



EXPLORING DIGITAL IDENTITY: FACTORS SHAPING GENERATION Z WOMEN'S SELF-PRESENTATION ON TIKTOK

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Generation Z women construct their digital identities on TikTok, focusing on self-expression, community and algorithmic influence. Through focus groups and semi-structured interviews with women aged 18-20, the findings reveal that participants prioritize authenticity but face pressure to conform to trends and idealized aesthetics reinforced by the platform's algorithm. While TikTok provides a space for creativity and community belonging, the personalized content reinforces specific identities, impacting self-perception. A strong sense of belonging to online communities plays a significant role in shaping their self-presentation. The study contributes to understanding how societal expectations and technology-driven dynamics influence digital identity.

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1. Introduction & state of the art

Self-presentation is a process that is deeply influenced by societal expectations. As Goffman (1956) described, it is a form of performance in which individuals adjust their behavior to align with the norms and expectations of those around them. Female self-presentation in particular has traditionally been shaped by aesthetic standards and the male gaze (Butler, 1988). In the digital space, women encounter a new arena for self-expression, offering opportunities to negotiate their identities. However, this environment remains deeply influenced by socially constructed expectations (Cook & Hasmath, 2014).

On TikTok, the phenomenon of media-perpetuated standards unfolds through two key mechanisms. In the first place, a broad range of social dynamics, namely self-objectification or body surveillance, are exercised by users. While in the pre-digital era this pressure was primarily exerted by mass media, users themselves now play a central role in the perpetuation of stereotypes and aesthetic norms, contributing to the creation and dissemination of self-presentations that reinforce societal norms and expectations. Secondly, these self-exerted influence dynamics intersect with the vast influence of technology. On TikTok, technology-driven recommendation systems play a crucial role in the selection of content users consume, influencing what users watch and engage with. This technology, strongly conditioned by societal factors, rewards or penalizes content based on normative frameworks.

This study aims to explore the possible behaviors of young women in their self-presentation on the platform. The primary research question examines the factors shaping young females' self-presentation on TikTok. The second research question revolves around how TikTok's algorithms shape self-presentation strategies. In this sense, the study explores a potential trend towards a more strategic self-presentation. The presence or absence of a strategy in terms of self-presentation prompts the third research question, which aims to answer how young females perceive authenticity in self-presentations on TikTok.

1.1. Identity and Self-Presentation

The concept of personal identity, as we understand it today, is a product of modernity, emerging from social changes such as the division of labor and the decline of religious authority (Elias, 2001; Giddens, 2008; Hernando Gonzalo, 2012). From this perspective, individuals constantly reflect on their identity, adapting it to social and cultural contexts (Craib, 1998).

Mead (1934) introduced the duality between the inner "I" and the social "me," emphasizing that we can only understand ourselves by considering how others perceive us. This idea was later developed through the concepts of personal and social identity, highlighting the constant interaction between social expectations and self-perception (Goffman, 1968; Jung, 1972). The study of social identity examines how society influences the individual. According to Goffman, social belonging entails adopting roles that align with individual perception, demonstrating that identity exists as a function of relationships with others.

In this context, social identity is concretized through its recognition by others, giving rise to the concept of self-representation. Here, the individual constantly adapts to meet social expectations and find their place within a collective. Self-presentation is understood as a dynamic process in which individuals construct their identity by adapting to different social environments. According to Goffman (1956), this process is comparable to a theatrical performance, where individuals present idealized versions of themselves depending on the demands of the social "stage". Bauman (2000) adds that in contemporary societies, marked by their "liquid" nature, identity becomes increasingly transient and malleable, forcing individuals to constantly "construct themselves".

1.2. Female Self-Presentation in the Digital Age

With the rise of social media, self-presentation has shifted to the digital realm, where technological platforms offer new tools for constructing and managing identities. When we present ourselves in an online environment, we are not addressing a specific person, but an imagined audience instead. The online publics, which boyd (2014) described as those communities built around shared identities and common social practices, become "networked publics" (boyd, 2010; Varnelis, 2008). The audiences to whom we present ourselves online have been reconceptualized by Gillespie (2014) as "calculated publics" within an algorithmic framework. Algorithms not only influence interactions within networked

publics but also actively produce "calculated publics," shaping user affinities and forming groups based on algorithmically derived criteria.

