


Female youth and social media: How do I see myself through social media?

Sofia Theodosiadou*. Argyris Kyridis**

*  Assistant Professor, School of Early Childhood Education, Faculty of Education, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (sotheo@nured.auth.gr)

**  Professor, School of Early Childhood Education, Faculty of Education, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (akiridis@nured.auth.gr)

Abstract

This paper examines the self-perceived media literacy of female University students in Greece. While previous research has recognized the multiple effects of social media on young people, little attention has been given to how young people themselves perceive the impact of social media on the creation of their identity. Utilizing a structured online questionnaire in a sample of 581 University students, discourse analysis of their answers on two open ended questions provides evidence for the way they evaluate their self-perception through the use of social media. It also reveals levels of student's (social) media literacy. Our results contribute to a deeper understanding of the effects of social media on young people and its collective dynamics in constructing female identity.

Keywords: social media, female identity, self- perception, Gen Z, (social) media literacy.

Introduction

Gen Z¹ came of age in the image- and information-saturated twenty-first century. Worldwide, Gen Z internet users spend over eight hours on their devices each day (GlobalWebIndex 2020 in Stahl & Literat, 2023) without distinguishing between the digital and physical worlds (Madden 2019 in Stahl & Literat, 2023). According to Boulianne et al. (2020) young people may use social media to express their political views even if not all feel comfortable to express themselves online due to fears about unfavorable reactions or conflict. However, social media remains a popular arena for political speech. This sort of activism is generally seen as slacktivism because it connects individuals into a loosely organized network, and these online activities are associated with offline activities (Boulianne et al., 2020). Social media has changed drastically the self-

¹ Gen Z, a generation born after 1996, have lived their whole lives in an internet and social media era and were among the first to incorporate social media use into their everyday lives and are much more likely than older generations to say they live online "almost constantly" . Gen Zers and Millennials express intense emotional reactions to seeing climate change content on social platforms compared with older generations (<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/06/21/on-social-media-gen-z-and-millennial-adults-interact-more-with-climate-change-content-than-older-generations/>).

presentation as it has offered multiple opportunities for others to contribute content that has implications for one's self presentation (tagging, commenting, liking and sharing). Furthermore, increased context collapse within the broad and diverse audience of social media is another way social media have impacted self-presentation making selective self- presentation almost impossible (Hollenbaugh, 2021).

Social media and youth

The media wields a significant influence, both beneficial and detrimental, on self-perception and the formation of gender identities (Alava & Chaouni, 2024). Multiple studies in the last two decades (Stahl & Literat, 2023; Craig et al., 2021; Ezzat, 2020) have shown that social media provide young people with personal empowerment, expanded access and connectivity, community and identity formation, a means for organizing their social life, and multiple possibilities for interaction that adult-mediated and physical spaces may limit. At the same time, however, these platforms can also breed toxicity and harmful experiences (e.g. cyberbullying, friendship fallouts, peer pressure), which can contribute to diminished self-worth, increased stress and anxiety, envy, loneliness, or apathy. Privacy, user activity surveillance, and data-mining are other common concerns pertaining to young people's social media usage that coexist with the platforms' social benefits (Stahl & Literat, 2023; Gangneux 2019). Feelings of being 'locked in' particular in relation to Facebook were found among young adults and were tied to social expectations of participation and fears of opting out (Gangneux 2019). Moreover, increasing numbers of young people feel overwhelmed in the process of online socialization and the phenomenon of social media fatigue (SMF) gradually spreads (Liu & He, 2021). Social networking service (SNS) fatigue is characterized "as a condition within which users of social media encounter mental exhaustion after witnessing numerous technical, informational, and communicative overloads through their involvement and engagement within the varied social media online platforms" (Tugtekin et al., 2020).

The construction of female identity through social media

Social media has become prominent within all aspects of adolescents' daily lives and also now plays an integral role in identity, social, and romantic relational development for most adolescents (Bates et al., 2020). Social media applications offer distinct new lines of identity exploration and expression in a context largely disparate to that of previous generations. Scholars now argue online environments such as social media are a key functional context for healthy developmental tasks related to identity development (Bates et al., 2020). Studies have focused on the associations of self-presentation on Facebook with various aspects of mental health and personality traits. In a review of the literature, Twomey and O'Reilly (2017 in Childs & Holland, 2024) found that users who engaged in authentic self-presentation are more likely to experience low levels of self-esteem and elevated levels of social anxiety. Much of this literature is focused on the authenticity of people's online personas and the negative effects of inauthentic self-presentation (Childs & Holland, 2024). The notion of authenticity and social media in previous research has been approached from the concept of on-line identities that are disembodied or representational. This online/offline dichotomy developed to be an irrelevant distinction as the concept of "the performative nature of authenticity" was powerfully established (Reade, 2021:537). The sometimes-striking differences between the self-image projected online

and reality can lead to identity confusion and profound questions about self-worth and authenticity (Alava & Chaouni, 2024).

