

GEN Z'S DIGITAL LIFE: SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS AS A MEANS OF OPEN AND HIDDEN EXPRESSION

Nizike Maiza Farin Ananta Purba¹ , Zahra Putri Arifin² , Muhammad Hafizh³

SMAS Unggulan Al-Azhar Medan, Kota Medan, Sumatera Utara 20142

Email: nizike.maiza12@gmail.com, zahraputri911@gmail.com
mohammadhafizh2210@gmail.com

Received :10 November 2025

Published : 02 January 2026

Revised :25 November 2025

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.54443/ijset.v5i1.1543>

Accepted :20 December 2025

Link Publish : <https://www.ijset.org/index.php/ijset/index>

Abstract

Generation Z grew up in a digital era that has made social media a primary platform for self-expression and identity formation. This study aims to describe Gen Z's overt and covert social media expression patterns and the factors that influence them. The method used was **descriptive quantitative**, with **an online questionnaire** conducted with **66 Gen Z respondents** aged 15–25. The research results show that primary accounts are used to maintain social image, while alternate or anonymous accounts provide a more free and authentic space for personal expression. The dominant factors driving the use of secondary accounts are the need for privacy and the comfort of being authentic. This phenomenon illustrates that Gen Z has a flexible and dynamic digital identity that adapts to the audience's context. This research emphasizes the importance of **digital literacy and self-identity awareness** so that social media can be used healthily and responsibly.

Keywords: *Generation Z, social media, self-expression, digital identity, alternative accounts*

INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology in recent years has significantly influenced the way younger generations interact, communicate, and present themselves in public spaces. For Generation Z, social media is not just a means of entertainment, but has become a primary platform for building identity, expressing themselves, and understanding the social relationships they encounter in their daily lives. Growing up in a digital environment, this generation considers online activities a crucial part of their social existence, thus self-representation on social media contributes to the digital identity they construct (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2021). This is reinforced by research by Twenge (2023), which shows that Gen Z has a stronger attachment to digital platforms than previous generations. Social media offers various features that allow users to choose and customize the self-image they want to project. Bayer et al. (2020) refer to this process as digital self-presentation, where individuals project a specific version of themselves to create an impression that resonates with digital audiences. However, this process is not without challenges, particularly the phenomenon of context collapse, where diverse audience groups blend together, forcing users to adapt their expressions to be accepted by all (Duffy & Chan, 2019). This situation often leads Gen Z to feel the need to maintain their image and limit self-expression on their primary accounts (Marsh & Rajan, 2022).

In response to these social pressures, many young people develop alternative strategies of expression through secondary accounts, private accounts, or anonymous accounts. Yau & Reich (2021) found that secondary accounts serve as safe spaces to express feelings, personal experiences, and aspects of themselves that cannot be shared openly on primary accounts. Serrano et al. (2022) also emphasized that the use of secondary accounts is a form of adaptation to high social expectations on public social media. Furthermore, the anonymity offered by alternative accounts allows Gen Z to express their emotions more honestly. O'Reilly et al. (2021) explain that anonymous spaces can increase comfort in sharing emotional experiences, especially when individuals face social or psychological stress. This finding is supported by Park et al. (2023), who found that alternative accounts are often used for emotional relief because users feel unmonitored. The use of multiple digital identities also demonstrates that Gen Z identities are flexible and can change according to context. Lee et al. (2022) emphasized that the digital identities of young people are fluid, shifting according to social needs, audiences, and platforms used. Laor (2023) added that managing multiple digital personas is an adaptive strategy for young people to balance the need for privacy, freedom of expression, and

control over their audience. On the other hand, recent research also shows that the dynamics of using primary and alternative accounts influence psychological well-being. Kim & Kim (2024) stated that digital anonymity can create a sense of psychological safety, but also raises challenges related to identity stability. Therefore, understanding how Gen Z divides their expressive space between primary and alternative accounts is crucial to understanding how they negotiate identity in the digital space.

