existing beliefs, preferences, and behavioural tendencies [20]. Among contemporary platforms, TikTok is frequently perceived as more adaptive to evolving identity states compared to platforms such as Instagram, and has been praised for its "algorithmic crystal" effect, whereby algorithmic curation appears to reflect and amplify the multifaceted nature of user self-concepts [22].

Social Environment and Peer Influence

Gen Z's self-presentation is further shaped by passive exposure to content produced by peers, influencers, and celebrities, a phenomenon conceptualised as "attention work" [19; 20; 23-25]. This process contributes to a continuum of self-presentation, ranging from relatively spontaneous, low-consciousness expression to highly strategic and deliberately curated performance. Online community dynamics exert a strong influence on how Gen Z users construct and communicate identity in digital spaces [26]. Within this context, mechanisms such as social comparison, peer pressure, and fear of missing out (FOMO) frequently generate feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, and evaluative tension [23; 24]. At the same time, these same mechanisms can produce the opposite effect by increasing engagement with trends, enhancing visibility within digital networks, and reinforcing idealised forms of self-presentation [20].

Self-Presentation Strategies and Curation

Self-Presentation Strategies

Different strategies are adopted by Gen Z to express their multifaceted identities in virtual environments:

- **Consistent Self-Presentation:** Individuals attempt to maintain alignment between online and offline identities, often resisting dominant social norms and external prejudices. They tend to engage with influencers and brands as identity extensions only when there is perceived value congruence, favouring ethical storytelling, authentic narratives of success and transformation, and more spontaneous, less intrusive communication styles over overt advertising [25; 27-30].
- **Audience-Oriented Presentation:** In this approach, Gen Z prioritises peer validation by tailoring content to maximise approval metrics such as likes and engagement. Under strong normative and aesthetic pressures to appear "perfect", this can result in a disjunction between online and offline selves, including appearance modification, highly curated performative identities, and conspicuous consumption (e.g., luxury goods and international travel) as symbolic markers of status and social recognition [24; 31].
- **Self-Staged Presentation:** To manage contextual identity variability, some individuals maintain multiple accounts for different audiences, such as Rinsta (real Instagram) for curated, achievement-oriented content and Finsta (fake Instagram) for informal, less curated expression. This reflects a broader acceptance of a multidimensional self, where tensions between "authentic" and idealised identities are not eliminated but actively negotiated and managed [4; 32; 33].
- **Self-Confident Presentation:** This strategy is characterised by spontaneous expression and acceptance of imperfections, resulting in a more self-assured and coherent digital persona. However, it exists in tension with prevailing influencer-driven norms that emphasise idealised beauty, success, and strength standards [25; 33].

Strategic Persona Curation

This cohort actively curates a positively valenced digital image to project social vibrancy, happiness, and perceived professional potential [34]. Patterns of social media engagement vary significantly across socioeconomic and cultural contexts. Users from more individualistic orientations and upper-middle-income backgrounds tend to prioritise self-promotion and visibility enhancement, whereas users embedded in collectivist cultural settings or lower-income groups are more likely to emphasise social bonding and the accumulation of social capital through relational engagement [13; 35].

Gen Z self-presentation is also shaped by underlying motivational orientations, particularly the

distinction between “authentic” and “idealised” self-presentation goals, which emerge from the interaction between platform affordances and prevailing social norms [36]. In this context, users increasingly conceptualise their online identity as a form of personal brand, strategically employing tactics such as optimised posting schedules, hashtag curation, and visually refined content production to attract followers and expand social or professional opportunities [23; 37; 38]. Alongside these proactive strategies, they also adopt protective self-management behaviours, including content deletion and detagging, to maintain a controlled and favourable digital self-image [39]. Platform preferences further reflect differentiated usage patterns across demographic groups. Snapchat and Instagram remain dominant among adolescents, while male users demonstrate a stronger inclination towards Discord and female users towards TikTok [40]. Transitional life stages, such as the shift from secondary education to university, often act as catalysts for identity recalibration, prompting updates to online personas in line with evolving peer networks and aspirations [24; 25]. In later stages of professional development, carefully curated professional profiles serve to reinforce both occupational identity and broader social positioning within digital environments [32; 41; 42].

Gen Z's Augmented, Global & Creative Selves

Augmented Appearances: AR filters and editing tools are widely accepted within Gen Z digital practices and are, in many contexts, even socially expected [38]. For certain users, such enhancements are not interpreted as distortions of authenticity but rather as legitimate expressions of personality, particularly when they reveal alternative or less formal aspects of the self. In this sense, such tools can function as communicative devices that facilitate interaction and encourage engagement with different audience segments [43].

Diversity and Multiculturalism: Gen Z's exposure to globalised digital content increases their familiarity with, and acceptance of, ethnic and racial diversity, contributing to the emergence of “glocal” identities that integrate global influences with local cultural rootedness. This is reflected in the deliberate use of languages, hashtags, and culturally specific symbols as part of their online self-presentation strategies. Such practices are further shaped by platform ecosystems that facilitate the acceptance of cultural “otherness” while simultaneously amplifying cross-national trends and patterns of social influence [25; 44].

Creative Expression: Beyond personal branding, Gen Z users also employ filters and content creation tools for activism as well as intrinsic personal gratification. They increasingly engage with issues such as mental health, social inequality, and political concerns through creative and platform-native formats, including trending dance challenges, comedic sketches, and expressions of dark humour [33; 38; 44; 45].

Negotiating Digital Identity

Balancing Authenticity and Idealization

Gen Z's pursuit of authenticity in online environments frequently comes into tension with the underlying dynamics of social media platforms. In attempting to balance appearing both “genuine” and socially appealing, individuals adopt a set of interrelated and mutually reinforcing strategies:

- **AR Filters as Selective Enhancement:** Augmented reality filters are used as both aesthetic augmentation tools and mechanisms for playful identity expression (e.g., animal or distortion filters). Importantly, Gen Z users often confine filter use to transient content formats such as Stories, where ephemerality reduces perceived long-term distortion and helps preserve a sense of enduring authenticity [38].
- **Contextual Safety and Validation:** Perceived authenticity is strongly contingent on psychological

safety and social validation. Gen Z users are more likely to disclose personal thoughts and emotions within supportive digital contexts, particularly in semi-private or restricted-access spaces (e.g., Finsta accounts), which reduce the pressure of performance associated with highly curated public profiles [37; 46].