Goffman (1959) has illustrated the concept of identity in a way suitable for the terrain of social media. Drawing from the dramaturgy world he equates identity with performance that has a front stage and a back stage and depending on how taken in by whose own act is, he might consider that the stage is the reality (Goffman, 1959). This is close to the performance of social media users that feel that social media networks are the stage and what happens there is the actual reality. According to Livingstone (2008) selves are constituted through interaction with others and in today's internet-mediated communication teenagers, self-actualization increasingly includes a careful negotiation between the opportunities (for identity, intimacy, sociability) and risks (regarding privacy, misunderstanding, abuse) (Livingstone, 2008). Through profiles on social media, teens can express salient aspects of their identity and they construct these profiles with an inclination to present the side of themselves that they believe will be well received by their friends and peers (Boyd, 2008). Especially girls are being engaged in a continuous work on themselves, their consumption and their bodies in order to align the image shared through SM with others' expectations forced to become neither too real nor not real enough (Roberti, 2022). In fact, gender issues also seem to be affected by the broader social process that pushes individuals to deal with systemic contradictions in an individual way: the incentive to work on oneself as a solution to gender inequalities transforms a structural problem of equal opportunities and social justice into a personal issue that every woman has to take on (Roberti, 2022). Celebrity feminism that is present in the female Instagram profiles is a kind of cultural tendency with no real political commitment that prompts many popular celebrities to take a stand on certain gender issues or to explicitly declare themselves as feminists (Roberti, 2022). Social media and in turn influencers are being seen and used as agents of societal change (Ezzat, 2020). Influencers play an indirect role in the construction of their fans' online identity as they reflect through their ideas and messages on how they present themselves online (Ezzat, 2020).

Selfie images that are so popular on SM and especially to the female users can be regarded as an example of self-presentation on line. Selfies can be seen as an authentic element of a social media identity (Nguyen & Barbour, 2017). According to Goffman (1959) who has accurately framed the notion of selfie more than half a century ago, we attempt to emphasize "desired impressions" in order to highlight positive ideas of ourselves. Grindstaff & Valencia (2021) argue that selfies may well be a DIY response of sorts to the persistent exclusion of women as producers of media. With selfies, not only do women get to be their own producer/director/editor but also, they simultaneously get to be the star of the show. As an individual gesture, the selfie is unremarkable, mundane. But as a social phenomenon linked to girls and young women, it highlights and complicates a vexed set of relationships between feminism, post feminism, femininity, sexualization, and empowerment in the context of the new gaze economy of digital culture as read through the lens of media sociology (Grindstaff & Valencia, 2021).

Methodology

This paper is part of a broader research project on the topic 'Media literacy of Greek University students' that has been conducted for students of Greek Universities. The pilot questionnaire was initially compiled in autumn 2022 and was distributed to a few journalists and academics on the field of communication and media literacy and were asked to comment on whether they understood the pilot questionnaire and whether

it thoroughly covered the issue. The reviewed questionnaire was again distributed to 30 University students in Greece on line and in person, who completed it and made comments that were adopted in the last version of the questionnaire. The revised pilot questionnaire was tested and the results proved the validity and reliability of its questions.

The final version of the structured questionnaire consisted of three parts, the first part was the demographic details of the participants, the second part was aiming in sketching the profile of the user towards online media and 15 questions were included. The third part examined the views of the students regarding the topics of journalist's role and information, news/social media and young people and self- perceived media literacy of young people. The questionnaire was designed to assess respondents' attitudes toward the specified themes. To capture the intensity of their opinions, a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) was employed. Some indicative statements in the third part of the questionnaire include: "I am able to assess the potential consequences of sharing messages on social media that contain false information." "I am fully aware of the type of news I share on social media." and "Cyberbullying is a myth." Two solely open questions (Do you believe that social media use influence yourself perception? If yes, in what ways do you believe this happens?) closed the questionnaire that were making an effort to map the self-perception of young people through social media.

The concept of self-perceived media literacy (SPML) was previously used as a scale to measure media literacy of undergraduate college students in the USA (Vraga et al.,2015). The SPML measures are designed to tap into individuals' belief that they are in fact media literate however perceptions of one's knowledge and actual knowledge are often related but distinct constructs – one can feel knowledgeable without actually holding correct beliefs (Vraga et al.,2015). Moreover, SPML derives from Potter's (2010) cognitive model of media literacy, which suggests that individuals need to feel in control of their media consumption and the media's influence on them to become media literate. As a consequence, the main research questions that arose were:

RQ1: How is the concept of SPML depicted in the Greek University female students?

