

Exploring identity and emotion: A phenomenological study of self-diagnosis in Gen Z women

Mengeksplorasi identitas dan emosi: Sebuah studi fenomenologis tentang diri-diagnosis pada perempuan Gen Z

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ABSTRACT

Self-diagnosing mental health disorders has become increasingly common among Gen Z women active on social media. This qualitative phenomenological study explores their subjective experiences and the impact of self-diagnosis on emotional regulation and social relationships. Fifteen female participants aged 18–24, who had consciously self-diagnosed based on exposure to mental health content on TikTok, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter), were interviewed using semi-structured in-depth methods. Data were analyzed through Creswell's phenomenological procedures. Three major themes emerged: self-diagnosis as a form of self-understanding, emotional regulation through psychological labeling, and shifts in social dynamics due to lack of validation from close environments and increased reliance on online communities. The findings suggest that self-diagnosis serves both as a coping strategy and a reflection of limited access to professional services and low mental health literacy. This study contributes to emotional regulation and identity development theories in the digital era, highlighting the urgency of inclusive mental health education and adolescent-friendly policies.

ABSTRACT

Fenomena swadiagnosis gangguan kesehatan mental semakin marak di kalangan perempuan Gen Z yang aktif di media sosial. Studi kualitatif dengan pendekatan fenomenologis ini bertujuan mengeksplorasi pengalaman subjektif mereka serta dampaknya terhadap regulasi emosi dan hubungan sosial. Sebanyak 15 partisipan perempuan berusia 18–24 tahun yang secara sadar melakukan swadiagnosis berdasarkan konten kesehatan mental di TikTok, Instagram, dan X (dahulu Twitter), diwawancarai secara mendalam dengan metode semi-terstruktur. Data dianalisis menggunakan prosedur fenomenologis Creswell. Tiga tema utama ditemukan: swadiagnosis sebagai upaya memahami diri, regulasi emosi melalui pelabelan psikologis, dan dinamika hubungan sosial akibat kurangnya validasi dari lingkungan terdekat serta pencarian dukungan di komunitas daring. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa swadiagnosis berfungsi sebagai strategi koping sekaligus respons terhadap terbatasnya akses layanan profesional dan rendahnya literasi kesehatan mental. Studi ini berkontribusi pada pengembangan teori regulasi emosi dan identitas di era digital, serta menekankan pentingnya edukasi dan kebijakan kesehatan mental yang inklusif bagi remaja.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, psychological terms such as overthinking, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and ADHD have moved beyond clinical contexts and entered popular discourse, particularly among younger generations. Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012, is characterized as a digital-native cohort that is highly exposed to the continuous flow of information facilitated by social media (Twenge, 2017). The evolution of social media from a simple communication tool to a medium for self-expression and the pursuit of meaning has significantly influenced how Gen Z interprets their psychological conditions. According to the 2023 Indonesia Health Survey (IHS), the national prevalence of depression is 1.4%, with the highest rate observed among individuals aged 15–24 at 2.0% (Badan Litbangkes, 2023). Nevertheless, only 10.4% of this group seek professional assistance, while self-diagnosis behaviors are reported by 12.9%. Additional national data indicate that 34.9% of young people (Gen Y and Gen Z) experience mental health issues, yet only approximately 2.6% access counseling services (Ismail et al., 2023; Al-Khouja et al., 2022). Similarly, a Deloitte survey (2023) found that 46% of Indonesian Gen Z report experiencing stress or anxiety, with 22.7% of those addicted to social media exhibiting poorer mental health conditions. A McKinsey report (2023) further shows that 20% of Indonesian Gen Z rate their mental health as poor, with females nearly twice as likely as males to report poor mental health (21% vs. 13%). Collectively, these findings underscore the necessity of examining the role of social media in shaping perceptions of, and responses to, mental health among Indonesian youth.

This research specifically examines the phenomenon of self-diagnosis among female Gen Z individuals in Yogyakarta. Preliminary interviews with 12 participants revealed that 8 of them frequently associated their symptoms, such as sleep disturbances, anxiety, and mood fluctuations, with information obtained from social media platforms, particularly TikTok and Instagram. More than half of the respondents also employed terms such as overthinking or bipolar to describe their emotional states, despite never having sought professional consultation. These findings suggest that social media functions not only as an information source but also as a mechanism through which individuals label and interpret their psychological experiences.