- **Crafted Genuineness Rather Than Raw Content:** Rather than presenting unmediated self-disclosure, Gen Z tends to construct a carefully curated “best possible version” of the self, blending aesthetic refinement with perceived naturalness through controlled editing of lighting, tone, and composition. This often involves combining vulnerability (e.g., trauma disclosure, personal flaws, and mental health narratives) with humour to maintain relatability while preserving visual and narrative polish [23-25; 38; 44].
- **Withstanding Socially Constructed Restrictions:** Platform affordances frequently intersect with and sometimes reinforce broader cultural norms and gendered expectations, thereby constraining the extent to which genuinely unfiltered self-presentation can be expressed within digital environments [47].

Platforms Affordances’ Role

Reward mechanisms and platform-specific visual architecture significantly shape Gen Z self-presentation practices. Engagement metrics such as likes and comments function as external validation cues that can enhance self-esteem and reinforce continued participation; however, when expected feedback levels are not achieved, they may also generate anxiety, self-doubt, and heightened evaluative pressure [15; 23; 24]. On Instagram, users strategically employ features such as Stories with in-built AR filters, Reels for performative and creative expression, and adjustable privacy controls to navigate between curated and more authentic identity presentations [25; 38].

TikTok’s “For You” page algorithm, combined with its short-form video infrastructure and embedded creative tools (e.g., music integration, visual effects, and AR filters), facilitates highly dynamic and multifaceted identity expression, often producing more fluid, diverse, and contemporary content compared to comparable platforms [22; 44; 48-50]. Platforms such as BeReal introduce structured spontaneity through unpredictable prompts, dual-camera capture, and time-restricted posting windows, thereby encouraging more immediate and less curated forms of self-presentation; nevertheless, some users still strategically stage or optimise these supposedly unfiltered moments [4]. In professional digital environments such as LinkedIn, Gen Z constructs identity through carefully calibrated profiles that range from highly curated representations to more transparent, evolving narratives, with an emphasis on credibility, trust-building, and value-oriented professional engagement [32; 42].

4. Discussion

This cohort navigates fluid and multifaceted digital identities, shifting between different “selves” across interconnected social media ecosystems [22; 25; 36; 43]. The authors situate these authenticity strategies within Lehman et al.’s multidimensional model [2], further extended by the inclusion of continuity [3]. This conceptualisation is additionally grounded in Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective on self-presentation [1], which frames identity as a performative and context-dependent process shaped by audience and setting.

4.1. Authenticity Dimensions in Social Media Self-Presentation

Authenticity as Consistency

Consistency refers to the alignment between an individual’s internal values and beliefs (self-concept) and their external expressions and behaviours (self-presentation) [2]. Gen Z frequently

interprets authenticity through this alignment, particularly the degree of congruence between their online persona and an internally perceived “true self”. This is reflected in patterns of controlled engagement (e.g., adaptive identity styles) and resistance to stereotypes and externally imposed social expectations [4; 14; 25]. In some cases, curated aesthetics, filters, lighting, and selective editing are still regarded as authentic when they are perceived as transparent extensions of genuine self-awareness [23; 25].

Platform affordances significantly structure how this consistency is enacted. BeReal’s randomised prompts and limited editing capabilities encourage more immediate, less curated “back-stage” disclosure, reinforcing perceived authenticity, personal values, and user agency. However, some Gen Z users still engage in strategic forms of genuineness by selectively choosing when and where to share unfiltered content [4]. In this sense, consistency is not defined by the absence of mediation, but by the perceived intention to represent internal beliefs more faithfully. By contrast, TikTok and Instagram features, including AR filters and creative editing tools, enable users to express more multifaceted self-concepts while still maintaining coherence with internal values across different audience segments [22; 38; 43]. When consistent self-presentation becomes overly driven by external validation or fails to accommodate the user’s multidimensional identity, it begins to shift towards conformity. This distinction between value-driven consistency and norm-driven conformity is addressed in the following section.

Authenticity as Conformity

Authenticity in this dimension is derived from normative legitimacy rather than internal conviction [2]. Collective pressures—such as influencer culture, scripted gender expectations, conspicuous consumption, and broader community dynamics—shape Gen Z self-presentation towards alignment with dominant social norms [26; 31; 33; 35; 47]. In this configuration, external expectations are prioritised over internal values on the “front stage”, with individuals performing socially prescribed roles before reverting to a “backstage” space where these performances are relaxed or withdrawn [1; 2]. This dynamic is visible across Gen Z digital practices, particularly using multiple accounts and differentiated identity spaces (e.g., Rinsta and Finsta), which function as distinct performance contexts.

Self-presentation is further calibrated according to platform-specific norms, with users adjusting expressions of “authenticity” in line with situational expectations. For example, posting an idealised and carefully curated image on Instagram may be interpreted as authentic within that platform’s aesthetic norms, whereas sharing unfiltered emotional content on Snapchat may be considered more authentic due to its emphasis on ephemerality and intimacy [36]. This conformity dimension can be understood as a form of “correct classification”, where authenticity is linked to being recognised as a legitimate in-group member through adherence to shared standards [2]. This process is often reinforced by algorithmic curation and echo chamber effects, which further stabilise normative expectations [18-20; 48; 49]. The findings indicate that Gen Z users who conform to perceived expectations often balance such alignment with consistency-driven self-presentation to secure validation and avoid social sanctions. However, from a philosophical standpoint, thinkers such as Sartre [51] argue that normatively driven self-presentation constitutes a form of inauthentic existence.

4.2. Authenticity as Connection

This dimension focuses on the perceived genuine association with credible referents, which emerges through three mechanisms: provenance, transference, and symbolism [2].

Provenance (Spatiotemporal Connection to the Origin): Social media’s viral dynamics strengthen

Gen Z's connection to cultural roots, as platform users on TikTok reproduce, remix, and recontextualise traditional and local practices. Examples include the Moroccan tea ceremony, Italian food purity discourses, Bollywood and Afro dance forms, and K-pop choreography, all of which are transformed into globally circulated cultural expressions [45].

Transference (Spatiotemporal Connection to a Value Beyond Its Original Context): Gen Z develops strong relational and affective ties with celebrities, influencers, brands, and peers who embody personally meaningful values [4; 27; 28]. These value-based associations function as extensions of identity construction and contribute to users' internal sense of authenticity within digital environments. This mechanism is further reinforced through comedic content, sketches, and dark humour remixes that engage with political, social, and environmental issues, thereby communicating authenticity through culturally resonant reinterpretation [44; 45; 52]. In addition, brands that adopt peer-like communication styles and socially embedded content strategies tend to cultivate deeper perceived authenticity among Gen Z audiences [29].