RQ2: How is the identity of female students in Greece emerges from their use of SM?

Data collection lasted from February to June 2023 and were analyzed by the two writers of this article who have conducted similar research and have relevant experience. The questionnaires were distributed on line during the Spring semester 2023 and a total number of 581 questionnaires were returned. All participants completed a consent form beforehand and they were informed of the study objectives, the handling of data, and their right to quit at any moment. All information was confidential and anonymized. The 88% of the participants were female students with 62,8% having humanities as a field of studies. The majority of the participants (65,7%) were over 23 years old and almost half of them (43,8) were living in big cities (Athens and Thessaloniki). Discourse analysis was used to analyze the open-ended questions and the Atlas ti programme was used for the analysis of the coded data. Seven codes emerged that include the quantity of the influence (extensive, little and not influenced at all by social media) and the quality of the influence (positive, negative, both positive and negative and neutral influence of social media). The code that had the highest score (356) in answers was the extensive influence of social media followed by not influenced (193) and negative influence (154) by social media. A strong correlation was found among extensive influence and negative influence of social media on young people's self-perception.

Results

The way the two codes, extensive and negative influence of social media are correlated is because when students talk about extensive use of social media usually, they combine this kind of use with negative influence of social media on overall self-perception. In other words, students consider excessive use of social media to pose a number of risks on young people's behavior and internal landscape.

University students define negative influence on self in terms of social media mainly focusing on the issue of self confidence and self-esteem. They often mention the trap of comparison to other users or celebrity users that social media provokes them to step into and the consequent feeling of insecurity, imbalance and not enoughness that are being borned. They often focus their answer on the issue of body image and extra weight as this is the core point of comparison in the arena of social media. Students illustrate in their answers feelings of "jealousy" and realize that the use of social media makes them feel "introvert and anti – social" as personalities. In their own words University female students confess that seeing a lot of girls on Instagram makes them feel "less confident".

There are some trends that appear from time to time that make you think if you are behind in relation to the rest in various matters (e.g. clothing, music). You need a critical attitude and you need to have stable things inside you that help you not to be disoriented from your beliefs.

Active or passive use of social networks is an example (if we interact more actively with other users our self-esteem increases).

Furthermore, female students mention the widely recognized profiles that are projected through social media and cultivate a fake appearance both externally and internally. Students reinforce their argument by underlying that the world of social media is full of "idealized images" as it is a "fake world", a "virtual world", a "distorted world", "an illusion", "a bubble" that draws you in and makes you lose connection to reality. They also acknowledge the phenomenon of influencers "that don't have a concrete professional identity but while craving for likes accumulate money and consider themselves as someone really special". However contradictory, they emphasize the need for self-acceptance and social acceptance through social media.

The over-promotion of elements such as good mood and carelessness are standards that are not consistent with the everyday life of an average person, who is overwhelmed by various kinds of obligations and problems. Personally, I am mostly affected by the part of the wrong standards of external appearance, and in fact many times I have felt bad about my appearance, despite the fact that I try very hard to take care of myself.

Yes. Usually, we all people try to project a different/fictitious image on social media than who we really are. This happens because we want to feel accepted by the rest of the world and we usually hide our true identity, ideas and perceptions due to fear of censorship or criticism. so, we start and project what others want to see and not our true personality and

character, even appearance as it is distorted by the use of filters that appear on social networks to project our image sideways.

The harmful influence of social media is coming up in the words of the female students as a deficiency of their media literacy skills. Lack of media literacy leave students helpless in the trap of the distorted reality that social media present and “they make them lose contact with real life” as well as overload them with sometimes necessary but other times totally unnecessary information. Students emphasize that sometimes they are not able to distinguish neither the “reliability of a news story” nor the power of hate speech and provocative comments that so often appear on social media posts. They stress clearly; “I feel like my critical thinking and rational thinking are being lost when I'm bombarded with news and images at an unproductive frequency”. This is something that forces them to follow an opinion just because they see it repeatedly on their timeline. They admit that they lack media literacy to distinguish between the real and fake life of social media posts and they abide to the rules of the social media game by choosing to use filters in order to present the version of themselves that the others want to see and not their real self. They further underline that “social media are used and operated as a tool to control masses.”

[...] Social networks can influence all their users as they can brainwash them. People can become slaves to technology and social networks. One cannot remain unaffected by the news or the trends of the time and I see myself identifying with this because I follow the mass regarding the media [...].

[...] The many filters and fake images create the illusion of "perfect" people, relationships, while luckily no one is perfect. We all stand out through our diversity and our uniqueness as an entity [...].