The influence of technology and economy have shaped the concept of self-presentation, leading to the construction of a digital identity that is both performed and commodified. In this regard, Van Dijck (2013) noted: "Gradually, users have come to understand the art of online self-presentation and the importance of social networking sites as tools for *self-promotion*" (p. 204). In parallel, Pooley (2010) suggests there is feedback between two apparently contradictory factors: the aim for expressive differentiation and self-promotion understood in the context of a market economy. This synthesis gives rise to what Pooley (2010) labels "calculated authenticity", an actualization of the self-performance that takes place through social media platforms and happens through the staging of a certain role that appears natural to an online audience.

In the context of social media, aesthetic pressure and the commodification of femininity have an influence on self-presentation. Indeed, Internet technologies act as a cultural catalyst of gender normativity, and thus gender performativity is transferred to the digital domain by mimicking gender presentational online content. In this regard, in order to engage with the gendered expectations, the online self must be "modulated, moderated, and managed to deliver satisfying and relatable moments within particular gendered terms" (Kanai, 2019, p. 7). Women, in particular, tend to internalize beauty standards perpetuated by the media, leading to practices such as self-objectification and body surveillance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). In the same vein, women are more prone to pursue the canonical standard of female beauty by modifying their features after being exposed to a certain beauty standard shaped by the hegemonic male gaze (Dang, 2022, p. 1043).

On the internet, the self experiences a process of constant self-actualization. In this regard, TikTok serves as a site for constant identity work in the service of consumer culture, a platform in which users perform a permanent actualization and explore the "pluralities they face in the construction of their own digital identities" (p. 3). This ongoing reinvention is deeply intertwined with the marketization of identity, where platforms like TikTok transform personal expression into a commodity shaped by consumer culture. The marketization of the body has specific consequences on women, given that the hypervigilance historically exercised on the female body cannot be ignored. Kanai (2019) points out how youthful femininity must be contemplated taking into consideration the neoliberal conditions that arrange the entrepreneurial subjectivity present in identity work.

Women have come to outnumber men in some social media domains, using social media more often and more actively than men do (NW et al., 2021). Nevertheless, more females than males set their profiles to private and delete contacts to limit their friend list (Herring & Stoerger, 2014; Madden, 2012). Female self-presentation on the internet is constrained by patriarchal structures, which is also made visible through slutshaming, sexual predation, and machismo behaviors. Thus, privacy and anonymity are very common affordances in female and LGTBQ+ profiles, as they serve as protective online boundaries.

1.3. Gen Z and online Self-presentation on TikTok

The paradigm shift brought about by networked technologies has definitely contributed to shaping the character of Generation Z. Generation Z (or simply Gen Z) is the successor cohort to Millennials. Baptized as "digital natives", they are distinguished from previous generations, the so-called "digital immigrants" by their diametrically opposed way of thinking, processing information and interacting with others (Prensky, 2001).

Gen Z exhibits a robust collective identity (Stahl & Literat, 2023), with some portraying them as 'identity nomads' who view the self "as a place to experiment, test, and change" (Francis and Hoefel 2018). Zeng, Abidin and Schäfer (2021) further argue that the Gen Z presence on TikTok mirrors a profound collective identity and heightened self-awareness. Online identity is not unitary nor does it work the same way across the different online environments, but instead, users adopt different presentations depending on the platform. The frequent display of different content or usernames according to the social media platform is argued to be a response to the perceived norms of a particular platform.