Symbolism (Objects Representing Original Qualities): Gen Z employs cultural symbols—including fashion styles, hashtags, linguistic variations, AR filters, and memes associated with trending events or aesthetic movements—to signal subcultural, religious, or ideological affiliation. These symbolic practices function as markers of shared identity and are used to construct and communicate perceived authenticity within online communities [25].

4.3. Authenticity as Continuity

Continuity emphasises the narrative thread that connects past expressions of identity with present behaviours and future aspirations, thereby establishing a coherent sense of trajectory and personal development [3]. It also refers to the temporal linkage of past, present, and future selves that together construct a stable and intelligible online identity [3]. For Gen Z, this is reflected in platform usage patterns that evolve across life stages: Instagram and Snapchat are more prominent during adolescence, Discord is more frequently adopted by young male users, and TikTok is often preferred by young female users, with each platform functioning as a distinct chapter within an unfolding digital life narrative [40].

Transitions such as moving from high school to university often trigger deliberate curation of digital histories, including the removal or concealment of outdated content and the introduction of updated profiles that reflect emerging identities, shifting peer networks, and increased autonomy from parental oversight [24; 25]. In parallel, social media platforms facilitate ongoing processes of identity exploration, career-oriented self-development, and self-expansion across time [15-17; 37]. Everyday practices such as selfie-sharing function as autobiographical markers, documenting key life events including campus experiences and graduation ceremonies, which serve as narrative anchors reinforcing continuity and social integration [41].

As individuals enter professional contexts, continuity extends into workplace identity formation, where platforms such as LinkedIn are used to construct a professional self that balances curated visual presentation with ongoing, situated updates on projects and achievements [32; 42]. Even the strategic inclusion of minor imperfections—such as unfiltered moments or behind-the-scenes content—can be integrated into a longer-term coherence strategy rather than signalling inconsistency. In this sense, life-stage adjustments and evolving content streams reinforce a continuous and credible self-narrative. Continuity is also maintained through alignment with anticipated future selves, where authenticity is understood as the integration of aspirational identities into present decision-making. For example, Gen Z individuals may engage with brands, influencers, or products that resonate with their projected self-concept and desired future identity trajectory [30].

4.4. Integrated Authenticity Conceptual Framework

Grounded in the synthesis of this systematic review, social media platforms function as differentiated virtual ecosystems, each structured by distinct normative logics, interactional expectations, and evaluative standards. Within these broader systems, additional micro-contexts emerge, layering behavioural codes, aesthetic norms, and communicative rules that shape identity enactment. In this sense, Gen Z self-presentation operates along a continuum ranging from a singular integrated persona to multiple context-sensitive identities. Importantly, authenticity is not determined by the number of identities performed; rather, it depends on the coherence and alignment of four core dimensions—consistency, conformity, connection, and continuity—as they are jointly enacted [2; 3].

Building on the multidimensional authenticity model [2] and its extension through temporal continuity [3], this study introduces “Integrated Authenticity” as a higher-order conceptual framework explaining how perceived genuineness emerges through the structured co-enactment of these interdependent dimensions within platform-specific contexts. Operationally, the framework functions as an analytical tool for examining how authenticity dimensions are selectively prioritised, attenuated, or reconfigured across different self-presentation settings. Authenticity arises when the resulting configuration maintains intelligible coherence across four domains: identity integrity, social embeddedness, symbolic legitimacy, and developmental trajectory. The framework is structured around two core principles. First, authenticity is graded rather than binary, emerging through varying combinations and intensities of dimensional activation, where higher multidimensional coherence strengthens perceived authenticity stability. Second, authenticity is ecological, meaning that its viability depends on the interaction between identity commitments and platform-specific affordances, norms, and evaluative structures. Social media environments therefore operate as adaptive arenas in which authenticity is continuously produced through context-sensitive coordination of interdependent evaluative dimensions.

4.5. Multi-Criteria Decision Interpretation

While Integrated Authenticity conceptualises genuineness as a graded and ecological configuration of four interrelated dimensions, this section formalises the mechanism through which such configurations are produced. Authenticity in algorithmically mediated environments can be understood as a bounded multi-criteria decision process [53]. Within online environments, self-presentation unfolds under conditions of uncertainty, continuous feedback loops, heterogeneous audiences, and algorithmic filtering mechanisms. Users are unable to simultaneously optimise all identity-relevant criteria. Instead, they engage in calibrated signalling, adjusting identity expressions to achieve sufficiently credible authenticity judgments while remaining cognitively efficient and socially sustainable. In this sense, authenticity is not a stable trait or purely expressive condition, but a composite evaluative outcome emerging from constrained and context-dependent configuration choices.

Authenticity as a Configurational Decision Outcome

Within this framework, authenticity is conceptualised as a latent outcome generated through the selective activation and differential weighting of four evaluative criteria, each operating as a decision-relevant parameter:

- Consistency regulates internal alignment between expressed commitments and enacted behaviour [2].
- Conformity captures responsiveness to platform norms and community expectations [2].
- Connection reflects spatiotemporal and symbolic value anchoring [2].
- Continuity ensures intelligibility of evolving self-presentation within a developmental identity trajectory [3].

Although these dimensions can be analytically isolated for interpretive clarity, online self-presentation rarely activates any single dimension independently. Expressions of internal alignment, for instance, are always embedded within social contexts in which normative pressures are simultaneously present, making strict separation between constructs such as consistency and conformity analytically useful but empirically interdependent. Authenticity is therefore conceptualised as a configurational evaluative construct, in which the relative weighting and contextual salience of multiple dimensions jointly determine the perceived strength of authenticity.

Trade-Offs, Weighting, and Bounded Calibration

Decision-making within this structure necessarily involves trade-offs [53]: strengthening one criterion may simultaneously enhance or diminish the contribution of another. For example, heightened conformity may improve short-term resonance and increase platform visibility; however, excessive adaptation to external expectations can undermine perceived consistency and weaken long-term continuity. Conversely, strong consistency and continuity may reinforce longitudinal credibility but can reduce responsiveness to rapidly shifting platform norms and cultural trends.