[...] In recent years, of course, it has been strongly observed that people react with comments to the most extreme posts (racism, body shaming, nationalist, even around war situations on the occasion of the Russia-Ukraine situation). nevertheless, some vulnerable social groups (adolescents, uneducated, older people) influenced by negative standards adopt perceptions both for others and for themselves [...].

Another aspect of the unfavorable effects of social media is the approach that social media increase loneliness and addiction to them. Female students illustrate vividly that “guilt arises in cases of overexposure and marginalization in cases of complete abstinence”. Moreover, they mention the feeling of “imprisonment when they scroll in social media and at the same time the feeling of apathy against serious matters”. They highlight those certain diseases such as “anorexia or depression are closely related to social media use”. Even in cases of light use of social media, students remark that they notice that “they stay on social media more time when they are not in a good mood”. “Likes” on social media are considered to be a way of social acceptance that in our times has been transferred on social media platforms. More specifically as it is described in the words of students;

[...] If you don't post and you don't have comments then you feel like they don't like you and don't engage with you [...].

[...] We live in an epoch where image matters and not the essence and the value of things [...].

A unique case of a university student confesses that erasing the accounts of social media made her feel lonely but at the same time empowered on managing her own life and on living for the present moment.

[...] Yes, and it's the main reason I deleted many social networks like Instagram, snapchat etc. for years even though almost kids my age have them all. [...] I have felt lonely at times abstaining from them, but in the end, I see the difference in myself, let's say in emotional maturity, in that I pay more attention to my surroundings and live in the moment. [...]

The second most powerful code that arises from the data is the answers that illustrate that female students don't admit to get influenced by social media use at all or are little influenced by them. These students argue that self- knowledge, self – acceptance and self – reliance are all personality traits that they have cultivated and help them build a personality that doesn't allow social media to have an effect on them. In particular they highlight in their own words;

[...] The way I perceive myself originates and emanates from my values, beliefs, principles, my education, and the people I trust and know me, not my interaction with social networks [...]

[...] It does not affect me at all how I see myself, nor the use of social networks, nor other factors. I see myself only through my own eyes [...].

[...] I think media don't affect how we perceive ourselves much because we know ourselves better than anyone else [...].

Some other students claim that the absence of influence from social media is due to the fact that they make a limited and controlled use of social media either for work purposes or for information and they also state that they either don't have a social media account or they use only one social media platform (e.x. Twitter).

[...] I generally make sure to use social networks only when and for as long as I need them, usually for my profession or studies and never for fun. That alone leaves no room for my self-perception to be affected by them [...].

Age is another factor that students declare that plays a significant role in the fact that they don't let social media affect them. Students insist that when they were younger, they could easier get affected by social media platforms. They clearly state in their answers;

[...] when I was little (I was affected by SM), yes, after a lot of thinking and personal psychoanalysis, I managed not to be affected by them [...].

[...] The use of social networks does not in any way affect how I perceive myself, because I believe that I have the judgment, both due to age and due to experience, to be able to evaluate and correctly estimate the information I receive from the internet and remain unaffected [...].

Consequently, although Generation Z has grown up in a digital environment and is commonly regarded as digitally native, social media does not appear to hold significant influence over their personal values. This may be because social media use has become a routine part of their daily lives rather than a tool for forming their identity. Many of them suggest that growing older and using social media more intentionally has changed how they perceive its role in their lives. It is worth mentioning that intentional use of social media has been noted during COVID – 19 pandemic as previous research (Liu et al., 2021) has found both social media fatigue and concerns related to COVID-19 contributed to Generation Z's in the UK disengagement from social media, transforming the experience of information overload into a heightened intention to discontinue its use (Liu et al., 2021).

The inability of social media to shape Gen Z identity is also found in another research that studied the self-narration of LGBTQ+ populations on social media. Kuper and Mustanski (2014 in Santer et al., 2023) found that non-heterosexual youth who were more actively engaged in online culture tended to adopt narratives of struggle and eventual success rather than narratives of emancipation, which reject the inevitability of struggle and emphasize the fluidity of gender and sexual identities. Their findings suggest that dominant narratives surrounding gender and sexuality, identified in earlier LGBTQ+ populations (Cohler & Hammack, 2007 in Santer et al., 2023), were reproduced through social media rather than redefined by it (Santer et al., 2023)

A small number of students argue that there is little influence to their perception of self and this is due to the fact that they make limited use of it, they consider it a "fake world" but at the same time they consider that they are mature enough and it is matter of self-management and self-power whether someone lets himself be influenced by social media. As they narrate in their answers;

[...] Only to a small extent. My self-perception is formed through other, more vital, more specific social activities and events [...].

[...] how a person perceives himself comes from many factors and one of them is the internet, but it is important to note that it is up to each individual to let themselves be influenced by social networks or not [...].