TikTok has been described as the social media with the most accurate algorithm (Klug et al., 2021), and countless users have attested with astonishment the platform's ability to suggest content based on

specific interests at any moment, almost as if it were able to read our minds. This happens due to an algorithmic mechanism whose choice of content is based on the user's interests repeated over time and his or her recent interactions (Boffone, 2022). Consequently, the more time the user spends consuming content on the platform, the more accurate and personalized the future content will be. Instead of relying on radically new features, TikTok revolutionizes the user experience by fostering a unique mode of self-presentation and identity creation. The main reason for using TikTok, as stated in the study carried out in China by Scherr & Wang (2021), is the fact that self-presentations are socially rewarding. This gratification is achieved through online communities that access the content through algorithms rather than a conscious act of networking. As stated by Bhandari and Bimbo (2022), TikTok differs from the networked self-model proposed by the rest of social media networks because it doesn't prioritize networking with other egos through self-disclosure.

One of the main aspects of the platform is the notion of repetition, which is mediated by algorithms that amplify aesthetic trends and reinforce normative beauty standards, particularly the ideal of youthful white femininity (Elias & Gill, 2018; Kennedy, 2020). TikTok fosters an "algorithmic aesthetic," where cultural and creative patterns are shaped by recommendation systems (Hallinan & Striplas, 2016). This creates dynamics of belonging, such as "algorithmic personalization," in which users adjust their content to align with specific communities, declaring their identity through hashtags and trends (Low et al., 2023). This cycle between users and algorithms, termed "algorithmic self," enables constant updates of the digital self (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Lee et al., 2022). Although TikTok facilitates new forms of self-expression, it also perpetuates gender and racial inequalities, censoring non-normative identities (DeVito, 2022; Karizat et al., 2021). However, its impact on Generation Z is undeniable, providing a space where young women can negotiate their identity, challenge traditional roles, and participate in a highly dynamic creative economy (Stahl & Literat, 2023).

2. Methodology

The objective of this study is to analyze the factors influencing the digital self-presentation of Generation Z young women on TikTok.

Research Questions

- What factors influence the digital self-presentation of Generation Z women on TikTok?
- How do TikTok's algorithms shape female self-presentation?
- How do Generation Z women perceive authenticity in TikTok self-presentations?

2.1. Data Collection

This study adopts a qualitative approach based on a sample from focus groups and semi-structured interviews to explore how young women from Generation Z construct their self-presentation on TikTok. The methodology is informed by approaches used in previous research. For instance, Manago et al. (2008) employed focus groups to examine gendered self-presentation on MySpace, while Yoanita et al. (2022) investigated Gen Z's self-presentation on Instagram using similar methods. These studies validate the appropriateness of focus groups for exploring collective perspectives and shared social dynamics within digital platforms. Semi-structured interviews, as employed by Bhandari and Bimo (2022) in their exploration of TikTok's algorithmic influence and Kitzie (2019) in studies of LGBTQ+ millennials, provide the flexibility needed to uncover nuanced, individualized experiences.

The data was collected in 2024 from 21 participants, selected through purposive sampling (Mejía Navarrete, 2000) to ensure relevance to the research questions. All participants were women aged 18 to 20, actively using TikTok. The sample included two focus groups composed of private and public university students and nine semi-structured interviews from similar academic contexts, offering insights into differing social and educational backgrounds. This demographic diversity was intended to capture a range of perspectives on self-presentation.

Participants were recruited from both public and private universities to provide valuable insights from diverse social backgrounds. This inclusion aimed to capture a broad spectrum of experiences and perspectives within the Generation Z demographic, enhancing the study's depth and generalizability.

Prior to participation, all individuals provided informed consent, acknowledging their understanding of the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including confidentiality and the option to withdraw at any time. Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to, ensuring that the research complied with established guidelines for human subjects.

Data were gathered through two focus groups, each comprising participants from both public and private universities, and nine individual semi-structured interviews. The focus group discussions and interviews were conducted in settings that were convenient and comfortable for the participants to encourage open and honest dialogue. With the participants' consent, all sessions were recorded to ensure accurate data collection and to facilitate thorough analysis. The recordings allowed for detailed transcription and helped capture the nuances of the conversations, which are essential for qualitative analysis.