Individuals do not compute optimal configurations in a formal sense. Instead, they operate under conditions of bounded rationality [54], progressively adjusting identity configurations in response to feedback signals, anticipated audience interpretations, and platform-driven incentives. Although simultaneous high activation across all four dimensions is theoretically possible, this typically occurs only when contextual conditions are strongly aligned, for instance, when personal values, community norms, credible symbolic referents, and life-course trajectories mutually reinforce one another. In most real-world cases, however, cognitive limitations, temporal constraints, algorithmic pressures, normative volatility, and audience heterogeneity make authenticity a satisficing rather than utility-maximising configuration [54, 55]. Accordingly, selective activation of dimensions should be understood as adaptive calibration within constrained environments, rather than as an indicator of reduced authenticity.

Analytical Articulation of the Multi-Criteria Logic

For analytical clarity, authenticity can be examined along four evaluative axes corresponding to the decision criteria (see Figure 6): internal alignment (Consistency), normative resonance (Conformity), spatiotemporal and symbolic value anchoring (Connection), and narrative intelligibility (Continuity) [2; 3]. These axes operate as graded dimensions rather than binary indicators. Their relative intensity and compatibility jointly determine the robustness of a given authenticity configuration, enabling authenticity to be analysed as a structured pattern of weighted criteria rather than as an undifferentiated global judgment. For instance, when a Gen Z user expresses environmental commitment, internal alignment, normative fluency, symbolic anchoring, and narrative progression may be activated in different proportions depending on communicative context, audience expectations, and situational constraints. Authenticity therefore emerges as a context-sensitive configuration of evaluative dimensions rather than a universally maximised condition.

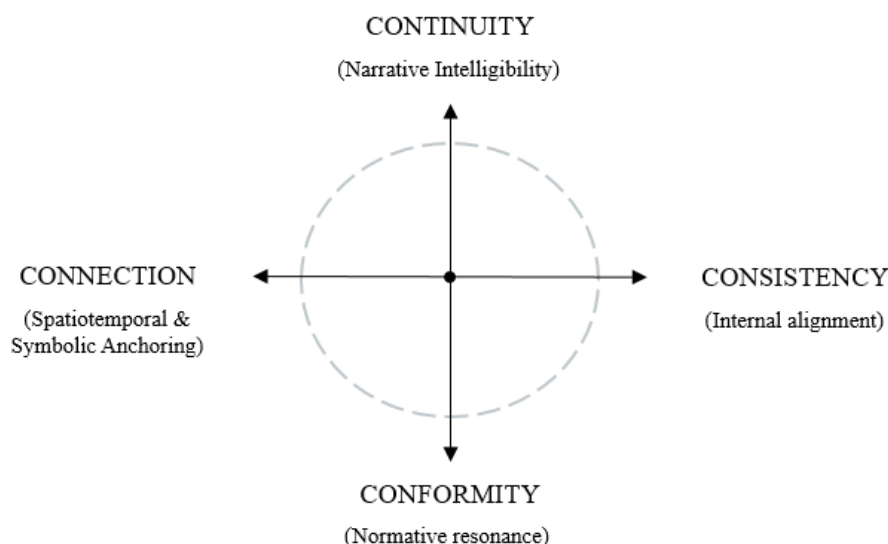


Fig.6: Configurational Structure of the Integrated Authenticity Framework
Source: Authors' Own Elaboration

Note: Perceived authenticity emerges from the configuration and relative intensity of the four dimensions, represented by the dotted circular configurational space.

Authenticity Under Algorithmic Mediation

These configurational decisions unfold within algorithmically structured ecosystems in which visibility metrics, recommendation systems, and engagement-based ranking mechanisms selectively amplify certain identity signals while attenuating others. Accordingly, users respond not only to social audiences but also to computational evaluative systems that function as parallel forms of assessment. This dual evaluative structure intensifies multi-criteria tensions. Signals that enhance algorithmic amplification may not necessarily reinforce narrative continuity, while cues that strengthen symbolic anchoring may fail to optimise reach or visibility. Authenticity configurations therefore reflect negotiated alignments between socially grounded recognition processes and algorithmically mediated reward structures. Conceptualising authenticity as a bounded multi-criteria decision framework extends Integrated Authenticity beyond interpretive description towards analytical formalisation, positioning authenticity as a context-sensitive outcome of adaptive calibration under structural and computational constraints [53, 54, 55].

5. Implications and Conclusion

This study synthesises existing research on Gen Z self-presentation practices within social media environments and develops the Integrated Authenticity Framework to explain how authenticity emerges across digital ecosystems. The findings indicate that the authenticity paradox experienced by this cohort is not a simple contradiction but a context-dependent negotiation of multiple identity signals. By structuring these signals into four interrelated dimensions, the framework demonstrates how authenticity judgments arise from specific configurations of these dimensions within situated communicative contexts. Interpreted through a multi-criteria decision perspective, authenticity is therefore conceptualised as a graded evaluative construct rather than a binary state of being either authentic or inauthentic.

The framework offers several practical implications for stakeholders operating in digitally mediated environments. For researchers and analysts of online communication, it provides a structured analytical lens for examining how authenticity signals emerge from the interaction of multiple evaluative dimensions rather than from a single indicator of perceived “realness”. For digital

marketing and organisational communication practitioners, it functions as an interpretive tool for assessing how brand messaging, influencer collaborations, and organisational narratives communicate authenticity within platform-based environments. For platform designers and governance actors, the framework highlights that authenticity judgments are shaped within algorithmically structured systems where platform affordances and ranking mechanisms influence which identity signals become visible, amplified, and interpretable. This underscores how platform architectures indirectly structure the evaluative conditions under which authenticity is constructed and recognised in digital communication environments.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the framework is derived from a systematic synthesis of existing literature and therefore remains conceptual in nature, offering an analytical structure for interpreting authenticity judgments rather than an empirically validated model. Second, as it is grounded in the current body of literature, it necessarily reflects existing theoretical orientations and empirical emphases, which may not fully capture emerging forms of digital self-presentation or alternative conceptualisations of authenticity. Third, the framework is developed primarily in relation to Gen Z social media practices, and its applicability to other demographic groups or communication contexts therefore requires further empirical examination.

Future research could extend and empirically test the proposed framework. Quantitative studies may operationalise the four dimensions to examine how different authenticity configurations influence audience perceptions, engagement dynamics, and platform visibility outcomes. Comparative studies across multiple social media ecosystems could further investigate how platform affordances shape the relative salience of each authenticity dimension. In addition, integrating the framework with formal multi-criteria decision-making models may enable the development of more precise analytical tools for evaluating authenticity configurations in algorithmically mediated environments.