On the opposite side they stand a very small percentage of students that argue that social media have a positive influence on them and their life. They consider that social media can battle their loneliness, can make them feel accepted and nurture the feeling of belonging to a community of like-minded people. Some of them believe that they can even enlarge their perspective of the world and help them acquire a broader view on important social issues.

[...]and thus, we evolve through social media. For example, I choose to read articles and get informed about any current affairs from profiles that support feminism. All this helps me understand myself, find new hobbies, get inspired and even think better about some "data" that I had until then [...].

[...] through social networks you perceive situations from a different perspective. So, you can judge your own perspective and the way you react to different things and judge whether the way you behaved was correct or not [...].

Furthermore, they argue that social media can empower their identity and help them towards self – knowledge and self-acceptance. They place a lot of emphasis on the choice they have to follow accounts that can help them with self-improvement and build their self-confidence. In their own words;

[...] The use of social networks helps to perceive our inner self. Usually, the internet is a way of "unfolding" the inner self mainly of people who internalize their feelings and prefer social isolation. Even, possibly, to be a way of demonstrating a different self, desirable for the person who pursues it. As for myself, through the use of the internet I have found that I am a "closed" person who expresses himself best through it. It gives me security as I avoid direct contact and am freed from the fear of face-to-face rejection and criticism [...].

Another code that emerges from the data and stands close to the code of the positive influence of social media is the mindful use of social media. They realize that the world of social media is a different world and thus they decide which social media accounts to follow very selectively and with a clear aim to sensitize them, educate them or entertain them in a realistic way. As students describe it;

[...] At times when I might be negatively affected, I always turn off my cell phone, take a break and think about the reason for this condition. I redefine myself, place it in my reality and appreciate what I have. So, in the face of this virtual reality, I may feel pressured at first, but upon reflection I always feel more real [...].

[...] If I see a post that causes public intimidation, bullying and negative judgments in general, I realize that I don't belong on that site or app as I'm not a person who will get into the process of judging someone whether I know them or not. So, I know where I belong and what I like to read and share [...].

Results Discussion

The findings of this study reveal notable contradictions. On the one hand, female students in Greece do not openly acknowledge being influenced by social media, instead emphasizing the importance of self-acceptance and social belonging within the digital sphere. At the same time, however, they admit lacking sufficient media literacy and struggling to manage the overwhelming flow of information on these platforms.

These conflicting responses suggest that female post-millennials in Greece lack a clear orientation toward social media self-literacy and face challenges in critically assessing the extent to which social media shapes their identity formation.

The noteworthy finding of the study indicated that the duration of exposure to social media platforms among Greek university students was the critical element influencing the positive or negative impact of social media on their identity. More specifically, the majority of female students in Greece contend that the pervasive use of social media is detrimental, primarily due to the fabricated lifestyles of influencers that are prominently displayed, resulting in information overload that fosters media illiteracy. For Generation Z social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram have emerged as primary conduits for news. Nonetheless, the frequent use of social media by young individuals does not inherently correlate with elevated levels of news and media literacy, especially young people from more vulnerable socioeconomic backgrounds, are likely to lack basic news and media literacy skills (Swart, 2023).

The overburdening stream of information, the permanent online interaction with other users, and the feeling that one's reactions are permanently observed as well as demanded may lead to what scholars have described as an "information overload" (IO) effect of mobile SNS use. Information overload typically refers to a state in which a person perceives an imbalance between environmental demands and the available resources to respond to and cope with those demands. "This setting may lead to a feeling of a loss of control and stress, and ultimately, depressive symptoms and life dissatisfaction" (Matthes et al., 2020: p. 2). This is most probably the reason young female students stress the element of feeling media illiterate due to excess of information (Matthes et al., 2020)

Another finding sharpens the negative impact of social media as the unrealistic body images and idealized portrayals of life, prompting comparisons within the confines of online platforms, ultimately leading to heightened loneliness and addiction associated with social media usage. Female post-millennial students in Greece openly acknowledge that engagement with social media platforms can amplify their feelings of isolation and loneliness. Despite social media's promise of connectivity, many report that prolonged use often results in a sense of emotional disconnection, prompting them to retreat from direct, face-to-face interactions within their immediate social circles. This withdrawal may stem from comparing their own lives to idealized portrayals online or from experiencing social fatigue, ultimately affecting the quality and depth of their offline relationships. Such findings highlight the complex and sometimes paradoxical role social media plays in shaping the social experiences and emotional well-being of young women today. These findings on loneliness and addiction are in line with Bonsaksen et al. (2021) who found that during the COVID19 pandemic more social media use was associated with increased emotional loneliness among the younger participants (Bonsaksen et al.,2021). While using social media, people expose themselves to comparison-related information provided by others. Frequent exposure might have an impact on their behavior so that their general comparison behavior increases (Chae,2018). Individuals with high awareness of the self and others' evaluation and low self-esteem more frequently engage in social comparison with influencers, something that predicts envy. A negative view of oneself and one's life is a strong predictor of envy. Envy toward influencers' life can negatively affect women. However, influencers' image of having it all is just another fantasy that provides an illusory sense of the empowerment of women. In other words, women feel envious toward something that does not even exist (Chae,2018).