2.2. Thematic blocks of analysis

The collected data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis, following the framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was chosen for its effectiveness in identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data. The thematic analysis enabled us to systematically code the data and identify key patterns and categories related to digital identity, gender norms, the attention economy, and community belonging.

The analysis process involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Throughout this iterative process, we remained reflexive and engaged in constant comparison to ensure that the themes accurately represented the participants' experiences and perspectives.

To structure the data collection and analysis, the study was divided into five thematic blocks. These blocks reflect both theoretical foundations and emergent themes from previous studies (e.g., Stahl & Literat, 2023; Roth et al., 2021), ensuring comprehensive exploration of the research questions.

- **Personal and digital identity:** this block examined how participants define their digital identity in relation to their personal self. Questions focused on whether participants perceive their TikTok persona as consistent with their offline personality and how social media has influenced their self-perception over time.
- **Self-presentation:** this section explored the curated aspects of identity that participants choose to showcase on TikTok, along with the pressures to conform to aesthetic standards. Insights were sought on how participants manage fast-changing trends and the importance they place on aligning their digital image with their identity.
- **TikTok's influence:** this block investigated how TikTok shapes self-presentation strategies and how the algorithm-driven personalization of content and its effects on participants' mental health, preferences, and self-perception.
- **Sense of community and belonging:** this block focused on participants' sense of connection within TikTok's networked publics (Boyd, 2014). Participants discussed whether they experienced a sense of belonging and how community interactions facilitated identity exploration and validation.
- **Authenticity:** this final block examined the participants' perceptions of authenticity in their TikTok content and self-expression. Inspired by Pooley's (2010) concept of "calculated authenticity," questions probed the evolution of participants' digital personas and their self-discovery journey through TikTok, compared to other platforms.

Table 1. Thematic blocks

	Focus areas
Personal & digital identity	definition; perception, changes.
Self-presentation	Identity display, trends, digital image.
TikTok influence	Content impact, personalization, mental health.
Sense of community	Connections, shared interests, identity discovery.
Authenticity	Authenticity, content evolution

Source: own elaboration, 2024.

3. Analysis and results

The word cloud highlights the most frequently mentioned terms by the interviewees, with "Exploration," "Community," and "Pressure" standing out as the dominant themes. "Exploration" is the most emphasized term, reflecting a strong focus on curiosity and the desire to discover new experiences or trends. "Community" also emerges as a significant concept, indicating the importance of social belonging and shared interests. Additionally, "Pressure" reveals the challenges or societal expectations faced by the participants.

Other relevant terms, such as "Authenticity," "Trends," and "Personalization," emphasize the participants' interest in staying true to themselves, keeping up with current movements, and tailoring experiences to their preferences. Themes like "Culture," "Fashion," and "Beauty" highlight the aesthetic and lifestyle influences, while "Algorithm" and "TikTok" point to the technological and social media aspects shaping their experiences.

Figure 1. Word Cloud (at least 8 mentions).



Source: own elaboration, 2024.

3.1. Factors influencing female self-presentation

The interviews revealed that aesthetic preferences, algorithmic reinforcement, and peer validation are central to participants' self-representation. Many shared that they choose specific aesthetics to align their digital personas with their personal interests and values. As one participant noted, "I think my style of dressing reflects the type of content I identify with," highlighting the interplay between personal identity and online representation.

The pressure to conform to trends emerged as a significant influence. Participants described how fleeting aesthetics create a constant need to adapt. One explained, "TikTok trends change so quickly that you feel like you have to keep up to stay relevant." Community and peer dynamics also shape self-representation, fostering a strong desire to resonate with their digital audience. "The more cohesive my aesthetic is, the more people identify with it," one participant emphasized, underlining the importance of connection and empathy.

The figure 2 illustrates the key factors influencing the digital self-presentation of Gen Z women on TikTok. The graphic organizes the main drivers into interconnected nodes, highlighting the complex ecosystem of motivations, external pressures, and algorithmic influences shaping their online personas.