Disclosure statement

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Appendix A: ADO-TCM Framework from the Systematic Literature Review

Pillar	Category	Findings From the Sample
Antecedents (A)	Drivers & Predictors	Algorithmic literacy, identity Styles (e.g., Ruminative, Diffused, etc.), socioeconomic background (Individualistic vs. Collectivist), consumer innovativeness, participation intention, Future self-image, subjective norms, social isolation, social comparison, social expectations, Self-objectification, peer pressure, anxiety, Peer surveillance, conspicuous consumption tendency, relationship building, reference group influence, identity distress, influencer-follower congruence, and attitude toward personalized advertising, platform affordances.
Decisions (D)	Actions & Strategies	Algorithmic Refinement, dual-accounting, visual transitions, active vs passive curation, platform selection based on social norms rather than technical affordances, AR filter use, “Cleaning up” past content, adopting “peace-keeping” self-presentation, and choosing between “consistent”, “self-staged”, “self-confident”, “selective self-presentation” and “audience-oriented” modes, active identity exploration through curated digital interventions, intentional self-disclosure, creating 'TikToks, not ads' to ensure brand authenticity, platform anonymity, glocal linguistic branding, value-driven ethical storytelling, creative expression.
Outcomes (O)	Results & Impacts	Algorithmic selves, integrated sense of self, diffracted belonging, otherness acceptance, impact on mental health, the willingness to disclose personal information, collective efficacy, transition from youthful experimentation to professional identity, weight-loss desire from slimming filters, identity clarity vs. identity confusion through digital feedback loops, emotional imbalance linked to online insecurity, reduced loneliness via digital bonding, youth activism and social change through remixing, glocal identity formation, echo chamber reinforcement.
Theory (T)	Theoretical Lenses Used by Authors	The Algorithmic Crystal Framework, Dramaturgy (Goffman), Self-Determination Theory, Objectification, Privacy Paradox, Cognitive Dissonance, Technology Acceptance Model, Social Norms, Mediatization, Digital Inclusion, Social Mirror, Equilibrium, Bourdieu’s Habitus, Cognitive Moral Development, Algorithmized Self, Giddens’ Identity Theory, Polymedia, Planned Behavior, Sociometer.
Context (C)	Scope of Studies	Young adults/Gen Z users across platforms including Instagram, TikTok, BeReal, and LinkedIn, with global data spanning the US, Europe, Africa, and Asia.
Methodology (M)	Research Designs	Predominantly qualitative approaches (semi-structured interviews, focus groups, walkthrough method, and narrative reviews) complemented by quantitative surveys and experimental designs. Analysis techniques include Thematic Analysis and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM).

Appendix B: Overview of reviewed studies

Title	Authors	Year	Key Findings	Research Methods	Journal/ Publication	Location	Relevance to the Topic
From Youthful Experimentation to Professional Identity: Understanding Identity Transitions in Social Media	Petter Bae Brandtzaeg and María-Ángeles Chaparro-Domínguez	2020	Young adults curate their online identity by cleaning up past content and adopting peace-keeping self-presentation to avoid negative scrutiny. The concepts of time collapse and context collapse complicate self-presentation.	Semi-structured interviews with 15 young adults (journalists) aged 21-26. Thematic analysis.	YOUNG	Norway & Spain	Highlights the challenges Gen Z faces in managing their online identity and self-presentation over time, emphasizing authenticity and strategies to navigate it.
Social media adoption behaviour: Consumer innovativeness and participation intention	Shampy Kamboj, Manika Sharma	2023	- Consumer innovativeness and participation intention directly and indirectly affect consumer adoption behaviour for social media to post their selfies. - Participation intention and perceived behaviour control have the strongest influence on behavioural intention to post selfies, followed by consumer innovativeness, attitude towards selfie-posting and subjective norms.	The data were gathered from 353 young consumers who post their selfies clicked via smartphone on their social media accounts.	International Journal of Consumer Studies	India	This study examines factors influencing selfie-posting behaviour on social media, which is a form of self-presentation. It also looks at consumer innovativeness, intention, and adoption behaviour.
Augmenting Self-presentation: Augmented Reality (AR) Filters Use Among Young Adults	Pitch Sinlapanuntakul & Mark Zachry	2024	AR filters on Instagram help young adults balance authentic and ideal self-presentation, enhance creative expression, and foster social engagement.	Semi-structured interviews with 12 young adults aged 18-25	Lecture Notes in Computer Science (LNCS)	USA	Explores how AR filters influence self-presentation and authenticity on social media
A Digital Identity Intervention Incorporating Social Media Activities Promotes Identity Exploration and Commitment Among Emerging Adults	Serena Soh, Bethany Cruz, Alan Meca, Gabriella M. Harari	2024	- Participants who completed both reflection and social media activities experienced increases in personal identity exploration and commitment, and increases in exploration of vocational identity, compared to those in the control condition. - The combination of reflection and social media activities was a more efficacious intervention treatment, compared to reflection alone.	A randomized controlled trial was conducted (N=267; N=141).	Identity	USA	This study examines the use of social media activities to promote positive identity development among emerging adults.
Resolving the complexity in Gen Z's envy occurrence: A cross-cultural perspective	Nazan Colmekcioglu, Bekir Bora Dedeoglu, Fevzi Okumus	2023	- This study highlights the differences in Gen Z consumers' envy occurrence regarding configurational factors. - Culture plays a significant role in Gen Z's envy occurrence. -	Qualitative comparative analysis.	Psychology & Marketing	UK, Turkey & USA	This study examines factors influencing envy occurrence (malicious or benign) in Generation Z (Gen Z) consumers,