Based on these dynamics, this study aims to:

(1) describe Gen Z's open expression patterns through primary accounts, (2) identify hidden forms of expression in alternative or anonymous accounts, (3) analyze the factors that encourage the emergence of multiple accounts as spaces for self-expression, and (4) explain the implications of this phenomenon for the formation of digital identity and the emotional well-being of Gen Z. Through a **quantitative descriptive approach** with a survey of 66 Gen Z respondents, this study is expected to contribute to the study of the relationship between digital expression, self-identity, and the social dynamics of the younger generation in the social media era.

Research methods

Types of research

This research uses a descriptive quantitative approach supported by qualitative data. This approach was chosen to gain a general overview of Generation Z's social media usage patterns for expressing themselves both openly and covertly.

Subjects and Samples

The research subjects were Generation Z (born 1997–2012) who actively use social media. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, with respondents being high school students, college students, or young workers. The target number of respondents was at least 100 to generate more representative data.

Research Instruments

The main instrument used is an online questionnaire (Google Form) consisting of:

1. Closed questions use a 1–5 Likert scale to measure respondents' level of agreement with a particular statement.
2. Open-ended questions to explore respondents' experiences and reasons regarding the use of social media accounts, both open and hidden.

Data collection technique

Data was collected online by distributing questionnaire links on platforms widely accessed by Gen Z, such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter (X).

Data Analysis Techniques

- Quantitative data is analyzed descriptively through percentage calculations, means, and visualization in the form of tables and diagrams.
- Qualitative data from open-ended responses were analyzed using theme categorization techniques to identify patterns of reasons and motivations for using open and hidden accounts.

Research purposes

1. Describes the pattern of social media account usage by Gen Z as a means of open expression.
2. Identifying hidden forms of expression that Gen Z does through alternative accounts, anonymous accounts, or private features on social media.
3. Analyzing the factors that drive Gen Z to use social media to express themselves openly and secretly.
4. Explaining the implications of the phenomenon of open and hidden expression on the formation of digital identities and the social lives of Gen Z.

CONTENT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of an analysis of data obtained from a questionnaire distributed to 60 Generation Z respondents, consisting of high school students, college students, and young workers. The questionnaire was distributed online via Google Forms and focused on understanding social media usage patterns, motivations behind having a second account, and forms of self-expression that emerge in the digital space. The collected data was processed using a descriptive statistical approach, with the results presented in tables, diagrams, and narrative interpretations. The discussion links the data findings to social and psychological phenomena related to how Gen Z manages their identity and space for expression in the digital world. In general, research results show that social media is not only a means of communication and entertainment, but also serves as a dynamic space for self-expression and self-management. The emergence of second or private accounts reflects a need for privacy, emotional security, and freedom of expression, distinct from the social functions of primary accounts.

Respondent Overview

This study involved 66 respondents from Generation Z (aged 15–25), consisting of high school students, college students, and young workers. All respondents were active social media users. Based on the questionnaire results, TikTok (66.7%) was the most frequently used platform, followed by Instagram (30.3%), Twitter/X (1.5%), and WhatsApp (1.5%). This indicates that short-form video-based social media has become a dominant platform for Gen Z to interact and express themselves in the digital world.

Patterns of Using Social Media Accounts as a Means of Open Expression

Most respondents stated that their primary account is used to present themselves openly to the digital public. Content uploaded to the primary account generally includes daily activities, personal work, photos, or popular entertainment trends. This expression pattern demonstrates that social media has become a space for social representation for Gen Z. They strive to create a positive self-image that aligns with social norms, both to maintain relationships with others and to build self-confidence. Thus, open expression on social media serves as a way for Gen Z to demonstrate their existence and construct their social identity in the digital public sphere. In as many open expression options Based on the survey results, Gen Z's comfort level with openly expressing themselves on their main social media accounts showed mixed results. Of the 66 respondents, 30.3% disagreed and 7.6% strongly disagreed with the statement, "I feel comfortable expressing myself (thoughts, hobbies, emotions) openly on my main social media account." Meanwhile, 37.9% of respondents chose neutral, 21.2% agreed, and only a small proportion strongly agreed. These findings suggest that most respondents do not feel completely comfortable expressing themselves openly on their primary accounts. This phenomenon confirms that primary accounts tend to function as "controlled" spaces of social representation, where users strive to maintain their image and conform to digital social norms. They are more selective about the content they share and tend to hide personal or emotional aspects that are deemed too revealing.