Furthermore, the incessant scrolling through social media often prompts young women to compare their own lives with those of others—most notably influencers and celebrities. In doing so, they frequently perceive a gap between their personal experiences and the curated images they encounter online. This comparison can engender feelings of marginalization, as female youth measure themselves against the seemingly ideal lifestyles showcased by social media personalities, leading to heightened self-criticism and a diminished sense of belonging. Influencers are closer to ordinary people than traditional celebrities, suggesting that ordinary people might envy influencers more than celebrities. Additionally, Facebook use, especially passive use (reading rather than posting), is positively associated with envy (Chae,2018) and the intensity of Facebook use is positively related to the frequency of social comparison (Chae,2018). What is more according to Smith (2004) people experience envy when the comparison target is similar to them and also when they consider it important and a point of reference for them (Smith, 2004). Plus, the person who envies feels inferior to the other person and a frustrating longing for all that is missing from his life, as well as a resentful feeling that the envied person doesn't deserve what he actually has (Smith, 2004).

Participants often highlight the tendency of social media to provoke constant comparisons with peers or celebrity figures, drawing attention to what they perceive as idealized representations of others' lives. This dynamic fosters a psychological "trap of comparison," which many describe as difficult to resist. As a result, they report experiencing a range of negative emotional outcomes, including insecurity, a sense of imbalance, and a pervasive feeling of inadequacy or "not enoughness." These effects appear to be linked not only to the content consumed but also to the broader performative culture of social media platforms, where self-worth is frequently measured against digitally constructed standards. Furthermore, the comparison to the unrealistic lifestyles of influencers is in accordance with Huang's (2021) findings that revealed a dynamic influence of age produced on the relationship between media exposure and body image relevant outcomes. That is to say that adolescents and emerging adults were more likely to internalize the ideal body presented in media or to be emotionally anxious (Huang,2021). Especially Instagram use is related to a variety of body image concerns, including body dissatisfaction and self-objectification (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020; Alava & Chaouni, 2024; Scully et al.,2023).

On the other end stand the female students in Greece that consider SM to help them combat loneliness and build self-awareness and self-confidence provided that they follow selective accounts, reflect on the posts that they read and make a cautious use of social media both in terms of the accounts that follow but also on the time spent there. Mindful use of social media was found to be positively correlated with psychological well-being and satisfaction with life. Specifically, it can alleviate stress related to social media which may, in turn, enhance users' subjective mental health and prevent intense and compulsive social media consumption (Shabahang et al.,2024).

The findings of this study extend existing research as it reveals that female University students in Greece have a self-perception of being highly media literate as they acknowledge the harmful implications of the excessive use of social media on their personality, social relationships, mental well-being and body image and they admit not being influenced by them. They do underscore that overflowing information can blur their judgement and weaken their media literacy skills. Thus, most of them argue that SM are not capable of building their identity as this is a performance and a virtual reality that cannot have significant impact on them. Specifically, they distance themselves from the effects of SM and seek to construct a more authentic

identity. Unconsciously they agree with Goffman(1959) and argue that SM encourage a staged identity whereas they look for a more genuine and honest identity that will help them accept their whole selves.

Conclusion

It is important to note that this research offers a snapshot of how female post-millennials in Greece portray themselves in relation to their media literacy competence. In this context, the presence of contradictory findings is not unexpected, as young women are still in the process of negotiating their attitudes and worldviews regarding the role of social media in shaping their identities. This is also a very crucial reason that further research is needed in the field.

According to this study female University students in Greece tend to form their identity in the real world even if they belong to the tech savvy Gen Z that has a dominant presence on social media. This aligns with similar conclusions about a more idealized concept that shapes Gen Z. Generation Z tends to exhibit a more idealistic orientation compared to millennials. This is reflected in their emphasis on pursuing meaningful work and aligning their careers with personal values and aspirations (Waworuntu et al.,2022). Furthermore, even if they use social media to foster their political participation their patterns of engagement reveal a strong orientation toward specific causes, such as participation in fundraising or demonstrations, as well as involvement in more spontaneous and short-term activities, including election campaigns (Andersen et al.,2021).