At the heart of the diagram is TikTok, positioned as the central hub where all factors converge. Its algorithms not only dictate what content gains visibility but also play a crucial role in shaping trends,

community dynamics, and personal exploration. The platform's design fosters rapid engagement with both macro and microtrends, amplifying their impact on users' self-presentation.

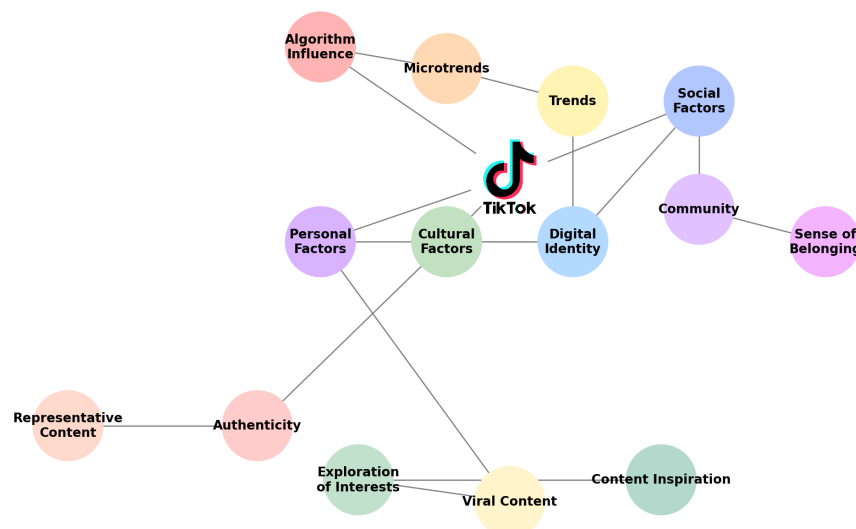
Exploration and trends are significant elements, as reflected in the node "Exploration of Interests," which underscores users' curiosity-driven interactions with the platform. Many participants use TikTok as a tool to discover new content, styles, and ideas, directly influencing their digital identity. Similarly, the node "Trends" highlights dynamic engagement with fleeting movements, often shaped by viral content or peer influence.

Social and personal factors also play an important role. Nodes such as "Community" and "Sense of Belonging" emphasize the importance of social validation and shared cultural spaces. TikTok fosters a sense of inclusion where users can participate in trends or create content aligning with their peer groups. On the personal side, "Authenticity" and "Personal Factors" reflect a dual tension between the desire to present an idealized version of oneself and staying true to one's identity. This delicate balance is a recurring theme among participants.

Algorithmic influence shapes individual choices, as seen in the node "Algorithm Influence," which highlights TikTok's recommendation engine as a key driver of content personalization. This algorithmic curation reinforces specific cultural norms or behaviors, influencing participants' preferences and interactions. For some, this creates a sense of inspiration, while for others, it introduces pressures to conform to certain standards.

The nodes "Digital Identity" and "Cultural Factors" reveal the interplay between personal self-expression and broader societal narratives. TikTok serves as a platform for users to navigate and negotiate their cultural identities, particularly through content creation and engagement with diverse communities. While nodes such as "Community" and "Exploration of Interests" reflect opportunities for creative expression, the earlier word cloud's mention of "Pressure" aligns closely with themes like "Trends" and "Algorithm Influence." Many participants experience implicit societal or algorithmic expectations that can feel overwhelming, even as they engage with the platform's opportunities.

Figure 2. Factors influencing digital self-presentation in Gen Z women on TikTok



Source: own elaboration, 2024.