Hidden Expressions in Alternative or Anonymous Accounts

Based on a survey of 66 respondents, the majority of Generation Z feel freer to express themselves on alternative or anonymous accounts than on their primary accounts. Thirty-nine percent of respondents agreed, and 30.3% strongly agreed, with the statement, "I feel freer to express myself on alternative/anonymous accounts than on my primary account." Meanwhile, 24.2% of respondents were neutral, and only 6.1% disagreed. These findings suggest that most Gen Zers feel more comfortable in more private or restricted digital spaces. This freedom often stems from the perception of alternative accounts as a safe space to express opinions, emotions, or aspects of themselves they don't want to share with the wider public. This phenomenon demonstrates that for Gen Z, digital identity is contextual and flexible. They adapt how they interact and express themselves based on the audience they have on each account. While primary accounts tend to be used to maintain social image and formal relationships, alternative accounts serve as spaces for authentic expression, where they can be more honest without social pressure. Thus, the existence of alternative accounts is not only a form of escape from the mainstream social world, but also a strategy for managing identity and emotions amidst the flow of openness on social media.

Reasons for Using an Alternate or Anonymous Account

Based on the results of a survey of 66 respondents, there are various reasons behind the use of alternative or anonymous accounts by Generation Z. The questionnaire results show that the biggest reason is the desire to maintain privacy (30.3%), followed by the desire to be yourself without limitations (27.3%), and avoid being judged by others (13.6%). Meanwhile, some respondents also mentioned other reasons such as expressing things that cannot be shared

on the main account (around 4.5%), FOMO (fear of missing out) (22.7%), as well as minor answers such as "so as not to be hacked" or "just following the trend." These findings indicate that the use of alternative accounts is not simply a digital lifestyle, but rather a form of adaptation to social pressures in online public spaces. Generation Z feels that mainstream social media often demands a perfect self-image and consistent identity, leading them to create new, safer and more private spaces to express themselves without fear of judgment or social consequences. Furthermore, the rationale for "being yourself without limitations" emphasizes that alternative accounts serve as a platform for authenticity, allowing individuals to express their emotions, opinions, or more honest aspects of their personality.

This phenomenon demonstrates that Gen Z is highly aware of the concept of digital self-management, distinguishing between their public persona and their private space of expression within the same platform. Types of Expressions Most Frequently Shared on Alternative or Anonymous Accounts Of the 66 respondents, the majority stated that the most frequently shared type of expression on alternative or anonymous accounts was personal stories and emotions, at 54.5%. This finding suggests that alternative accounts provide a safe space for individuals to channel emotions, share stories, or express feelings that may be difficult to share on their primary accounts. Additionally, 21.2% of respondents admitted to frequently sharing opinions or social criticism, while another 12.1% shared personal work such as writing, drawings, or other forms of creativity. These types of expressions indicate that alternative accounts are used not only as an emotional escape but also as a platform for more honest and free self-expression and creativity. Interestingly, some respondents also chose to share light entertainment content or daily activities, but in a more limited and personal context. This demonstrates Gen Z's desire to remain "present" in the digital space, but with full control over who sees their personal side. Overall, these results reinforce previous findings that Gen Z tends to divide their digital identities into two spheres: public and private. Primary accounts serve as a more formal and public social representation, while alternative accounts serve as a more emotional, spontaneous, and authentic space.