The key issue emerging from these interviews is the tendency of participants to internalize mental health labels encountered on social media as components of their self-identity (Baumel & Yom-Tov, 2018). This tendency often disrupts their capacity to regulate emotions and maintain healthy interactions with peers and family members (Nguyen & Faulkner, 2020). Scholars argue that adopting mental health labels without professional diagnosis can contribute to emotional instability. Self-diagnosis narratives are inherently ambivalent: while they may provide a sense of self-validation, they also risk exacerbating existing psychological vulnerabilities (Petersen et al., 2021). Supporting this view, a study by Lee and Wong (2021) in Malaysia found that students who engaged in self-diagnosis through social media were more susceptible to psychological distress, underscoring the significance of this phenomenon in the Southeast Asian context.

This research is particularly important because, if left unaddressed, the practice of self-diagnosis may foster misconceptions about mental health, delay professional treatment, and increase the risk of more severe psychological disorders. Marchant et al. (2019) emphasize that excessive exposure to mental health narratives on social media can generate new identity pressures that aggravate unaddressed symptoms. In Indonesia, where the psychologist-to-population ratio stands at approximately 1:250,000, the capacity of mental health services remains insufficient to meet public needs, especially among adolescents (Kementerian Kesehatan Republik Indonesia, 2023). These conditions indicate that self-diagnosis should not be dismissed as a mere digital trend but recognized as a pressing mental health concern requiring serious attention from practitioners, educators, and policymakers.

Previous studies from Yuniarti & Pratama (2021), have shown the educational role of social media in enhancing mental health literacy among students. However, few have explored in-depth the subjective experiences of individuals engaging in self-diagnosis. Moreno et al. (2020) found that women are more active in sharing emotional experiences on social media and are more vulnerable to the psychological influence of digital content. Chen et al. (2020) in Hong Kong highlighted how mental health narratives on TikTok reinforce the psychological identity of teenagers, while Gori et al. (2021) in Europe demonstrated that self-diagnosis is associated with increased self-stigma and delayed professional help-seeking. However, these studies have not delved deeply into how self-diagnosis impacts psychological dynamics, particularly emotional regulation and social relationships.

This study fills the gap in research by exploring the subjective experiences of female Gen Z individuals who engage in self-diagnosis through social media, with a focus on how this practice affects their emotional regulation and social relationships. Previous research has largely focused on mental health literacy or the general effects of social media, without specifically linking self-diagnosis to emotional regulation and social relationships. The novelty of this research lies in the phenomenological approach that integrates personal experiences with the unique socio-cultural and digital context of Indonesia.

The aim of this research is to explore the experiences of female Gen Z in self-diagnosing mental health disorders through social media and how this practice influences their emotional regulation and social relationships. The research adopts a phenomenological approach, which prioritizes understanding the essence of participants' lived experiences rather than merely measuring statistical tendencies. This study is expected to provide new insights into the psychological dynamics of Gen Z in the digital age and contribute to the development of psychological intervention models based on real-life experiences of Indonesian youth.

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with an interpretative phenomenological methodology to explore in-depth the experiences of Gen Z women in understanding self-

diagnosis of mental disorders on social media. The phenomenological approach is considered appropriate because it captures the complexity of the subjective meanings embedded in personal experiences, particularly in dynamic socio-cultural contexts. In line with (Creswell, 2021), this method is used to uncover the essence of individuals' life experiences who have encountered a specific phenomenon, in this case, self-diagnosis as an interpretative process of psychological symptoms.

The research subjects consist of 15 Gen Z women aged 18–24 who are active users of social media and have consciously engaged in self-diagnosing mental disorders. The participants were selected using purposive sampling, with the inclusion criteria being: (1) having direct experience with self-diagnosis, (2) being able to verbally reflect on their experiences, and (3) being willing to participate in in-depth interviews voluntarily.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews using a semi-structured format, both in person and online via video conferencing platforms. The duration of the interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes, depending on the participants' dynamics. All interviews were recorded with ethical consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis purposes.

