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SOCIAL MEDIA AS SYMBOLIC SPACE: IMPLICATIONS OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM ON GENERATION Z SELF-IMAGE AND SELF-ACCEPTANCE

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Abstract

This study investigates the complex dynamics of self-image formation and self-acceptance among female Generation Z university students on Instagram. Using a descriptive qualitative approach grounded in symbolic interactionism, research was conducted at Tazkia University with five female students selected through criterion-based selection. Data were collected via in-depth interviews, digital observations, and documentation, then analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model assisted by NVivo 15. The findings reveal that participants engage in meticulous visual planning, treating their Instagram feeds as professional portfolios rather than spontaneous expressions. This process involves a constant dialogue between the "I" (authentic self) and the "Me" (socialized self), where visual elements like color grading and aesthetics serve as significant symbols for self-branding. The study also identifies a distinct digital identity duality, where participants utilize "first" and "second" accounts to negotiate between public "front stage" expectations and private "back stage" authenticity. Furthermore, digital interactions, such as likes and comments,function as "social mirrors" that significantly impact self-perception and self-worth. Despite the pressures of algorithmic trends and social comparison, participants achieve self-acceptance through a reflective reinterpretation of digital symbols and the support of offline social environments. This research concludes that self-construction on Instagram is an active, agentic process where users strategically manage symbolic boundaries to protect their self-identity. These results contribute to a deeper understanding of digital identity management and the psychological resilience of Generation Z in visual-centric social media environments.

Keywords: *self-image, self-acceptance, social media, symbolic interactionism, digital identity*

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INTRODUCTION

The advent of social media, a product of technological advancement, is a hallmark of the current era of globalization. Internet use has become an inseparable part of daily life, making internet-based communication an integrated component of various aspects of human existence. The development of social media is also inextricably linked to the rapid progress of communication technology devices, such as gadgets and telecommunication networks, which enable society to both produce and consume digital content massively (Suryadi & Nugraha, 2022).

According to the *Survei Penetrasi Internet Indonesia 2024*, Indonesia's internet penetration rate reached 79.5% of its total population of 278,696,200 people in 2023 (APJII, 2024). Generation Z is recorded as the group with the highest internet penetration rate, reaching 87.02%, with the majority of its users being students at 95.92%. Social media use is the top reason for Indonesians to use the internet daily. DataReportal also shows that from early 2024 to early 2025, at least 143 million Indonesian residents are active social media users, equivalent to 50.2% of the national population (Kemp, 2025).

This situation illustrates that the socio-emotional development of the current generation occurs in digital spaces (O'Keeffe & Pearson, 2011; Nurbaiti, 2023; Shetu et al., 2024), including social media, which is not only an effective communication tool but also a dynamic digital space for identity construction (Khazraee & Novak, 2018; Rosana & Fauzi, 2024). This is evident in Generation Z, who have grown up alongside technology and the internet since childhood (Fajrina & Purba, 2024), leading to different interaction patterns and unique ways for them to present and form their identity through social media.

Social media refers to a collection of internet-based applications that enable users to create and share content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kietzmann et al., 2011). It facilitates active participation in sharing and developing ideas, leading to faster two-way interaction (Whiting & Williams, 2013; Mutiah et al., 2019; Gil et al., 2020). Social media platforms encourage users to create engaging content, foster dialogue, and communicate with broad audiences (Kapoor et al., 2018). It has evolved into a diverse and widespread communication tool, allowing content sharing across various platforms (Singh et al., 2022).

While social media offers a space to expand connectivity and creative self-expression, its omnipresence in the lives of Generation Z poses critical and complex psychological challenges regarding how individuals perceive themselves and are perceived by others (Li et al., 2019; Austin et al., 2021). Visual-based social media like Instagram tend to have a more dysfunctional impact on body image (Vandenbosch et al., 2022). Empirical evidence indicates that social media use is associated with lower body image (Rodgers & Rousseau, 2022), although the effects range from small to moderate, highlighting an immediate risk to self-perception of young users.