Like all studies, this study carries a number of limitations. First, the sample consisted of young female University students resident in Greece and thus results may not generalize to other groups. Secondly, the SMPL consisted of two open questions. Future studies can expand the scale of SMPL and address a number of different issues concerning self - perceived media literacy as well as expand the sample to different genres and ages.

Bibliographical references

- ALAVA, S., & CHAOUNI, N. (2024). *Virtual Filters, Real Pressures: The Impact of Social Media on Teenage Girls' Body Image*. Retrieved from <http://www.essachess.com/index.php/jcs/article/view/635>
- Andersen, K., Ohme, J., Bjarnøe, C., Bordacconi, M. J., Albæk, E., & De Vreese, C. H. (2021). *Generational gaps in political media use and civic engagement: From baby boomers to generation Z* (p. 250). Taylor & Francis.
- Bates, A., Hobman, T., & Bell, B. T. (2020). "Let Me Do What I Please With It . . . Don't Decide My Identity For Me": LGBTQ+ Youth Experiences of Social Media in Narrative Identity Development. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 35(1), 51–83. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558419884700>
- Bonsaksen, T., Ruffolo, M., Leung, J., Price, D., Thygesen, H., Schoultz, M., & Geirdal, A. Ø. (2021). Loneliness and Its Association With Social Media Use During the COVID-19 Outbreak. *Social Media + Society*, 7(3), 20563051211033821. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211033821>
- Boulianne, S., Lalancette, M., & Ilkiw, D. (2020). "School strike 4 climate": Social media and the international youth protest on climate change. *Media and Communication*, 8(2), 208–218. Retrieved from <https://www.cogitatiopress.com/mediaandcommunication/article/view/2768>
- Boyd, D. (2008). Why youth (heart) social network sites: The role of networked publics in teenage social

- life. *YOUTH, IDENTITY, AND DIGITAL MEDIA*, David Buckingham, Ed., *The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2007–2016. Retrieved from https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1518924
- Chae, J. (2018). Explaining Females' Envy Toward Social Media Influencers. *Media Psychology*, 21(2), 246–262. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2017.1328312>
- Childs, C., & Holland, F. (2024). Young peoples' lived experiences of shifts between face-to-face and smartphone interactions: An interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 27(1), 57–72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2022.2101356>
- Craig, S. L., Eaton, A. D., McInroy, L. B., Leung, V. W. Y., & Krishnan, S. (2021). Can Social Media Participation Enhance LGBTQ+ Youth Well-Being? Development of the Social Media Benefits Scale. *Social Media + Society*, 7(1), 2056305121988931. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305121988931>
- Ezzat, H. (2020). Social media influencers and the online identity of Egyptian youth. *Catalan Journal of Communication & Cultural Studies*, 12(1), 119–133. https://doi.org/10.1386/cjcs_00017_1
- Gangneux, J. (2019). Logged in or locked in? Young adults' negotiations of social media platforms and their features. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 22(8), 1053–1067. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2018.1562539>
- Goffman, E. (1949). Presentation of self in everyday life. *American Journal of Sociology*, 55(1), 6–7. Retrieved from http://educ333b.pbworks.com/w/file/attach/53313682/goffman_intro.pdf
- Goffman, E. (2023). The presentation of self in everyday life. In *Social theory re-wired* (pp. 450–459). Routledge. Retrieved from <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003320609-59/presentation-self-everyday-life-erving-goffman>
- Grindstaff, L., & Torres Valencia, G. (2021). The filtered self: Selfies and gendered media production. *Information, Communication & Society*, 24(5), 733–750. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1874480>
- Hollenbaugh, E. E. H. E. E. (2021). Self-presentation in social media: Review and research opportunities. *Review of Communication Research*, 9. Retrieved from <https://www.rcommunicationr.org/index.php/rcr/article/view/15>
- Huang, Q., Peng, W., & Ahn, S. (2021). When media become the mirror: A meta-analysis on media and body image. *Media Psychology*, 24(4), 437–489. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2020.1737545>
- Liu, H., Liu, W., Yoganathan, V., & Osburg, V. S. (2021). COVID-19 information overload and generation Z's social media discontinuance intention during the pandemic lockdown. *Technological forecasting and social change*, 166, 120600.
- Liu, Y., & He, J. (2021). "Why are you running away from social media?" Analysis of the factors influencing social media fatigue: An empirical data study based on Chinese youth. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 674641. Retrieved from <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.674641/full>
- Livingstone, S. (2008). Taking risky opportunities in youthful content creation: Teenagers' use of social networking sites for intimacy, privacy and self-expression. *New Media & Society*, 10(3), 393–411. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444808089415>
- Matthes, J., Karsay, K., Schmuck, D., & Stevic, A. (2020). "Too much to handle": Impact of mobile social networking sites on information overload, depressive symptoms, and well-being. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 105, 106217. Retrieved from