Data analysis followed the phenomenological procedures outlined by (Creswell, 2021), which includes five stages: (1) organizing and preparing raw data; (2) reading through the entire data set to obtain a holistic understanding; (3) coding the data to identify meaning units and key themes; (4) describing the essential structure of the experience; and (5) constructing a thematic narrative based on deep interpretation of the data.

The validity and reliability of the data were ensured through several verification strategies, including source triangulation, member checking, and audit trails. These strategies aim to ensure the consistency and integrity of the interpretation process. Furthermore, the qualitative data quality guidelines from (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and (Sugiyono, 2022) were used as references to ensure that the four criteria of scientific evaluation credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were met.

All stages of the research were conducted in accordance with ethical principles for qualitative research. Participants were provided with written informed consent, guaranteeing anonymity and confidentiality of the data. They were also given the freedom to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. The researcher ensured that the participants' positions were not undermined by power relations during the interview process.

3. RESULTS

This study involved 15 Gen Z female participants who are active social media users and have experience with self-diagnosing mental health disorders. Based on thematic analysis of the in-depth interview results, three main themes emerged that represent their experiences: (1) Self-Diagnosis as Self-Understanding, (2) Self-Diagnosis as an Emotional Regulation Strategy, and (3) Impact on Social Relationships.

Table 1. Thematic Findings of the Study

Theme	Subtheme	Participant Quotes
Self-Diagnosis as Self-Understanding	1) Recognizing psychological terms from social media	<i>"I first learned about overthinking from TikTok... this is totally me." (P5)</i>
	2) Naming confusing emotional experiences	<i>"By calling it 'anxiety,' I just feel more relieved." (P2)</i>
	3) Comparing personal experiences with online content	<i>"I saw people on Instagram talking about bipolar, and I felt like I could totally relate." (P9)</i>
Self-Diagnosis as Emotional Regulation	1) Accepting and validating one's feelings	<i>"I started to understand my emotions better... and I don't blame myself as much." (P15)</i>
	2) Creating new anxiety effects	<i>"It actually made me overthink more, wondering if maybe it is really true." (P10)</i>
	3) Delaying seeking professional help	<i>"I feel like I know enough from TikTok, so I never really thought about going to a psychologist." (P8)</i>
Impact on Social Relationships	1) Withdrawing from close relationships	<i>"When I told my family, they just laughed at me." (P3)</i>
	2) Seeking support from online communities	<i>"Friends on Twitter (now called X) (now called X) understand me more and are supportive." (P11)</i>
	3) Fear of stigma from the surrounding environment	<i>"I am afraid of being called crazy, so I only talk about it on social media." (P6)</i>

Source: Research Findings, 2024

Narrative Description of Findings

Self-Diagnosis as Self-Understanding

The majority of participants in this study revealed that their understanding of mental health terms such as overthinking, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and ADHD was largely influenced by social media, particularly TikTok and Instagram. These platforms present information in short and easily understandable content, which makes participants feel that they have found a reflection of their personal experiences. As one participant shared, *"I first learned about overthinking from TikTok... when I saw the video, I immediately thought: this is totally me"* (P5).

Self-diagnosis thus becomes a tool for naming emotional turmoil that was previously difficult to fully understand. By using these terms, participants felt validated, as if their experiences made more sense after finding the term that seemed to fit. One participant added, *"By calling it 'anxiety,' I just feel more relieved. It is like giving a name to all these unclear feelings"* (P2). This phenomenon shows that for Gen Z, who are at a vulnerable stage of development, the presence of psychological labels helps them organize their feelings and form their identities, even without professional guidance or assessment. As one participant stated, *"I saw people on Instagram talking about bipolar, and I felt like I could totally relate"* (P9). This reflects how self-diagnosis, while providing relief and validation, must still be approached carefully to avoid substituting professional consultation, which is more accurate and effective.

Self-Diagnosis as an Emotional Regulation Strategy

Most participants in this study utilized self-diagnosis as a coping mechanism to deal with emotional stress. By labeling their condition, many felt more accepted by themselves, which they previously struggled to achieve. Naming their experiences allowed them to make peace with themselves, reduce feelings of guilt, and acknowledge the mental exhaustion they were facing. One participant said, *"I started to understand my emotions better. For instance, when I get easily angry or have trouble sleeping, I think 'maybe this is ADHD like what I saw in the Reels video'"* (P15).