Furthermore, Instagram browsing activity is also associated with lower levels of body appreciation and is entirely mediated by the tendency for social comparison with social media influencers (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022). Calverley and Grieve (2021) explain that exposure to idealized images displayed by influencers can significantly increase body dissatisfaction.

Although some social media content, such as body positivity, may have positive effects, exposure to idealized images generally leads to negative outcomes (Vandenbosch et al., 2022). This dissatisfaction, often exacerbated by the constant performance required on platforms like Instagram, not only affects how individuals view their bodies but also critically undermines their self-acceptance. Self-acceptance relates to an individual's understanding of themselves. Self-acceptance is believed to be an individual's ability to openly accept their perceived limitations without avoiding or denying them (Jersild et al., 1975; Klussman et al., 2022). Rogers (1951) viewed self-acceptance as an important factor for optimal mental well-being. The consequences of this weakened self-acceptance are empirically alarming; low self-acceptance is associated with significantly higher levels of depression and anxiety among young adults, with social comparison acting as a key mediator in this relationship (Ruan et al., 2023).

The behaviour of comparing oneself to others is a common phenomenon in social media use. Social media platforms like Instagram constantly expose users to the appearances, achievements, and lifestyles of others. Increased digital media use can amplify the pressure to present oneself as best as possible, as individuals are increasingly

exposed to images and videos of attractive people (Kelley, 2019; Mafra et al., 2022). Women who strongly tie their self-esteem to their appearance will have a higher risk of negative impacts from social media (Rodgers & Rousseau, 2022). The importance of an individual's ability to self-regulate becomes crucial when facing various demands and roles, a challenge also experienced by university students with diverse responsibilities beyond their main academic activities (Dananier & Khotimah, 2021). The above findings highlight the complex relationship between self-image, self-acceptance, and social media.

Most research still focuses on issues between social media and images related to individuals' physical aspects, such as body image, body appreciation, and body dissatisfaction, while researchers find that there is still a critical empirical blind spot in examining the aspects of self-image comprehensively in the context of social media.

Given the strong empirical link between low self-acceptance and heightened levels of depression and anxiety among young people (Ruan et al., 2023) and the overwhelming presence of social media in their identity formation (Paragraph 3), the lack of a comprehensive understanding of how this generation constructs a multi-faceted self-image represents an urgent empirical challenge with profound implications for student mental health and academic success.

Maltz (1964) first introduced the self-image term as an individual's perception of themselves based on how others view who they are. Millon (in Immelman, 2003) explains that self-image is an individual's way of understanding themselves as an object. According to Jersild (in Ni'mah & Rohmatun, 2017; Permata & Nasution, 2024), there are three aspects of self-image: (1) Perceptual component, or physical self-image; (2) Conceptual component, or physical self-image; (3) Attitudinal component, or social self-image. Social interaction, including interaction on social media, plays a significant role in shaping these three aspects and a complete self-image. This gap indicates that the study of self-image in the context of social media needs to be expanded beyond just the physical aspect to include personal and social aspects that have been overlooked.

Social media platforms become symbolic spaces where self-perception is continuously constructed and negotiated, especially for Generation Z, whose identity formation process occurs concurrently with their involvement in the digital environment. When users perform actions such as uploading, liking, commenting, and exchanging messages, user engagement on social media goes beyond mere content sharing; it involves meaningful symbolic dialogue. These interactions manifest as symbolic interactions that can create meanings about beauty, success, worth, and authenticity (Segaard, 2015; Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016; Maares et al., 2021). A symbolic interactionism perspective views users not only as creators of content on social media but also as products of digital symbolic interactions (Solomon, 1983; Bourdieu, 1989). Understanding how this generation forms self-image and negotiates self-acceptance on social media is key to revealing the complex dynamics often hidden beneath the surface. To address this critical empirical gap and to provide foundational data for effective intervention strategies, this research sets out with the main objective of exploring the symbolic interaction processes used by Generation Z in building self-image and negotiating self-acceptance on social media platforms.

This research will refer to Symbolic Interactionism, a term first introduced by Herbert Blumer in 1937. Blumer used this term to describe a sociological framework derived from Mead's thought. This theory emphasizes that meaning and self are formed from social interaction (Tavory, 2016). Mead (in Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2018) states that symbolic gestures play an important role in the interpretation process in social interaction. Ritzer & Stepnisky (2018) further explain that these symbols are a type of gesture used specifically by humans.