The Effect of Overt and Covert Expression on Self-View

The survey results showed that the majority of respondents were neutral (56.1%), followed by 31.8% who agreed that overt and covert expression on social media affects how they perceive themselves. Only a small proportion (9.1%) disagreed, and 2.9% strongly disagreed. These findings indicate that social media serves as a reflective space for Gen Z, where personal expression, whether publicly displayed or hidden on anonymous accounts, becomes part of the process of recognizing and affirming one's identity. The predominant neutral response also suggests that some Gen Z still view digital expression as separate from their "real" identities, yet remain aware that their online activities can influence their long-term self-perception.

Flexibility of Self-Identity in Digital Space

Based on the survey results, 51.5% of respondents agreed and 10.6% strongly agreed that they use social media accounts according to their audience (such as close friends, public, or anonymous). Meanwhile, 34.8% of respondents chose neutral, and only a small proportion disagreed. These results indicate that Gen Z consciously segment their identities in the digital world. They adjust their forms of expression and interaction depending on the context of the audience they are facing. In other words, their digital identities are flexible and dynamic. In addition, with the statement "Social media helps me build a flexible self-identity," most respondents also showed a tendency to agree, indicating that social media platforms have become a space for self-exploration for Gen Z. Digital identity is no longer seen as something static or singular, but rather as a construct that continues to change along with the experiences and online social relationships they build. This finding aligns with social identity theory in digital media, which states that individuals tend to present different "versions of themselves" in public and private spaces. In the context of Gen Z, this flexibility is not a form of inconsistency, but rather a strategy for adapting to the rapidly changing digital social environment.

Social Media as a Flexible Space for Self-Identity Formation

The majority of respondents (51.5%) agreed, and 1.5% strongly agreed, that social media helps them build a flexible identity. Meanwhile, 47% of respondents were neutral, and no respondents disagreed. These findings suggest that the majority of Gen Zers view social media as a space that allows for self-exploration and identity adjustments to suit their social context. Their digital identities are not singular or fixed, but rather fluid and can change depending on their audience, trends, or experiences.

This flexibility is one of the defining characteristics of Gen Z identity in the digital age. They can project multiple versions of themselves—for example, a professional version on LinkedIn, a casual version on Instagram, and an anonymous version on other platforms—as a means of adapting to various online interaction spaces.

Social Media as a Flexible Space for Self-Identity Formation

The majority of respondents (51.5%) agreed, and 1.5% strongly agreed, that social media helps them build a flexible identity. Meanwhile, 47% of respondents were neutral, and no respondents disagreed. These findings suggest that the majority of Gen Zers view social media as a space that allows for self-exploration and identity adjustments to suit their social context. Their digital identities are not singular or fixed, but rather fluid and can change depending on their audience, trends, or experiences. This flexibility is one of the defining characteristics of Gen Z identity in the digital age. They can project multiple versions of themselves—for example, a professional version on LinkedIn, a casual version on Instagram, and an anonymous version on other platforms—as a means of adapting to various online interaction spaces.

Alternative Accounts and Freedom of Expression

Based on the results of a survey of 66 respondents, it appears that the majority of Gen Z feels that having an alternative or anonymous account makes them feel more at ease and free to express themselves. Of these results, 45.5% of respondents agreed and 19.7% strongly agreed with the statement "Having an alternative/anonymous account makes me feel more at ease and free." Meanwhile, 30.3% of respondents were neutral, and only around 4.5% disagreed or strongly disagreed. These findings show that the majority of Gen Z (around two-thirds of respondents) consider having alternative accounts essential for more free personal expression. These accounts are typically used to share things they don't always share on their primary accounts, such as personal opinions, emotional outpourings, or more candid sides of themselves. In other words, alternative accounts serve as a kind of safe space or a "retreat" from the social pressures and expectations often present on their primary social media platforms. This phenomenon also illustrates how Gen Z is constructing boundaries between public and private identities in the digital world. On the one hand, primary accounts are used to maintain social connections, self-image, and professional connections, while alternative accounts provide a platform for more authentic expression without fear of judgment. This emphasizes that using anonymous accounts isn't simply about "hiding oneself," but rather an effort to find a balance between freedom of expression and the need for privacy.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusion

Based on the results of research on Gen Z's digital life as a means of open and hidden expression, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. Gen Z uses social media accounts as a space for open expression, maintaining communication with family, friends, and the wider social community. Primary accounts are often used for self-image and stable social relationships.
2. In addition to their primary accounts, many Gen Zers use alternate, anonymous, or private accounts as a means of hidden expression. These accounts provide greater freedom to express thoughts, emotions, and identities that aren't always possible on their primary accounts.
3. This pattern of multiple accounts demonstrates Gen Z's digital identity flexibility, as they consciously manage their self-image according to audience context and privacy needs. Social media helps them build adaptive and multifaceted digital identities.
4. Alternative or anonymous accounts also act as safe spaces that help Gen Z channel self-expression without social pressure, while also supporting mental health through greater freedom of expression.
5. This phenomenon of open and hidden expressions reflects the social and psychological dynamics of Gen Z in facing challenges and opportunities in the digital era, while also emphasizing the importance of digital literacy and coaching strategies in the healthy and responsible use of social media.

Suggestion

Based on the findings of this study, several suggestions that can be given are as follows:

1. For Gen Z: It is hoped that they will remain wise and aware in managing their digital identities on various social media accounts, both primary and alternative accounts, in order to maintain a balance between freedom of expression and social responsibility.

2. For parents, teachers, and educators: It is necessary to provide education and guidance on digital literacy, particularly regarding privacy management, the risks of using anonymous accounts, and the psychological impact of open and hidden expression on social media.
3. For social media platform developers: It is recommended to continue developing features that support user privacy and security, as well as provide a safe space for self-expression without discrimination or social pressure.
4. For further researchers: It is recommended to conduct more in-depth research using qualitative methods or longitudinal studies to understand in more detail the motivations, experiences, and psychological impacts of using alternative and anonymous accounts on Gen Z.

REFERENCES

Bayer, J. B., Ellison, N. B., Schoenebeck, S., & Falk, E. (2020). Digital self-presentation and emotional well-being in social media use. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 14(12), e12574.

Duffy, B. E., & Chan, N. K. (2019). "You never really know who's watching": Youth experiences with context collapse on social media. *New Media & Society*, 21(9), 1980–1995.

Kim, S., & Kim, J. (2024). Social media anonymity and psychological safety among digital natives. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 27(1), 12–20.

Laor, T. (2023). Multiple online identities among youth: A qualitative exploration of digital persona management. *Computers in Human Behavior Reports*, 9, 100250.

Lee, J., Park, S., & Kim, H. (2022). Fluid digital identities: Understanding youth identity construction across social media platforms. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 25(6), 1–18.

Marsh, S., & Rajan, S. (2022). Young people's social media pressures and self-presentation strategies. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 37(4), 512–530.

O'Reilly, M., Dogra, N., & Whiteman, N. (2021). Anonymity and emotional disclosure in online youth communities. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18(3), 415–432.

Park, J., Kaye, B. K., & Chen, M. (2023). Self-expression and emotional relief through secondary social media accounts. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 28(2), zmac012.

Przybylski, A. K., & Weinstein, N. (2021). Digital screen engagement and adolescent identity development. *Developmental Psychology*, 57(6), 821–830.

Serrano, J. C., Papacharissi, Z., & Oliveira, M. (2022). Curated identities and social media pressures among youth. *Social Media + Society*, 8(1), 20563051221077691.

Twenge, J. M. (2023). Generational differences in digital engagement and social media identity formation. *Psychology of Popular Media*, 12(3), 145–158.

Yau, J. C., & Reich, S. M. (2021). "It's just a finsta": Adolescents' use of secondary Instagram accounts for identity exploration. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 36(5), 537–563.