However, this phenomenon is not without its consequences. Some participants expressed that frequent exposure to mental health content actually increased their anxiety and even made them feel worse. As one participant explained, *"After saying I am bipolar, I just kept overthinking, wondering if maybe it is really true, and I started thinking negatively all the time"* (P10). Furthermore, some participants felt satisfied by simply "recognizing" their issues through social media, which led them to avoid seeking professional help. P8 stated, *"I feel like I know enough from TikTok, so I never really thought about going to a psychologist."* These findings suggest that while self-diagnosis can function as an emotional regulation tool, without adequate psychological literacy, it can become a misleading trap that prevents individuals from seeking more appropriate and professional support.

Impact on Social Relationships

The study findings indicate that self-diagnosis among Gen Z women not only relates to self-understanding but also has a significant impact on their social relationships. Many participants reported feeling misunderstood or belittled when trying to communicate their emotional struggles to their parents or close circle. The lack of mental health literacy among family members often led their experiences to be dismissed as exaggerated or labeled as "seeking attention." This drove participants to withdraw and seek alternative communities online, where they felt safer and more accepted. As one participant revealed, *"When I told my family, they just laughed at me, saying I was seeking attention. So, I often vent on Twitter (now called X) (now called X)"* (P3).

In addition, there was also a fear of social stigma if they openly discussed their suspected mental health condition, leading them to prefer speaking anonymously. One participant shared, *"I am afraid of being called crazy, so I only talk about it on social media"* (P6). This phenomenon suggests that self-diagnosis is not only related to self-identity search but is also intertwined with the need for safety within a social and cultural context, where social media often serves as an emotional affiliation space that provides a sense of acceptance, although not always in a healthy context. As expressed by P11, *"Friends on Twitter (now called X) understand me more and are supportive. I feel accepted."*

Table 2. Main Findings of the Study: Self-Diagnosis among Gen Z Women

Theme	Subtheme	Description
Self-Diagnosis as Self-Understanding	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Influence of social media 2) Search for self-identity 3) Similarity of symptoms felt with what they read 4) Efforts to explain difficult-to-understand emotions 5) Labels as a form of new identity 	Gen Z women use psychological terms from social media to understand emotions and build their personal identity narratives.
Self-Diagnosis as Emotional Regulation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Relief after labeling 2) Decrease and increase in anxiety 3) Increase in sense of belonging and internal validation 4) Avoidance of professional consultation because they feel "sufficiently" aware 5) Increased anxiety when they feel they match all the symptoms 	Used as a coping mechanism, but risks increasing anxiety and hindering the search for help.
Impact on Social Relationships	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Lack of family support 2) Turning to online communities as an escape 3) Searching for online communities as a safe space 4) Tendency to compare experiences with others 5) Feeling misdiagnosed but still holding on to the self-label 	Leads to social isolation, seeking validation on social media, and biased social comparisons.

Source: Research Findings Analysis, 2024

The findings of the study, as presented in Table 2, highlight the complex impact of self-diagnosis on self-understanding, emotional regulation, and social relationships among female Gen Z individuals. In terms of self-understanding, female Gen Z participants tend to adopt psychological terms from social media to describe and make sense of their emotions. This process is often accompanied by a search for identity and the recognition of symptoms that align with what they encounter in the digital space. Meanwhile, in the realm of emotional regulation, self-diagnosis functions as a coping mechanism that provides temporary relief and internal validation. However, this also carries the risk of exacerbating anxiety, especially when participants feel they exhibit all the symptoms without seeking professional help.

The impact on social relationships includes social isolation exacerbated by a lack of family support, and the search for online communities as safe spaces. This, in turn, leads to biased social comparisons. This phenomenon illustrates how, although self-diagnosis offers a

sense of understanding and validation in the short term, it can hinder the process of seeking more appropriate help and increase social anxiety among Gen Z women. While self-diagnosis helps organize emotions and build identity, it must be approached with caution to prevent it from becoming a substitute for professional consultation, which is crucial for accurate diagnosis and support.