Blumer (1969) mentions that symbolic interactionism is based on three main premises. First, individuals act towards things based on the meaning those things have for them. These things can include physical objects, other people, categories of people, institutions, ideals, and situations encountered in daily life. Second, the meaning of these things arises from social interaction with other people. Third, these meanings are interpreted and modified through a process whereby individuals make sense of the things they encounter. Each of these premises is very important for understanding symbolic interactionism. In the context of social media,

the self is a continuous reflection formed and reconstructed through social interaction. Digital symbols, such as likes, comments, posts, and feedback from others, mediate how individuals make sense of themselves and others.

Based on the explanation above, this research will uncover how female students of Tazkia University give meaning and construct their self-image through symbolic interaction on Instagram and how they develop self-acceptance in response to symbolic cues received on Instagram. These questions are aligned with a broader effort to understand the dynamics of self-interpretation among Generation Z users and digital symbols on social media. By using a symbolic interactionism approach, researchers aim to analyse the dynamics of meaning and symbols hidden behind seemingly simple social media interactions, which nonetheless have profound implications for young people's self-understanding today.

METHODOLOGY

This study is conducted within an interpretivist paradigm using a qualitative methodology. Specifically, it employs a descriptive qualitative research design framed by the theoretical lens of Symbolic Interactionism. This design is chosen to provide a nuanced, in-depth description of how female students construct self-image and achieve self-acceptance through digital symbols on Instagram.

The subjects of this research are referred to as participants. In alignment with qualitative inquiry, participants were not selected through statistical sampling but through criterion-based selection. Five female students from Tazkia University were selected based on specific criteria: (1) daily Instagram use more than 3 hours, and (2) high involvement in digital interactions that contribute to their self-perception and acceptance.

The research was conducted through a systematic sequence of procedures designed to ensure a rigorous qualitative inquiry. The process began with the preparation phase, which involved designing the interview protocols and administering a preliminary screening questionnaire to identify participants who met the established criteria. Following participant selection, the data collection phase was initiated, utilizing semi-structured in-depth interviews to capture the participants' narratives, alongside digital observations of their Instagram activities and the collection of documentation such as posts and captions.

Once the data were gathered, the data processing phase commenced using NVivo 15 software to systematically organize and code the raw qualitative material. The data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, involving the iterative processes of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. Finally, a thematic interpretation was applied, utilizing Symbolic Interactionism as a theoretical lens to identify patterns of meaning regarding how digital symbols are used to construct self-image and self-acceptance.

The study utilized methodological triangulation to ensure the trustworthiness by corroborating interview data with digital observations and documentation. Reliability was maintained through a rigorous and transparent thematic analysis process. Limitations include the specific scope of female students at Tazkia University and the focus on a single visual platform (Instagram), which may not reflect the experiences of all Gen Z users across different social media environments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
1. Self-Image Management

The presence of Instagram is utilized by its users as a space to display parts of themselves that they deem worthy of showing. Based on the researchers' observations, participants not only pay attention to the physical appearance they show to many people, but also to how the overall visual appearance of their account is perceived by many people. This meticulous planning is evidenced by the participants refusal to post content that does not meet their standards. As Participants M3 emphasized this by stating, *"If it's horrible, I definitely won't post it"*, viewing the platform instead as a "portfolio".

Participants stated that they were unable to present themselves spontaneously without going through various considerations. They consider that other elements, such as colour tone, feed aesthetics, and account appearance consistency, are as important as physical aspects when uploading photos or videos to their personal accounts. Decisions before

uploading must be carefully considered, as they try to avoid content that may disrupt the harmony of their feed display. Therefore, the researcher concludes that participants undertake meticulous visual planning in uploading content.