Social isolation and social anxiety as drivers of generation Z's willingness to share personal information on social media	Teidorlang Lyngdoh, Dahlia El-Manstrly, Krishnan Jeesha	2023	Envy is an impactful emotion on consumer behaviors. - When Gen Z feels socially isolated/anxious, they are more likely to share personal information on social media. - The effect of social isolation on sharing of personal information increases when Gen Z fear that they are missing out on the rewarding experiences others are having, are engaged in repetitive negative thoughts and perceive their firm's privacy policy as transparent and ethical.	A sequential multi-study design, including an experiment followed by a survey.	Psychology & Marketing	UK & India	including the role of self-presentation. This study examines factors affecting Gen Z's willingness to share personal information on social media. It considers social and psychological factors.
Body and diet as sales pitches: Spanish teenagers' perceptions about influencers' impact on ideal physical appearance	Beatriz Feijoo, Adela López-Martínez, Patricia Núñez-Gómez	2022	Teenagers recognize influencers' impact on their perceptions of physical appearance and diet; they are aware of persuasive tactics and the aspirational world influencers create.	Qualitative study with 12 focus groups of minors aged 11–17 years	Profesional de la información	Spain	Highlights how Gen Z navigates authenticity and self-presentation influenced by social media, particularly through influencers.
The contributions of gender identification and gender ideologies to the purposes of social media use in adolescence	Adriana M. Manago, Abigail S. Walsh, Logan L. Barsigian	2023	Gender ideologies influence adolescents' social media use: girls use social media more for emotion bonding, appearance validation, and social compensation, while boys use it more for competitive activity bonding. Masculinity ideology is a strong predictor across genders.	Survey of 309 cisgender U.S. high school students	Frontiers in Psychology	USA	Explores how Gen Z navigates authenticity and self-presentation on social media, focusing on the impact of gender identification and ideologies on social media use.
Understanding the relations between exposure to the positive self-portrayals of others on social media and emerging adults' mental health during a COVID-19 imposed lockdown	Ilse Vranken, Lara Schreurs, Edward John Noon, Laura Vandenbosch	2023	Exposure to positive self-portrayals on social media during the COVID-19 lockdown negatively impacted emerging adults' mental health. No significant moderation effects were found for experiencing COVID-19 illnesses in one's environment or gender.	Cross-sectional study of 415 emerging adults	Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace	Belgium	Explores how Gen Z navigates authenticity and self-presentation on social media, focusing on the impact of positive self-portrayals during times of social deprivation.
Scripted Gender Practices: Young	Rita Basílio Simões, Inês Amaral, Ana	2023	Young adults' use of social media apps in Portugal often reinforces normative gender scripts. Women experience more guilt and	Semi-structured interviews with 25 young adults	Social Media and Society	Portugal	Highlights how Gen Z navigates authenticity and self-presentation on social

Adults' Social Media App Uses in Portugal	Marta M. Flores, Eduardo Antunes		anxiety over time spent on apps, while men view app use more pragmatically. Dating apps reveal gendered behaviors and risks for women.				media, focusing on gendered affordances and normative gender scripts.
Youth activism and (de)personalized remix on TikTok	Adina Gitomer, Julia Atienza-Barthelemy, Brooke Foucault Welles	2024	Gen Z users on TikTok tend to resist personalization in their remix strategies, focusing on amplifying original activist content rather than inserting their own perspectives.	Qualitative content analysis of remixed content associated with Gen-Z for Change	Social Movement Studies	USA	Explores how Gen Z navigates authenticity and self-presentation on social media, particularly through depersonalized remix strategies on TikTok.
Don't make ads, make TikTok's: media and brand engagement through Gen Z's use of TikTok and its significance in purchase intent	Jose A. Flecha Ortiz et al.	2023	- Gen Z uses TikTok for connection and engagement. - Motivations for interactivity on TikTok impact consumer engagement. - Brand engagement on TikTok influences purchase intention.	Quantitative study using an electronic survey.	Journal of Brand Management	USA	Examines Gen Z's engagement on TikTok, a key platform for their self-presentation, and how this engagement influences their interaction with brands and purchase intent.
Narratives of the Self in Polymedia Contexts: Authenticity and Branding in Generation Z	Nicholas Santer, Adriana Manago, & Rachel Bleisch	2023	- Gen Z constructs their autobiographical selves through self-presentation on multiple social media platforms. - Authenticity and branding are key narratives in their self-presentation.	Qualitative study using whole-person narrative analysis of audiovisual recordings.	Qualitative Psychology	USA	Focuses on how Gen Z uses various social media platforms to construct their identity, highlighting the tension between authenticity and branding in their self-presentation.
Comparing Who We Are to Who We Could Be: How Future Self-Images Influence Consumer Choices	Alex Taylor & Jamie Carlson	2025	- Temporal comparisons influence self, emotions, wellbeing, and behavior (especially online). - Future self-evaluation uses envisioned selves for validation and modeling. - Digital platforms enable temporal comparisons, shaping future identities.	Literature review, theoretical framework development	Psychology & Marketing	Australia	It discusses the role of future self-images in influencing consumer choices and behaviors
'Everybody needs to post a selfie every once in a while': exploring the politics of Instagram curation in young women's self-	Sofia P. Caldeira, Sofie Van Bauwel & Sander De Ridder	2021	- Curation is important in self-representation, influenced by social/aesthetic norms. - Tensions exist between "Instagrammable" aesthetics and authenticity.	Qualitative: 13 in-depth interviews with female Instagram users aged 18-35	Information, Communication & Society	Belgium	it investigates how young women navigate self-representation and authenticity on Instagram.

representational practices			- Self-representation can be empowering but must navigate negative stereotypes (e.g., gendered views on selfies).				
Gen Zers' Travel-Related Experiential Consumption on Social Media: Integrative Perspective of Uses and Gratification Theory and Theory of Reasoned Action	Wooyang Kim and Dale A. Cake	2025	- Gen Zers use social media for travel planning driven by escapism, vicarious pleasure, and information-seeking needs. - Positive attitudes from travel-related content lead to content-sharing, following travel accounts, and purchasing tour programs.	Quantitative study using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM).	Journal of International Consumer Marketing	USA	Explores Gen Z's motivations and behaviors on social media in the context of travel, including self-presentation (sharing content) and navigating authenticity (escapism, self-expansion)
#GenZ on TikTok: the collective online self-Portrait of the social media generation	Catherine Cheng Stahl & Ioana Literat	2023	- Gen Z portrays itself on TikTok as a generation of contrasts: powerful and self-assured, yet vulnerable and damaged. - Gen Z uses playful self-reflexivity about time, embodying self-awareness, unity, and collective spirit.	Qualitative study using thematic analysis of TikTok videos and comments.	Journal of Youth Studies	USA	addresses how Gen Z presents itself on social media (TikTok) and constructs its collective identity.
Self-Presentation in Social Media: Review and Research Opportunities	Erin E. Hollenbaugh	2021	- Social media offers opportunities and challenges for managing self-presentation. Self-presentation is moderated by social media affordances like anonymity, persistence, and visibility.	Literature review and conceptual model.	Review of Communication Research	USA	Provides a comprehensive review of self-presentation theories in the context of social media, discussing key variables like anonymity, persistence, visibility, and context collapse
Are My Photos Worth a Thousand Ads? Gen Z Consumers' Perspectives on Personalized Myselfie Advertising and Its Implication for AI Algorithms	Ho-Young (Anthony) Ahn & Eric Haley	2025	- Gen Z consumers connect self and brand on social media. - They seek social recognition and validation but also value authenticity. - Personalized "myselfie" advertising can be an ego booster but raises anxiety about social media impressions and privacy concerns.	Qualitative study using in-depth interviews and a qualitative projective technique.	Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising	USA	Explores Gen Z's perspectives on personalized advertising using their own photos, revealing insights into their self-presentation, authenticity concerns, and privacy considerations.
The Algorithmic Crystal: Conceptualizing the Self through Algorithmic	Angela Y. Lee, Hannah Mieczkowski, Nicole B. Ellison, Jeffrey T. Hancock	2022	TikTok users perceive the algorithm as reflective of their multifaceted and dynamic self-concepts; users engage in organic and strategic refinement to align algorithmic representations with their actual selves; algorithmic personalization fosters feelings of	Qualitative analysis of 24 interviews with TikTok users	Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction	USA	It explores how TikTok's algorithm influences self-concept and social interactions, highlighting the role of personalized algorithms in shaping

