

Digital Identity and Ideal Self-Presentation on Social Media: A Generation Z Study within the Society of the Spectacle

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ABSTRACT

The Society of the Spectacle is a theory proposed by Guy Debord, which asserts that in modern society, reality is replaced by images. This theory argues that individuals transform the world they live in into a "spectacle" through their continuous efforts to present themselves to an audience. The most concrete reflection of the Society of the Spectacle in the digital age is social media platforms, which are especially used intensively by young people and young adults today. On these platforms, users constantly reconstruct their lives to make them visible and socially approved. The aim of this study is to reveal the processes of self-construction and appearance-based awareness levels of Generation Z individuals on social media. The study examines how young individuals construct their identities in these digital spaces, where visibility is particularly emphasized. The research was conducted using a quantitative method and employed two valid psychometric scales. The data were analyzed using SPSS 30.0 software. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, independent samples t-tests, and ANOVA were conducted. The study was carried out with 300 participants aged between 18 and 27. Statistical analyses revealed that female participants exhibited significantly higher levels of appearance awareness and digital identity construction compared to male participants. It was also found that individuals in the high-income group engaged in more aesthetic and performative identity presentations on social media.

Keywords: Society of the Spectacle, Social Media, Ideal Self, Self-Presentation, Generation Z

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Dijital Kimlik ve Sosyal Medyada İdeal Benlik Sunumu: Gösteri Toplumunda Bir Z Kuşağı Çalışması

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ÖZ

Gösteri Toplumu, Guy Debord tarafından ortaya atılan ve modern toplumda gerçekliğin yerini imgelerin aldığı bir kuramdır. Bu kuram, bireylerin kendilerini sürekli olarak izleyiciye sunma çabasıyla yaşadıkları dünyayı bir "gösteri"ye dönüştürdüklerini savunmaktadır. "Gösteri toplumu" nun dijital çağdaki en somut yansıması ise günümüzde özellikle gençlerin ve genç yetişkinlerin yoğun olarak kullandığı sosyal medya platformlarıdır. Kullanıcılar bu alanlarda yaşamlarını görünür ve onaylanabilir hale getirmek için sürekli olarak yeniden inşa etmektedir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Z kuşağı bireylerinin sosyal medyada benlik inşa süreçleri ile görünüm temelli farkındalık düzeylerini ortaya koymaktır. Özellikle görselliğin ön plana çıktığı bu dijital mecralarda, genç bireylerin kimlik sunumlarını nasıl gerçekleştirdikleri incelenmiştir. Çalışma nicel yöntemle yürütülmüştür ve iki geçerli psikometrik ölçek kullanılmıştır. Elde edilen veriler SPSS 30.0 programıyla analiz edilmiştir. Betimsel istatistikler, korelasyon, t-testi ve ANOVA testleri uygulanmıştır. Araştırmaya yaşları 18-27 arasında değişen 300 kişi katılmıştır. Çalışmanın istatistiksel analizi sonucunda elde edilen bulgular, kadınların erkeklere kıyasla daha yüksek düzeyde görünüm farkındalığı ve dijital kimlik inşası gerçekleştirdiğini; yüksek gelir gruplarının ise sosyal medyada daha estetik ve performatif kimlik sunumları yaptığını ortaya koymuştur.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Gösteri Toplumu, Sosyal Medya, İdeal Benlik, Benlik Sunumu, Z Kuşağı

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Introduction

With the digitalization process, almost all areas of social life have been transformed; individuals' self-presentations, identity construction styles, and social relations have been radically reshaped. This transformation is particularly evident in the interaction practices of young individuals, defined as Generation Z, on social media platforms. The transformation of social media from a mere communication tool into a performative stage for individual existence prompts individuals to present their lives within an aesthetic, visible, and socially approvable framework. In this context, Debord's (2024) theory of the "Society of the Spectacle" gains renewed relevance in today's digital age; individuals' fictionalizing of their own lives into "objects of spectacle" becomes central to social relations.

The phenomenon of "appearance replacing reality," one of the defining characteristics of the society of the spectacle, manifests in individuals increasingly concealing their true selves through "ideal self" presentations on social media platforms. Goffman's (2023) impression management theory and Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory offer a critical framework for understanding the impact of digital platforms on individual self-concept. In particular, the constant exposure to perfectionist representations encountered by Generation Z on social media encourages individuals to display aesthetically and socially superior appearances, fostering deep contradictions and dissatisfaction within self-perception.