In the context of symbolic interactionism, the participants' actions are understood by the researcher as a form of digital communication through visual symbols. Elements such as colour tone and feed display become significant symbols that convey messages of self-branding to others. Participants implicitly 'communicate' with their audience through the visuals they present on their accounts, as Participant M2 explained, "*Usually I unify color grading with previous posts to make it look pleasant to the eye*" and these visuals carry social meanings that participants and other users wish to interpret positively. There is a connection here with the concept of 'Me' in symbolic interactionism, where individuals place themselves as objects of social evaluation and adjust their behaviour to meet the social expectations of their social environment.

Furthermore, the majority of participants utilize filters and editing as a strategy to build desired impressions. Participant M3 mentioned using filters to provide variation so as not to look rigid. The researchers view this not just as an aesthetic choice, but as an effort to manage how they are perceived by using symbols as tools to communicate self-image. Participant M5 admitted that while she tries to be honest, she is 100% attentive to appearance before uploading. This confirms that Instagram symbols have an intersubjective function, where Instagram is not only a space to show who we are but also a platform to build the best version of ourselves, regardless of whether it is entirely consistent with reality.

Participant M4 also mentioned that decisions regarding self-presentation on Instagram can receive social approval from others, even before the content is published. This confirms that self-image formation on social media is not merely an individual process but involves complex dynamics, such as assumptions about what is desired, valued, or accepted by others.

These research findings align with previous studies highlighting the importance of visual strategies in forming self-image on social media. Adilia and Wijayani (2024) showed that students actively use visual elements such as photos, captions, filters, and hashtags in constructing their self-presentation on Instagram. Other research by Zakirah (2020) also supports that the choice of photo location, camera angle, and even makeup use are conscious strategies in constructing the desired self-image. These studies reinforce the position that visual symbols are not merely aesthetic aspects, but also part of symbolic practices in forming a self-image that is socially and culturally recognized by digital audiences.

Thus, self-image management on Instagram can be understood as a process of identity construction through visual symbols, which are arranged, selected, and published based on a dialogue between individual desires and social expectations. Instagram becomes a symbolic space where individuals negotiate between authentic self-expression and social demands that are not always visible.

2. Digital Identity Duality

The researchers found that all participants divided their digital identities by using two Instagram accounts: a first account (main account) and a second/dummy account (backup account). Each account represents a different side of the self, adjusted to its differing social contexts. The first account tends to be used by participants to display a more guarded, professional, and presentable side of themselves to a wider audience. This version of the self is primarily governed by the 'Me', which internalizes social standards to ensure the individual remains presentable to the generalized other. Conversely, participants utilize the second account as a more personal space to express themselves more freely and reveal parts of themselves that they usually do not want to show to the public.

Observations show that participants meticulously designed the profiles they created on their first accounts. This was evident in the choice of username, visually appealing content, the selection of songs and captions that matched the mood of their uploads, and the consistent arrangement of their feeds. Participant M2 highlighted this by stating her goal was "self-branding" and ensuring color grading matched previous posts so her account looked pleasant to the eye. In this context, the Instagram feed acts as a significant symbol where its visual harmony communicates a

message of competence and curated identity to the audience. In contrast, participants' second accounts usually displayed more unedited visuals. They also opted for more raw, even humorous, usernames and bios. Furthermore, participants seemed to have no difficulty showing their emotional side or sharing private events on their second accounts.

Referring to the interviews, the majority of participants explained feeling uncomfortable showing their 'true' selves on their first account without filtering it first. Participant M4 described the identity on her first account as being "calmer" (*lebih kalem*) than her actual personality. This discomfort arises from the process of taking the role of the toher, where the participant anticipates the judgement of their broad audience and adjusts their behavior to avoid social friction. Participants admitted that the self they displayed on their first account almost or even completely did not reflect their real-world selves. Participant M1 noted that while her first account feed is like "selling" a specific personal positioning and strictly organized, her second account provided the freedom to be her real self.

These findings strengthen Mead's view on the concept of self, where the self is formed through a reflective process and dialogue between the 'Me' and the 'I'. The presence of the 'Me', which is the part of the self that reflects the social views of others, was predominantly felt on the first account, where individuals displayed a version of the self adapted to perceived social norms. Conversely, the second account became a free space for the 'I' to share a more spontaneous, personal, and authentic side. Participant M3 confirmed this, stating that the second account reflects her life as it truly is.