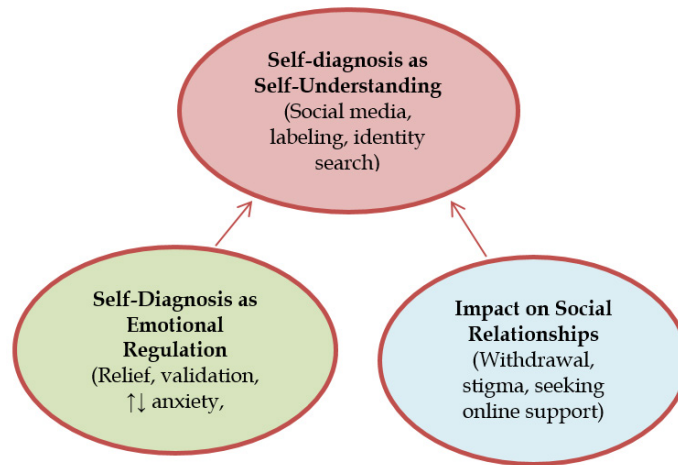


Figure 1 Thematic model of self-diagnosis experiences converging into emotional regulation and social relationships

Source: Research Findings Analysis, 2024

Figure 1 shows that self-diagnosis among Gen Z women begins as a way of understanding themselves through psychological terms from social media, which then develops into strategies of emotional regulation and influences social relationships. The arrows indicate how this process branches into two main outcomes: emotional regulation and social relationships. In emotional regulation, self-diagnosis provides relief, validation, and a sense of belonging, but also creates both an **increase (!)** and **decrease (!)** in anxiety, while delaying professional help-seeking. In terms of social relationships, it leads to withdrawal, fear of stigma, and greater reliance on online communities for validation and support.

4. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore the experiences of female Gen Z individuals in self-diagnosing mental health disorders through social media and its impact on emotional regulation and social relationships. The primary findings of this study reveal three major themes: self-diagnosis as a means of understanding self-identity, self-diagnosis as an emotional regulation strategy, and its impact on social relationships, including virtual community support and the risk of social isolation. These findings suggest that self-diagnosis is not merely an individual phenomenon but a representation of the interaction between psychological factors, digital culture, and the structural conditions of mental health services in Indonesia.

The first theme reveals that participants use self-diagnosis as a framework to understand their emotional experiences and construct their identities. This aligns with Erikson's (1968) psychosocial development theory, where individuals in the adolescent to young adult phase seek narratives that give meaning to their lives. From the researcher's perspective, this practice of self-diagnosis reflects a fundamental need for identity validation, especially amidst the lack of psychological support from family and educational institutions. However, this phenomenon also opens the door to self-pathologization Pera (2020), where individuals excessively label themselves with disorders that have not been professionally validated. The study illustrates that, unlike Western research which emphasizes the risk of misinformation Luxton et al. (2012), in the Indonesian context, this practice also functions as a "new emotional language" to communicate psychological experiences that are difficult to express offline.

The second theme highlights self-diagnosis as an emotional regulation strategy. Participants reported feeling relief when they could label their conditions, which is consistent with Gross's (2014) theory of emotional regulation. However, the effects are ambivalent: while it aids self-understanding, self-diagnosis may increase anxiety and reinforce confirmation bias, as shown by Lehtimaki et al. (2021). From the researcher's viewpoint, this phenomenon reflects a paradox in psychological literacy: although Gen Z has extensive access to mental health information, the lack of evaluative skills results in pseudo-literacy, which is counterproductive. This study contributes a new perspective to the literature by suggesting that self-diagnosis can be understood as a form of meaning-focused coping (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000), though it risks being maladaptive without professional guidance. These findings also emphasize the need for digital-psychological literacy education that balances information access with critical thinking skills.

The third theme addresses the implications of self-diagnosis on social relationships. When family support is limited, participants seek validation through online communities. This finding aligns with Deci & Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory, which posits that the fundamental need for relatedness drives individuals to form new social bonds. The researcher views this phenomenon as ambivalence: online communities provide a safe space for youth to share, yet they also strengthen echo chambers that limit critical perspectives. Previous studies (Naslund et al., 2020) have emphasized the benefits of online communities, but this research reveals the darker side of normalizing self-diagnosis without clinical verification, reinforced by negative social comparison (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). Thus, this study extends the literature by highlighting that online communities not only provide support but also create the risk of social isolation under the guise of community.