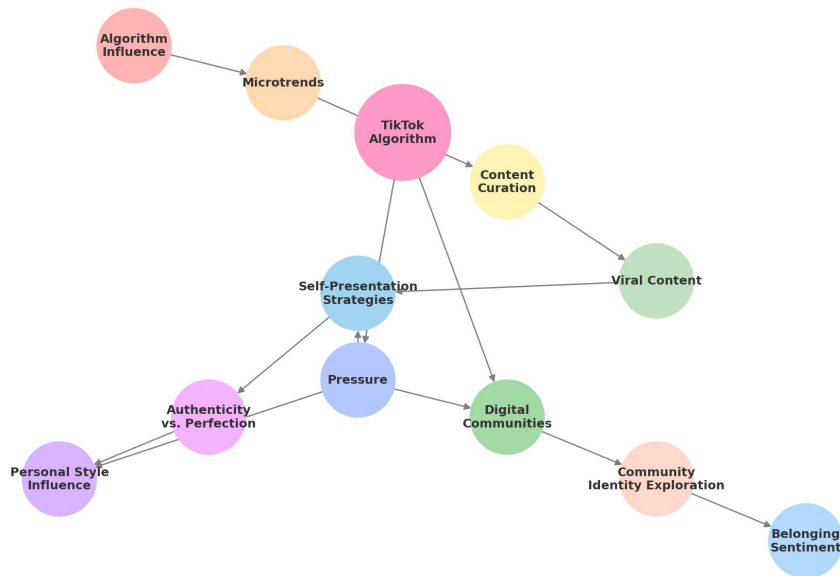
3.2. How TikTok's algorithms shape female self-presentation

TikTok's algorithm has a profound impact on self-representation by promoting specific content and aesthetics. Participants highlighted the algorithm's ability to curate a personalized feed that reinforces certain styles and behaviors. One remarked, "The algorithm keeps showing me videos related to the aesthetics I explore, making me feel like that's what I should be." This aligns with the concept of algorithmic reinforcement, where repeated exposure shapes identity construction.

Another participant commented on how the algorithm accelerates trend cycles: "TikTok trends move so fast; the algorithm amplifies them, making them unavoidable." This creates a feedback loop where users adopt trends to gain visibility, further reinforcing the algorithm's preferences.

The next diagram (figure 3) illustrates the key factors influenced by TikTok's algorithms in shaping the self-presentation of users, particularly women from Generation Z. At the core of the network is the TikTok Algorithm, which functions as the primary driver of behaviors and decisions regarding digital identity and self-presentation. This centrality reflects the algorithm's ability to curate content, promote trends, and establish the visibility of specific microtrends that significantly influence how users perceive and construct their digital personas.

Figure 3. How TikTok's algorithms shape self-presentation



Source: own elaboration, 2024.

The influence of the algorithm extends into multiple interconnected domains. Microtrends, fueled by the algorithm, serve as fleeting but impactful trends that drive content creation and engagement. These trends, often short-lived, are instrumental in encouraging users to adapt their style and participate in viral challenges, thereby reinforcing a cycle of trend adoption and reproduction. The algorithm's role in Content Curation and Viral Content highlights its ability to amplify specific themes, aesthetics, or behaviors, setting the stage for what is deemed popular or desirable on the platform.

One of the major outcomes of this system is the shaping of Self-Presentation Strategies, a set of practices that users adopt to align their digital personas with the prevailing norms and expectations set by the platform's ecosystem. These strategies are not developed in isolation but are heavily influenced by external pressures. The diagram places Pressure as a central factor affecting self-presentation, linking it to both personal style and broader digital communities. This pressure manifests in various forms, from aesthetic expectations to the need to participate in trends, all of which converge to shape users' public identities.

The interaction between Authenticity vs. Perfection and Personal Style Influence represents the tension many users face. While there is a desire to maintain authenticity, the pressure to adhere to algorithm-driven ideals often pushes users toward a curated form of perfection. This tension underscores the challenges users encounter when trying to balance personal expression with platform-driven standards.

Furthermore, the algorithm enables access to Digital Communities, which play a significant role in fostering shared interests and collective identity. These communities provide a sense of belonging and serve as spaces where users can explore identity through shared trends, aesthetics, and narratives. Within these spaces, the concept of Community Identity Exploration emerges as a critical element, where users navigate their roles and relationships in digital environments. The ultimate result of these

interactions is the development of a Belonging Sentiment, a key psychological factor that ties users to their communities and reinforces their engagement with the platform.

TikTok's algorithms deeply shape how Generation Z women construct and navigate their digital self-presentation, as evidenced by the insights from the interviews. Specific examples highlight the mechanisms through which these algorithms influence their online identities and behaviors.