Interestingly, although the second account is positioned as a space for freer and more authentic expression, participants still select the content they upload. Claims of "being authentic" on the second account still involve a filtering process, albeit with looser social control. Participant M5 admitted that she felt she could be more honest and herself on her second account, but she still only chose to display her best side. This underscores that intersubjectivity on social media remains even in private spaces; the self-representation is never completely detached from the expectation that an audience, no matter how small, will interpret these symbols

Therefore, the existence of two accounts is not just a matter of personal need, but also a symbolic strategy for managing interactions and differentiating who is involved in the constructed self-narrative. Even seemingly spontaneous expressions of 'I' are still framed by certain social rules. Thus, the self on social media is always born from a negotiation between personal desires and the expectations of others.

The use of two accounts by individuals to differentiate between a selectively constructed self and a more freely expressed self has strong support from previous research. Rezi et al. (2024) found that students use dual accounts on Instagram to separate public and private representations. This strategy reflects an awareness of different audiences and also demonstrates a form of symbolic adaptation to social norms in digital spaces. Tobing et al. (2023) further categorized this as public identity (front stage) and private identity (back stage) on Instagram. By utilizing different accounts, participants are engaging in symbolic adaptation, shifting the meaning of their "self" based on the digital stage they occupy.

Thus, the duality of digital identity reflects the complexity of self-construction, where individuals consciously choose which version of themselves to display through various symbolic strategies. Instagram is not just a visual platform, but a space for social interaction that demands different symbolic strategies to maintain the boundaries between the 'social self' and the 'personal self'.

3. Symbolic Meaning in Online Interaction

One important finding in this research is how participants interpret digital symbols such as likes, comments, stories, and posts as essential elements in understanding themselves on social media. Interactions on Instagram are not only viewed as a space for information exchange but also as a social reflection that influences how they see themselves and how they feel accepted by their environment. In the view of symbolic interactionism, these interactions serves as social cues that allow the individual to assess their position in the eyes of others.

The empirical data show that participants interpret feedback, such as likes and comments, are not merely understood as technical metrics but as significant symbols of

validation. Participant M5 expressed that receiving likes and supportive comments on her achievement post makes her feel deeply supported by friends and more confident in her own worth. Similarly, Participant M3 noted that positive feedback acts as a motivation to continue presenting herself in a particular way. The concept of the generalized other in symbolic interactionism becomes relevant here, as individuals tend to form an image of themselves based on the collective views of others towards them. Participant M2 even linked these symbols to professional success, noting that engagement is a vital symbol for her personal branding and career in social media management.

Conversely, negative feedback, even ambiguous feedback such as the absence of feedback, can act as a social mirror that disrupts self-perception. This is a clear manifestation of the looking-glass self, where the individual's self-concept is shaped by how they imagine others are judging them. Participant M4 shared a poignant example, a simple comment about her crooked headscarf caused her to obsess over the statement and eventually take down the post. Participant M3 also admitted that low engagement triggers internal doubt, causing her to ask, "*Am I hideous?*". These instances show that even subtle or unintentional feedback symbols like this can trigger deep self-reflection. These feedback symbols operate like 'social mirrors' that can reinforce, disrupt, or even change an individual's self-perception.

Symbols are also present in the content consumed from others, which often triggers social comparison. For example, Participant M3 described seeing an acquaintance with a latest model of phone and immediately labeling that person as having a high salary. This indicates that what is seen from other people's posts can be automatically interpreted as a symbol of social status or success, and can trigger social comparison. Thus, symbols in posts can not only internally shape self-image but also guide individuals to evaluate themselves through an external lens.

However, the researchers found that the meaning of symbols is not always swallowed whole by those who consume them. Some participants showed a reflective and critical attitude towards the authenticity of the social symbols they received. Participants are aware that symbols on social media are not always truthful and begin to analyse the authenticity of the digital interactions they experience. Participant M5 mentioned that overly general positive comments might just be polite gestures, as she herself admitted to having done the same thing. This indicates social media interaction is an active process of contextual interpretation, where participants analyze the truthfulness of symbols rather than reacting to them passively.