Personalization on TikTok			mere belonging and ephemeral connections with similar others.				identity and fostering connections.
Creating Students' Algorithmic Selves: Shedding Light on Social Media's Representational Affordances	Ignas Kalpokas, Emilija Sabaliauskaitė, Victoria Pegushina	2020	Students exhibit a casual and sometimes cynical attitude towards social media; they engage in passive consumption more than active contribution; awareness of data collection is present but limited; social media use is driven by social observation and entertainment; self-presentation is strategic but often casual.	Focus group interviews with 18 students from 12 different countries	Creativity Studies	Lithuania	It explores Gen Z's interaction with social media, focusing on self-creation, data awareness, and the balance between passive and active engagement.
Digital Inclusion Through Algorithmic Knowledge: Curated Flows of Civic and Political Information on Instagram	Shelley Boulianne, Christian P. Hoffmann	2024	Young adults (18-24) are more likely to curate their Instagram feeds for civic and political information than older adults. Algorithmic knowledge and political interest positively relate to curation practices. Young adults' understanding of algorithms helps them curate information flows, contributing to digital inclusion.	Nationally representative survey data, structural equation modeling	Media and Communication	Germany	Highlights the role of algorithmic knowledge in digital inclusion and how young adults use Instagram for civic and political information, relevant to understanding how Gen Z navigates authenticity and self-presentation online.
Digitally Curated Beauty: The Impact of Slimming Beauty Filters on Body Image, Weight Loss Desire, Self-Objectification, and Anti-Fat Attitudes	Makenzie Schroeder, Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz	2025	Using slimming beauty filters increases body dysmorphia, desire for weight loss, self-objectification, and anti-fat attitudes; social self-comparison (comparing oneself to a filtered version of oneself) is a significant mediator; body dysmorphic cognitions also mediate these relationships.	Online experiment with 187 participants using different types of filters	Computers in Human Behavior	USA	It explores the psychological impact of beauty filters on Gen Z's self-presentation and body image on social media.
Experiencing Algorithms: How Young People Understand, Feel About, and Engage With Algorithmic News Selection on Social Media	Joëlle Swart	2021	Young people's understanding of algorithmic news curation varies widely. Their sense-making is context-specific, triggered by unexpected results and explicit personalization cues. Emotional responses to algorithms range from neutral to negative, affecting their engagement with algorithms. Despite awareness, young people rarely intervene in algorithmic decisions.	In-depth interviews, walk-through method, think-aloud protocols	Social Media and Society	Netherlands	Highlights the impact of algorithmic news curation on young people's media consumption, relevant to understanding how Gen Z navigates authenticity and self-presentation online.
Ignore the Affordances; It's the Social Norms: How	Lee Taber, Sonia Dominguez, Steve Whittaker	2023	Social norms and goals are the primary drivers of social media posting choices; affordances and features are secondary	Scenarios, flowcharts, and	Proceedings of the ACM on Human-	USA	It explores the decision-making process of Gen Z and Millennials in choosing

Millennials and Gen-Z Think About Where to Make a Post on Social Media			considerations; users first evaluate if their post matches existing social norms; if not, they revisit their goals and consider affordances.	interviews with 19 participants	Computer Interaction		social media platforms for self-presentation, emphasizing the role of social norms.
Instagram live-streamings: How Does Influencer–Follower Congruence Affect Gen Z Trust, Attitudes and Intentions?	Souad Maghraoui, Lilia Khrouf	2025	Influencer–follower congruence in Instagram live-streamings promotes followers' trust toward the brand. Influencer reputation reinforces this relationship. Brand trust mediates the effect of influencer–follower congruence on brand attitude, which in turn mediates the relationship between brand trust and followers' intentional reactions (shopping, imitation, recommendation).	Survey, PLS analysis	Young Consumers	Tunisia	Highlights the impact of influencer–follower congruence on Gen Z's trust, attitudes, and intentions in Instagram live-streamings, relevant to understanding how Gen Z navigates authenticity and self-presentation online.
One Social Media, Distinct Habitus: Generation Z's Social Media Uses and Gratifications and the Moderation Effect of Economic Capital	Qingqing Hu, Xue Hu, Pan Hou	2022	Gen Z's social media uses vary based on motivations (daily routine alternatives vs. socialization); economic capital moderates these uses; upper-mid-income Gen Zs use social media more for communication and news, while low-income Gen Zs focus more on social capital accumulation and self-expression.	Online survey with 221 Chinese Gen Z social media users	Frontiers in Psychology	China	It explores how economic capital influences Gen Z's social media practices and self-presentation, highlighting digital social inequalities.
Relations of Conspicuous Consumption Tendency, Self-Expression Satisfaction, and SNS Use Satisfaction of Gen Z through SNS Activities	Seung-A. Shin, Jong-Oh Jang, Jong-Kul Kim, Eun-Hyung Cho	2021	Conspicuous consumption factors (imported goods/famous brands, high-priced articles, status symbol) significantly affect self-expression satisfaction and SNS use satisfaction. Self-expression satisfaction significantly affects SNS use satisfaction.	Online survey, correlation analysis, multiple regression analysis	International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health	Korea	Highlights the impact of conspicuous consumption on self-expression and SNS use satisfaction among Gen Z, relevant to understanding how Gen Z navigates authenticity and self-presentation online.
Social Media: A Digital Social Mirror for Identity Development During Adolescence	Vanesa Pérez-Torres	2024	Social media plays a crucial role in adolescent identity development; key themes include self-presentation, social comparison, role models, and online audience; social media allows adolescents to explore and commit to identity options, receive feedback, and engage in social comparison; parasocial	Literature review and thematic analysis	Current Psychology	Spain	It explores how Gen Z uses social media for self-presentation and identity development, emphasizing the role of social interactions and feedback.