Four participants mentioned that TikTok's ability to tailor content based on their interactions creates a reinforcing loop of identity. One explained, "When I like videos about a specific aesthetic, the algorithm keeps showing me similar content. It makes me feel like that's who I should be, even if I didn't think about it before." This constant exposure not only strengthens their preferences but also impacts real-life decisions, such as adopting new habits or purchasing products seen in videos.

The fast pace of trends was identified as a source of pressure by five participants. One stated, "Trends on TikTok move so fast. You see one thing today, and by the time you've thought about trying it, everyone's already moved on to something else. It's exhausting to keep up." This rapid cycle creates a sense of urgency to stay relevant, often leaving users feeling overwhelmed.

Three participants highlighted the role of digital communities in fostering a sense of belonging and validation. One shared, "I've found people who get my humor and interests on TikTok. It's like a safe space where I can explore who I am without feeling judged." Another added, "Joining these communities makes me feel connected, even if it's just through a screen." These communities provide not only a social outlet but also a framework for users to experiment with and affirm their identity.

The tension between authenticity and perfection was noted by four participants. While they expressed a desire to present an authentic version of themselves, they also felt the pull of curated, idealized aesthetics promoted by the platform. As one explained, "I try to stay true to myself, but it's hard when you see everyone looking perfect and following the same trends. Sometimes it feels like you have to fit in to be seen." These examples reveal how TikTok's algorithmic structure functions both as a mirror and a mold for Generation Z women, allowing them to explore their identity while subtly defining the boundaries within which that exploration takes place.

3.3. How do Generation Z women perceive authenticity in TikTok self-presentations?

Authenticity was perceived as a complex and relative concept. Many participants described a tension between being genuine and adhering to platform-driven aesthetics. As one participant explained, "I want to be authentic, but there's always that pressure to conform to what's popular on TikTok." Interestingly, authenticity was often associated with spontaneity and empathy. For instance, one participant noted, "When I stopped curating my posts and shared what felt natural, I received more engagement." This highlights a preference for "calculated authenticity," where users balance personal expression with audience expectations. Authenticity also emerged as a form of resistance to algorithmic norms. "I try to create a feed that reflects who I am, not just what TikTok promotes," shared one participant, emphasizing the active role users play in constructing their digital identity.

From the interviews, Generation Z women reveal a complex perception of authenticity on TikTok, where the concept is shaped by several interrelated factors. Many participants acknowledge a tension between genuine self-expression and the external pressures of curated, idealized aesthetics. One respondent emphasized, "I try to be myself, but there's always this push to match what's trending or what people expect to see." This highlights how pressure to conform can overshadow individual authenticity. The algorithm plays a significant role by promoting curated content that aligns with platform-wide trends, subtly encouraging users to adapt their self-presentation.

Despite this, several participants found TikTok to be a space for creative freedom, allowing them to experiment with different facets of their identity. "TikTok gives me the chance to try new styles or ideas without judgment," said one interviewee, reflecting how the platform fosters a duality of exploration and conformity. Validation from digital communities also emerged as a critical aspect. "When people comment or interact with my videos, I feel seen and understood," shared another respondent, emphasizing how community interactions can enhance the feeling of authenticity, even when content is curated.

Ultimately, participants described their experience as a balancing act between staying true to their personal identity and meeting the platform's aesthetic expectations. This balance is a recurring theme, encapsulating the struggle to maintain authenticity in an environment heavily influenced by algorithmic curation and societal norms.

3.4. Age-based differences in young females' self-presentation on TikTok

Although all participants were young women aged 18 to 20, subtle differences emerged between the older and younger individuals. Women aged 20 tended to exhibit greater reflection on their digital identities and expressed a stronger concern for maintaining authenticity in their self-expression on TikTok. These participants frequently highlighted the importance of balancing their online presence with their offline identities. They were also more critical of the algorithm's influence on their behavior and self-image. As one participant explained, "I try to be mindful of how I present myself online, ensuring it aligns with who I am offline." This age group demonstrated a more deliberate approach to digital self-representation, emphasizing intentionality and alignment with personal values.