The interpretation of digital symbols such as likes, comments, and stories as social representations has been discussed in various studies. A study by Ismail et al. (2024) shows that feedback in the form of comments or likes can strengthen users' self-affirmation on social media, although sometimes accompanied by fear of negative judgment. Similarly, Thomas et al. (2020) state that social validation significantly impacts self-perception and self-acceptance, especially when that validation is considered authentic. This research confirms that digital symbols are not just technical features, but also a means of forming social meaning about identity and self-worth in the eyes of others.

Thus, online interaction on Instagram not only creates technological experiences but also forms a symbolic field where individuals negotiate their identity and self-worth. This process demonstrates that self-image on social media is not just about physical appearance, but also about how individuals understand and respond to the social symbols inherent in every aspect of social media.

4. Negotiation on Self-Acceptance

Amidst social media pressures and high social expectations, participants in this study showed that the process of self-acceptance is non-linear and complex. This self-acceptance does not appear instantly; rather, participants strive to fully accept themselves through a reinterpretation of digital symbols they encountered in their environment. Participant M1 shared a pivotal moment of self-realization regarding the pressure to conform, stating, "*Why would I force myself to like that? This is a hobby, it should be enjoyed to the fullest*". In the framework of symbolic interactionism, this represents a shift where the individual prioritizes the spontaneous and authentic impulses of the 'I' over the socialized, demanding expectations of the 'Me'.

Some participants admitted to feeling emotionally unsafe when viewing the achievements of others, which they interpreted as ideal standards that disturbed their own self-acceptance. Participant M5 noted that seeing the extraordinary achievements of others can lead her to feel stressed and feel that she must show the same thing so as not to appear inferior. However, participants were able to reinterpret these achievements after a complex negotiation process between the ideal standards they understood and the reality they personally experienced. This indicates that symbolic meaning is not static; it can be shifted through personal reflection. For example, Participant M2 said that she now feels happy seeing other people's achievements rather than feeling threatened.

Researchers observed that participants utilize their own uploads as a form of positive self-affirmation. Participant M5 explained that she shares achievement moments as a "*form of self-validation for the struggles I have gone through*". When digital symbols, such as a post or a caption, are interpreted for personal satisfaction rather than external recognition, they become tools for internalizing a positive self-concept. This shows a shift from an identity shaped entirely by external symbols to a more personal and contextual view of digital life. Participant M4 reinforced this by stating that even if she does not post an achievement, she still feels proud of her achievement *off camera*. Individuals begin to understand that they are not obligated to constantly meet existing social expectations and that likes and comments are not absolute measures of self-worth.

The participants' self-acceptance process is significantly reinforced by the presence of their offline social environment. Participant M5 emphasized that she tries to believe she deserves love from the closest people rather than just relying on the validation of likes or comments. The real-world environment acts as a counterbalance to the 'social mirrors' of the digital world, helping individuals stay connected with their true selves. Participant M1 noted that "*If you are already comfortable and content with yourself, you just need to adjust*".

These results align with several studies showing that individuals, especially university students, experience complex dynamics in achieving self-acceptance through symbolic interaction on social media. Regita et al. (2024) highlight how exposure to social standards and comparison with others on social media can trigger psychological pressure, such as anxiety and self-dissatisfaction. Hatun and Kurtca (2023) note that young social media users often feel pressured by the digital social context that makes it difficult for them to present an authentic self. However, through self-reflection and social support, many of them are eventually able to achieve a more complete self-acceptance.

Thus, the process of self-acceptance in Generation Z on Instagram is a reflective process, where individuals not only strive to understand themselves but also reorder the symbolic meaning of the social and digital experiences they encounter every day.

5. Adaptation to Social Media Trends

Instagram, as a digital space, is not just a place for self-display but also a significant source of social pressure. Participants in this study showed various forms of adaptation and coping mechanisms to deal with social expectations, algorithmic demands, and emotional dynamics arising from online interactions. This adaptation occurs through conscious efforts to limit the audience, avoid certain content, or deactivate accounts. In the context of symbolic interactionism, these adaptations represent agentic efforts by individuals to protect their self-concept by managing the flow of symbols they consume and project.