			relationships with influencers impact identity formation.				
The Old King is Dead, Long Live the Algorithmic King – The Decline of Facebook and the Rise of TikTok – Comparative Study of Algorithmic Design of Social Media Platforms	Lukasz Nowacki	2024	Facebook's decline is attributed to its ageing user base and less engaging content. TikTok's algorithm provides personalized content, leading to higher engagement among Gen Z. TikTok's algorithmic design promotes individualistic interaction, posing potential risks of echo chambers and targeted marketing.	Mixed-methods analysis, content analysis, user surveys	International Social Science Journal	China	Highlights the impact of algorithmic design on social media engagement, relevant to understanding how Gen Z navigates authenticity and self-presentation online.
Why's Everyone on TikTok Now? The Algorithmized Self and the Future of Self-Making on Social Media	Aparajita Bhandari, Sara Bimo	2022	TikTok's algorithm plays a central role in user experience, leading to a new model of self-making termed the "algorithmized self"; users are highly aware of and engage with the algorithm; content is consumed without context, and self-creation occurs across multiple platforms.	Walkthrough method and 14 semi-structured interviews	Social Media and Society	USA & Canada	It explores how TikTok's algorithm influences Gen Z's self-presentation and identity development, highlighting the unique role of the algorithm in shaping user experience.
Exploring uses and gratifications and psychological outcomes of engagement with Instagram Stories	Jia-Dai (Evelyn) Lu and Jhih-Syuan (Elaine) Lin	2022	Users engage with Instagram Stories for exploration, self-enhancement, perceived functionality, entertainment, social sharing, relationship building, novelty, and surveillance. Engagement leads to both positive and negative emotions, with creation activities predicting negative emotions. Engagement is linked to psychological dependency through increased negative emotions.	Two-step approach: pretest with 21 participants and main study with 296 participants. Exploratory factor analysis and multiple regression analyses.	Computers in Human Behavior Reports	Taiwan	Highlights the motivations behind Gen Z's engagement with Instagram Stories and the psychological outcomes, relevant to understanding their self-presentation and navigation of authenticity on social media.
Generation Z, values, and media: from influencers to BeReal, between visibility and authenticity	Simona Tirocchi	2024	Generation Z values family, respect, and honesty. They prefer media that convey authenticity, genuineness, and sustainability. BeReal is popular for promoting authenticity.	Five focus groups with 60 university students aged 20-23. Thematic analysis.	Frontiers in Sociology	Italy	Highlights the values important to Gen Z and their preference for media that promote authenticity and genuineness, relevant to understanding their self-presentation and navigation of authenticity on social media.

I do not want to be perfect: investigating generation Z students' personal brands on social media for job seeking	Nguyen M Trang, Brad McKenna, Wenjie Cai, Alastair Maclean Morrison	2024	Gen Z students value online personal brands for job seeking but face challenges like perfectionism and authenticity. They use self-promotion and supplication to build trust and authenticity.	Qualitative interpretive study with 11 interviews and LinkedIn profile observations. Thematic analysis.	Information Technology & People	UK & Vietnam	Highlights the importance of authenticity in Gen Z's personal branding on social media for job seeking, relevant to understanding their self-presentation and navigation of authenticity on social media.
Mediated by Code: Unpacking Algorithmic Curation of Urban Experiences	Annelien Smets, Pieter Ballon, Nils Walravens	2021	Algorithmic curation in urban environments influences citizens' experiences through digital intermediaries like personal applications and urban infrastructure. The framework identifies information flows, feedback loops, curation logics, and multi-stakeholder configurations.	Literature review and conceptual framework development.	Media and Communication	Belgium	Highlights the impact of algorithmic curation on urban experiences, relevant to understanding how digital technologies shape Gen Z's navigation and interaction in urban spaces.
Becoming Your 'Authentic' Self: How Social Media Influences Youth's Visual Transitions	Michelle Gorea	2021	Social media significantly influences youth's visual self-representation during transitions from high school to university. Visual practices are active components of identity work, shaped by family, peers, and socioeconomic factors. Authenticity pressures and visual self-presentation are major sources of anxiety for youth.	Mixed qualitative approach, in-depth interviews, platform analysis	Social Media and Society	Canada	Highlights the impact of social media on youth's visual self-representation and identity formation, relevant to understanding how Gen Z navigates authenticity and self-presentation online.
Be Yourself: The Relative Importance of Personal and Social Norms for Adolescents' Self-Presentation on Instagram	Arne Freya Zillich, Claudia Riesmeyer	2021	Identified four types of self-presentation among adolescents: authentic, self-confident, self-staged, and audience-oriented; personal and social norms both play crucial roles; adolescents engage in reflective norm breaches to cope with conflicting norms; proximal and distal reference groups influence self-presentation.	Semi-structured interviews with 27 German adolescents aged 14-19	Social Media and Society	Germany	explores the balance between personal authenticity and social norms in Gen Z's self-presentation on social media.
Identity development in the digital context	Serena Soh, Sanaz Talaifar, Gabriella M. Harari	2024	Digital media plays a significant role in shaping identity development through mechanisms like selection, manipulation, evocation, and application. Identity processes influence and are influenced by digital environments.	Narrative review of studies from psychology and communication research.	Social and Personality Psychology Compass	USA & UK	Highlights the importance of digital media in identity development, relevant to understanding how Gen Z navigates authenticity and

Generation Z's perception of privacy on social media: Examining the impact of personalized advertising, interpersonal relationships, reference group dynamics, social isolation, and anxiety on self-disclosure willingness	Zoltán Rózsa, Lucia Ferenčáková, David Zámek, Jana Firstová	2025	Generation Z's willingness to disclose personal information on social media is influenced by attitudes toward advertising, reference group influence, and social isolation.	Online self-administered questionnaire with 451 Generation Z individuals. Binary logistic regression analysis.	Oeconomia Copernicana	Slovakia	self-presentation on social media. Highlights factors influencing Gen Z's self-disclosure on social media, emphasizing the role of advertising, reference groups, and social isolation in navigating authenticity.
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