- https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0747563219304364?casa_token=9ZnnNCyLVSA AAAA:yWaA-GnOgo1_XfUdEoVhW41uMmnYkeWhR_CPm3XX-yzp1kvHcwPHdqnI_s0mLXMzF4sb1C8e
- Pew Research Center, On social media, Gen Z and Millennial adults interact more with climate change content than older generations, 21/6/2021, Thigen C. & Tyson A. Available on line <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/06/21/on-social-media-gen-z-and-millennial-adults-interact-more-with-climate-change-content-than-older-generations/>, last accessed 31/5/2025.
- Reade, J. (2021). Keeping it raw on the 'gram: Authenticity, relatability and digital intimacy in fitness cultures on Instagram. *New Media & Society*, 23(3), 535–553. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819891699>
- Roberti, G. (2022). Female influencers: Analyzing the social media representation of female subjectivity in Italy. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2022.1024043>
- Santer, N., Manago, A., & Bleisch, R. (2023). Narratives of the self in polymedia contexts: Authenticity and branding in Generation Z. *Qualitative Psychology*, 10(1), 79.
- Scully, M., Swords, L., & Nixon, E. (2023). Social comparisons on social media: Online appearance-related activity and body dissatisfaction in adolescent girls. *Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 40(1), 31–42. Retrieved from <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/irish-journal-of-psychological-medicine/article/social-comparisons-on-social-media-online-appearance-related-activity-and-body-dissatisfaction-in-adolescent-girls/EDD4BBA262EDDB05137A0A1F3DA6846B>
- Shabahang, R., Zsila, Á., Aruguete, M. S., Huynh, H. P., & Orosz, G. (2024). Embrace the moment using social media: A cross-cultural study of mindful use of social media. *Mindfulness*, 15(1), 157–173. Retrieved from https://idp.springer.com/authorize/casa?redirect_uri=https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12671-023-02271-9&casa_token=YF4FtE1bbtkAAAAA:DdY5u-hK0rxZzL1Iry35wz81Y-2K-Q4EvEdhRS1qb5DR0E5MW2Ck2etIJyAWCdAWz9EnN96srmNh3hw
- Smith, D., Leonis, T., & Anandavalli, S. (2021). Belonging and loneliness in cyberspace: Impacts of social media on adolescents' well-being. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 73(1), 12–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2021.1898914>
- Smith, R. H. (2004). Envy and its transmutations. *The Social Life of Emotions*, 43–63. Retrieved from [https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=t-5GiBys-dkC&oi=fnd&pg=PA43&dq=Smith+R+H+\(2004\).+Envy+and+its+transmutations.+In:+L+Z+Tieden+s+and+C+W+Leach+\(eds\)+The+social+life+of+emotions.+UK:+Cambridge+University+Press,+pp.+43%E2%80%9363.&ots=2SSqBqwSTb&sig=ibAzSkRA9n4_XXq0KvEY5Op9JfQ](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=t-5GiBys-dkC&oi=fnd&pg=PA43&dq=Smith+R+H+(2004).+Envy+and+its+transmutations.+In:+L+Z+Tieden+s+and+C+W+Leach+(eds)+The+social+life+of+emotions.+UK:+Cambridge+University+Press,+pp.+43%E2%80%9363.&ots=2SSqBqwSTb&sig=ibAzSkRA9n4_XXq0KvEY5Op9JfQ)
- Stahl, C. C., & Literat, I. (2023). #GenZ on TikTok: The collective online self-Portrait of the social media generation. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 26(7), 925–946. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2022.2053671>
- Swart, J. (2023). Tactics of news literacy: How young people access, evaluate, and engage with news on social media. *New Media & Society*, 25(3), 505–521. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211011447>
- Tiggemann, M., & Anderberg, I. (2020). Social media is not real: The effect of 'Instagram vs reality' images on women's social comparison and body image. *New Media & Society*, 22(12), 2183–2199. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819888720>
- Tugtekin, U., Barut Tugtekin, E., Kurt, A. A., & Demir, K. (2020). Associations Between Fear of Missing Out, Problematic Smartphone Use, and Social Networking Services Fatigue Among Young Adults. *Social*

Media + Society, 6(4), 2056305120963760. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120963760>

Vraga, E., Tully, M., Kotcher, J. E., Smithson, A.-B., & Broeckelman-Post, M. (2015). A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Measuring News Media Literacy. *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 7(3), 41–53.

Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1088583>

Waworuntu, E. C., Kainde, S. J., & Mandagi, D. W. (2022). Work-life balance, job satisfaction and performance among millennial and Gen Z employees: a systematic review. *Society*, 10(2), 384-398.