

Original Article

Curated Selves: Gen Z Identity Formation in the Age of Digital Duality

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ABSTRACT: *This paper explores how Gen Z negotiates identity within highly digitalized environments shaped by social comparison, curated personas, and validation-driven behaviours. Drawing from Festinger's Social Comparison Theory, Goffman's dramaturgical model, and contemporary approaches to digital identity, the article argues that digital culture has intensified identity fragmentation among young people. Through close reading of contemporary literary and popular texts including True Beauty, Aesthetica, Followers, and Sympathy this paper demonstrates that curated personas function both as coping mechanisms and sources of psychological strain. The findings suggest that while digital platforms offer spaces for creativity and empowerment, the pursuit of constant validation and visibility complicates authentic identity formation. The study concludes that digital identity becomes healthy only when online personas remain aligned with offline experiences, rather than replacing them.*

KEYWORDS: *Gen Z identity, Digital persona, Social comparison, Validation addiction. Dramaturgical model, Digital identity, Contemporary literature, Escapism, Curated self.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The question of identity has intrigued humanity for centuries. When people speak about identity today, what do they truly mean? Is identity who we essentially are, or is it a social performance crafted for the gaze of others? Within Gen Z culture, many individuals misinterpret identity as a socially accepted behaviour that they are expected to embody. Although the generation values individuality rhetorically, their notions of uniqueness are often guided by collective digital trends rather than organic personal growth. Such behaviour results in "collective individualism," where everyone performs uniqueness in the same way.

Increasing digital immersion reduces the time young people spend in direct social interactions. Studies show that Gen Z spends more hours online than any generation in history (Common Sense Media 22). In the absence of consistent real-world exposure, their understanding of the world is shaped predominantly by digital representations. As a result, the online self increasingly overshadows the offline self, creating tension and self-doubt. While identity formation has always involved negotiation, Gen Z navigates this process under unprecedented visibility and comparison.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on Gen Z identity consistently emphasizes the profound psychological and cultural impact of digital technology. Twenge's *iGen* provides empirical evidence connecting the rise of smartphones to increases in anxiety, depression, and loneliness among youth. Turkle's *Reclaiming Conversation* argues that constant digital interaction diminishes the ability to engage in spontaneous face-to-face conversations, a skill essential for developing a stable identity.

Boyd highlights that networked teens use digital spaces as arenas for experimentation, performance, and validation. This aligns with van Dijck's argument that social media platforms construct identity narratives through mechanisms of connectivity, visibility, and algorithmic reinforcement. Cover further elaborates that digital identities are shapes constructed through interaction, surveillance, and continuous self-monitoring.

Literary texts also reflect these concerns. Contemporary fiction increasingly explores digital selfhood, often depicting characters who struggle with the tension between real and curated selves. Angelo's *Followers* examines a world where personal identity becomes inseparable from online visibility. Rowbottom's *Aesthetica* critiques the beauty and wellness industries that thrive on influencing self-perception. Sudjic's *Sympathy* investigates unhealthy forms of digital obsession and identity mimicry. The webtoon *True Beauty* demonstrates how social comparison shapes body image and self-worth. These works reveal that identity in a digital age is fluid, fragmented, and frequently unstable, a recurring theme in contemporary youth-focused narratives.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. SOCIAL COMPARISON THEORY

Leon Festinger's Social Comparison Theory provides a foundation for understanding why individuals compare themselves to others. Festinger argues that people evaluate their abilities and worth by comparing themselves with those around them. In the digital era, social media exponentially expands comparison targets. Gen Z sees peers, celebrities, influencers, and strangers who appear more successful, attractive, or socially admired. Research indicates that such upward comparison leads to body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem (Fardouly and Vartanian 509). Literary texts like *True Beauty* directly embody these consequences, illustrating how digital comparison distorts self-perception.

3.2. VALIDATION ADDICTION / SELF-ESTEEM REGULATION

Digital validation—through likes, comments, shares, and follower counts creates a feedback loop that shapes emotional regulation. Marwick's *Status Update* explains how users adopt techniques such as micro-celebrity and self-branding to cultivate visibility. These behaviours generate feelings of superiority when engagement is high but cause insecurity and emotional instability when validation declines (Mills et al. 322). Characters like Floss in *Followers* exemplify this addiction, structuring their entire self-worth around public approval.