When compared to previous studies, this research highlights several key differences. First, while much of the international research (Nguyen & Faulkner, 2020; Petersen et al., 2021) emphasizes the negative effects of self-diagnosis, this study also underscores its adaptive function as a self-understanding strategy. Second, previous research has largely been conducted in countries with relatively good access to mental health services, whereas this study reveals the dynamics of self-diagnosis in Indonesia, where service limitations

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and stigma still prevail (Kementerian Kesehatan Republik Indonesia, 2023). Third, Western literature often focuses on individuals in general, while this study emphasizes the experiences of female Gen Z individuals, who are more active in sharing emotional experiences on social media (Moreno et al., 2020). This novelty indicates that self-diagnosis in Indonesia has its own cultural nuance, where social media is not just a source of misinformation but also a space for articulating the emotional identity of youth.

The findings of this study contribute significantly to the literature on self-diagnosis, particularly within the Indonesian context. As outlined in the introduction, there is a notable gap in research concerning the subjective experiences of female Gen Z individuals in Indonesia who engage in self-diagnosis through social media, an area that remains underexplored. This study addresses that gap by shedding light on how female Gen Z participants internalize psychological labels such as “overthinking” and “bipolar,” which they encounter on social media, despite not having received a professional diagnosis. These findings expand our understanding of how psychological identities are constructed through digital interactions, aligning with Berger & Luckmann (1966) social construction theory, which posits that psychological realities are not solely shaped through direct interactions but also through the narratives in the digital sphere.

Additionally, this research provides a novel perspective on emotional regulation and social relationships, revealing that self-diagnosis functions as a coping mechanism that offers self-validation but also exacerbates anxiety. This discovery enriches the existing literature by demonstrating the ambivalent nature of self-diagnosis, which has often been predominantly viewed as a negative phenomenon (Baker & White, 2015; Nguyen & Faulkner, 2020). As such, the study fills a critical gap in understanding the dual role of self-diagnosis—not only in exacerbating emotional distress but also as a strategy for self-understanding in the absence of formal psychological support.

Furthermore, this study highlights the social dynamics surrounding self-diagnosis, where online communities, while providing support, may inadvertently contribute to social isolation due to the normalization of self-diagnosis without clinical validation. This aspect has not been adequately addressed in previous literature. These findings advance our understanding of the impact of social media on social relationships and underscore the need for digital-psychological literacy education that balances information access with critical evaluative skills.

In conclusion, this study not only addresses the gap identified in the introduction but also enriches the current body of literature by offering a new perspective on self-diagnosis within the unique digital cultural context of Indonesia. This contrasts with the predominant Western perspectives and highlights the culturally nuanced role of social media in the formation of psychological identities and social relationships.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size is limited to 12 female Gen Z participants, meaning the findings cannot be generalized to the entire population. Second, data

was obtained through subjective interviews that were highly influenced by the participants' openness, so the potential for interpretive bias cannot be avoided. Third, this study only focused on female participants, and the dynamics of self-diagnosis in male Gen Z or other age groups have not been explored. From the researcher's perspective, these limitations open opportunities for future research with a broader scope, using mixed methods or directly involving digital content analysis, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the self-diagnosis phenomenon in the era of social media.

5. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that self-diagnosis of mental disorders among social media-using Gen Z women is a complex phenomenon reflecting efforts to understand oneself, regulate emotions, and address systemic limitations in access to mental health services. The three main themes—self-diagnosis as self-understanding, emotional regulation, and its impact on social relationships—underscore the role of social media in psychological meaning-making and identity formation. Theoretically, the findings expand our understanding of identity and emotional regulation dynamics, highlighting the psychological biases created by digital content exposure. Practically, these findings emphasize the need for digital mental health literacy, inclusive policies, and accessible services. This research contributes to developing community-based online interventions and adaptive mental health programs for the digital generation, offering long-term implications for clinical, educational, and policy frameworks aimed at fostering a healthier digital ecosystem.

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