In contrast, the 18-year-old participants appeared more open to experimenting with various trends and aesthetics, showing less concern about maintaining a consistent image. They exhibited a more exploratory attitude, focusing on spontaneity and adaptability rather than the long-term implications of their online personas. One participant remarked, "I enjoy trying out different trends—it's fun, and I don't feel the need to stick to one thing." This group was more inclined to follow microtrends and quickly adapt to the dynamic nature of the platform, demonstrating a playful and less critical engagement with TikTok's algorithm and aesthetics. These differences suggest that age, even within a narrow range, can influence how young women navigate and negotiate their digital identities.

4. Discussion and conclusions

This study explores the intricate ways in which TikTok influences the digital self-presentation of Generation Z women, intertwining empirical insights with established theoretical frameworks. By delving into the intersection of algorithmic influence, community dynamics, societal pressures, and the quest for authenticity, the research sheds light on the evolving nature of digital identity construction.

The algorithm emerges as a pivotal force, not only curating content but also shaping user behaviors and perceptions. Participants consistently highlighted how TikTok's algorithms reinforce specific aesthetic and cultural norms, creating a feedback loop that influences both online and offline identities. One respondent observed, "The more I interact with a particular style, the more TikTok reinforces it, almost deciding who I should be." This reflects Van Dijck's (2013) assertion that social media platforms mold identity through calculated interactions, prioritizing curated performance over organic authenticity. Furthermore, the algorithm amplifies aesthetic ideals that align with Hallinan and Striphas's (2016) concept of "algorithmic aesthetic," reinforcing the dominance of normative beauty standards, as described by Elias and Gill (2018).

TikTok also serves as a space for community building and social validation. For many participants, the platform offers "safe spaces" where humor and shared interests foster a sense of belonging. This aligns with boyd's (2010) notion of "networked publics," though it operates within the constraints of Kanai's (2019) framework, which underscores the gendered and aesthetic norms required for validation. One participant noted, "TikTok is where I find people who share my humor and interests, but there's always an expectation to look or act a certain way."

The tension between individuality and conformity is a recurring theme, illustrating Mead's (1934) distinction between the inner "I" and the socially responsive "me." Respondents frequently described the pressure to align their self-presentation with trending content while attempting to remain authentic. One participant confessed, "I try to stay true to myself, but the pressure to fit into trends is overwhelming." This dynamic reflects Goffman's (1956) metaphor of identity as a performance, where users balance societal expectations with personal expression. Bauman's (2001) concept of "liquid modernity" further contextualizes this struggle, as TikTok's rapid trend cycles demand constant adaptation.

Despite these challenges, TikTok offers opportunities for identity exploration, embodying Pooley's notion of "calculated authenticity." Several participants valued the platform as a space for experimentation, allowing them to test new ideas and styles without fear of judgment. One explained, "TikTok lets me try out new aspects of myself in a way other platforms don't." This dual role of TikTok—as a site for creativity and a space constrained by norms—underscores its complexity as a digital ecosystem.

The findings of this study are limited by the cultural and demographic scope, focusing on young women aged 18–20 within specific educational contexts. Future research should expand this scope to include non-binary individuals, diverse age groups, and participants from varying cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into how TikTok's evolving algorithms

and societal trends shape self-presentation over time. Additionally, comparative analyses with other platforms like Instagram would enrich understanding of TikTok's unique influence on digital identity.

By synthesizing participant insights with foundational theories, this study underscores TikTok's dual role as both a mirror and a mold for Generation Z women. The platform not only reflects users' identities but actively shapes them through algorithmic curation, societal pressures, and community dynamics. These findings illuminate the nuanced interplay between individuality, conformity, and technology, offering a comprehensive perspective on the digital self in the age of social media. Ultimately, TikTok exemplifies the complexities of navigating identity in a highly visible, algorithm-driven ecosystem, providing a rich avenue for future research into the evolving landscape of digital expression.

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