3.3. GOFFMAN'S DRAMATURGICAL MODEL

Erving Goffman conceptualizes identity in terms of performance, distinguishing between a "front stage" (public persona) and "backstage" (private self). In the digital age, the front stage is represented by social media profiles, curated images, and controlled narratives. The backstage remains hidden—fears, flaws, insecurities, and unfiltered emotions. Literature repeatedly demonstrates how widening gaps between these stages create psychological tension. In *Aesthetica*, Anna Wrey's digitally perfected front stage ultimately alienates her from her real self.

3.4. DIGITAL IDENTITY THEORY

Digital identity theory argues that online selves are constructed through interactions across digital platforms. These identities can be empowering when they reflect genuine traits, but destructive when they replace or overshadow offline identity (Oxley 41; Stål 88). This duality is central to Gen Z's experiences and is mirrored throughout contemporary narratives.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The claim that Gen Z cannot imagine life without technology must be approached with nuance. Rather than being universally incapable, research indicates that Gen Z is the most digitally dependent generation, with 95% owning smartphones and reporting stress during intentional disconnection (Common Sense Media 10). This heavy reliance reduces in-person interaction, making digital spaces their primary arenas for communication and identity formation.

Sherry Turkle notes that digital natives often struggle with spontaneous conversation because they are accustomed to having time to craft messages (Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation* 55). This aligns with the observation that Gen Z prefers edited, premeditated communication—a behaviour reflected in narratives like *True Beauty*, where Jukyoung relies on makeup and curated presentation to interact confidently.

In *Aesthetica*, Anna Wrey becomes alienated from her physically altered self, revealing how digital culture can pressure individuals toward irreversible changes. The novel critiques a society where online standards dictate real-world bodies and identities. Similarly, *Followers* explores the psychological toll of constant visibility: characters cannot separate their true selves from their digital performances.

These fictional portrayals mirror real psychological trends. Studies show that digital self-curation leads to increased anxiety, fear of judgment, and self-discrepancy (Mills et al. 326). When the curated persona becomes too distant from the real self, individuals may experience confusion, dissatisfaction, and identity diffusion.

Contemporary literature suggests that curated personas initially provide relief from insecurities, allowing characters to mask flaws, gain confidence, or escape past trauma. Yet the comfort is temporary. Over time, maintaining these personas becomes exhausting and unsustainable, leading to emotional burnout. Jukyoung's fear of being seen without makeup, Floss's dependence on relevance, and Anna's regret over cosmetic procedures all reflect the fragility behind digital perfection.

Escapism is a central theme in these narratives. Stacy Wood emphasizes that Gen Z increasingly retreats into digital entertainment and idealized online spaces to cope with social, economic, and emotional pressures (Wood 3). While escapism can offer temporary refuge, excessive reliance prevents genuine self-confrontation, ultimately worsening identity confusion. Despite these challenges, the literature also highlights the potential for digital spaces to support identity when used authentically. Amanda Lovelace's poetic journey demonstrates that digital platforms can amplify real emotions and create supportive communities when aligned with authentic self-expression. Authenticity, not performance, determines whether digital identity becomes empowering or harmful.

5. CONCLUSION

The digital age places Gen Z in a complex position where identity is both a personal quest and a public performance. While digital platforms offer opportunities for creativity, connection, and self-expression, they also amplify pressures of comparison, perfection, and visibility. Contemporary literature mirrors these realities, portraying characters who carefully curate idealized selves only to confront feelings of emptiness and estrangement.

Authentic identity formation requires space for imperfection, vulnerability, and introspection. For Gen Z to reclaim selfhood, they must balance online presence with offline reality, recognize the limitations of curated personas, and cultivate identity through lived experiences rather than digital validation. Ultimately, identity cannot be perfected through filters or shaped by algorithms; it must emerge through genuine human experience.

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