Participants mentioned that they utilize Instagram's technical features, such as 'hide' or 'mute', to protect themselves from social pressure caused by certain content. Observations also showed that participants use the 'close friends' feature as a form of control over their audience. Participant 3 also explained that she hides specific people because she feels uneasy with their presence. Similarly, Participant M4 noted that if she encounters unpleasant comments, she chooses to immediately cut-off or block the user. These choices are not merely technical; they are symbolic strategies used to assert control over who can participate in the informant's constructed self-narrative. From a symbolic interactionism perspective, this reflects individuals' efforts to maintain digital interaction boundaries that they feel are safe and healthy.

Participants also adapt to algorithmic systems that encourage following specific trends to remain visible. Participant M5 admitted that the uniform way of thinking on Instagram, where users constantly trigger each other to show off achievements, became too "toxic" for her. To cope, some participants adopt a neutral attitude. Participant M2 mentioned that she no longer feels pressured to follow trends just to look cool, stating that her strong life principles prevent such things from dropping her self-confidence. By refusing to follow the algorithmic flow, these individuals are resisting the generalized other's definition of success. However, not all participants were concerned with constantly following algorithmic developments. Although observations showed that some participants participated in trending videos on social media, they expressed a neutral attitude towards the algorithmic flow they faced. This attitude helped them maintain self-control amidst the strong digital currents.

Many people can interpret posts such as achievements, lifestyles, or good moments in other people's lives as standards of success. Such symbolic interpretation can create pressure for participants who view it. When digital pressure reaches a certain point, most participants choose to take a break from their social media activities as a form of self-care. Participant M5 described that she decided to deactivate her account or even delete the Instagram application as a necessary escape from the toxic environment of social media. This withdrawal allows the individual to return to a private space to restore a self-perception that may have been shaken by the constant social mirrors on the screen. This shows that the meaning given to digital symbols highly depends on the individual user's interpretation and can significantly impact self-acceptance.

These findings enrich the study by Mahon and Hevey (2021), which revealed that young people strive to form and maintain their self-image by limiting negative content and engaging with more positive content. These efforts are also accompanied by cognitive strategies through the critical evaluation of behaviour seen on social media. Adaptation to this digital flow can also be linked to research by Kalpokas et al. (2020), which showed that students respond to social media in a way that tends to follow its flow, without much awareness of how the platform shapes their appearance and interaction. This adjustment is not just about technology, but also about how they deal with emerging social pressures. In some cases, they choose to keep their distance or reduce involvement as a form of self-protection.

Thus, adaptation to social media trends by Generation Z can be understood as an effort to survive in the complex digital symbolic interaction space. They do not passively face digital pressures but interpret, choose, and respond to the social symbols they encounter daily as part of a conscious process of protecting and reshaping their self-identity.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that Instagram serves as a critical symbolic space where female Generation Z students actively construct and negotiate their self-image. The findings highlight that self-presentation is not a mere display of physical appearance but a sophisticated process of managing visual symbols, such as feed harmony and color grading, to meet perceived social expectations of the "generalized other". The prevalence of dual-account usage reveals a strategic identity duality, allowing individuals to navigate the tension between the "Me" (a curated, professional persona on main accounts) and the "I" (a more spontaneous, authentic self on second accounts). Ultimately, digital symbols like likes and comments function as powerful 'social mirrors' that can either validate or disrupt an individual's self-concept, depending on the user's critical interpretation of these digital cues.

Furthermore, the study concludes that self-acceptance in the digital age is a non-linear, reflective process achieved through the reinterpretation of social standards. While Instagram can act as a source of "toxic" pressure and social comparison, participants demonstrate agency by utilizing technical features, such as muting, hiding, or deactivating accounts, as symbolic strategies to maintain healthy interaction boundaries. Self-acceptance is ultimately reinforced by a combination of digital self-affirmation and the stability provided by offline social support systems. These findings emphasize that Generation Z users are not passive subjects of social media influence but are active agents who constantly negotiate, interpret, and reshape their digital identities to align with

their evolving self-worth.

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