Recent studies have revealed that these perfection-oriented self-presentations on social media negatively affect individuals' self-esteem and psychological well-being (Twenge & Martin, 2020; Lup et al., 2015). In particular, the mismatch between the ideal self and the actual self may result in self-discrepancy and related psychological stress. At this point, it becomes evident that social media not only reflects the individual's identity externally but also actively shapes it internally. This transformation suggests that Generation Z's online identity constructions are shaped not only by individual preferences but also by algorithmic incentives, social validation mechanisms, and platform-specific norms (Vartanian, 2012).

A review of the local literature reveals that digital identity studies have increased significantly in recent years. For instance, Çankal (2024) examined the relationship between the online identities constructed by members of Generation Z on digital platforms and their offline identities, revealing that participants

exhibited “conditional” identities depending on different contexts. Kaya's (2021) study shows that social media users' cultural events and art-focused posts have become an important component of digital identity performance. Other studies conducted in Turkey also examine digital identity and self-presentation in conjunction with the concepts of surveillance society, selfie culture, and spectacle society (Kavut, 2020; Akkaş & Aksakal, 2023).

The aim of this study is to examine the relationship between Generation Z individuals' self-presentations on social media and their perceptions of the ideal self within the framework of the Society of the Spectacle theory. Specifically, the structural relationships between appearance-related social media consciousness and digital identity construction levels are analyzed to better understand how social media platforms contribute to the transformation of the self. In line with this aim, the study explores the connection between Generation Z's digital self-performance and their pursuit of social approval, opening the function of social media in individual identity construction to discussion within both sociological and psychological contexts.

Hypothesis:

H1: There is a positive and significant relationship between appearance-related social media awareness and digital identity construction.

H2: Female participants obtain higher scores on the Appearance-Related Social Media Consciousness Scale compared to male participants.

H3: Female participants obtain higher scores on the Social Media Identity Construction Scale compared to male participants.

H4: Appearance-related social media awareness increases as daily time spent on social media increases.

H5: Digital identity construction levels increase as daily time spent on social media increases.

H6: As income level increases, both appearance-related social media awareness and digital identity construction scores show a significant increase.

Framework

Society of the Spectacle

“Society of the Spectacle” is a theory put forward by Guy Debord in 1967 and holds great importance in understanding contemporary society. Debord's

analysis emphasizes that modern society is not only an economic system but also a system of appearances and representations. In this system, reality can no longer be directly experienced; instead, it is perceived in a “mediated” way through images and representations. The concept of “mediation” here refers to the severing of people's direct contact with reality, as experiences are lived through various intermediaries such as media, advertisements, and digital platforms (Debord, 2024).

In Debord's theory, the process of “the transformation of reality into spectacle” holds a central place. As the authentic and directly experienced dimensions of life gradually diminish, everything turns into an object of spectacle. For example, a vacation may no longer be a direct experience but rather a performance staged for photos to be shared on Instagram, a prominent social media platform today. The concept of “commodification” refers to the transformation of human relationships and even personal experiences into objects that can be bought, sold, and consumed. The number of followers, likes, and interactions on social media are contemporary examples of this commodification (Debord, 2024, p. 71).

The process of gaining “spectacular quality,” one of the core dynamics of the society of the spectacle, refers to the transformation of all aspects of daily life into elements of spectacle. In this context, individuals cease to be active subjects of their own lives and instead become passive spectators of others’ lives. Debord’s notion of the “passive spectator” critiques the reduction of modern individuals to mere consumers and their loss of agency over their own existence. Today, people who spend hours watching others’ lives on social media and live their own lives under constant pressure to exhibit them exemplify this passive spectator position (Debord, 2024, pp. 135–149).

In the society of the spectacle, authentic experiences are transformed into artificial appearances. In other words, this process refers to the loss of naturalness and spontaneity of life. Individuals in modern societies today appear to live and exhibit fictional representations of real emotions and experiences rather than experiencing them authentically. For example, watching a concert through a phone camera and focusing on recording and sharing the moment instead of fully experiencing it is a typical and contemporary illustration of the transformation of real experiences into artificial appearances (Baudrillard, 2019).

Debord's theory of the “Society of the Spectacle” has taken on deeper significance in today’s digital age. Social media platforms, digital filters,

influencer culture, and virtual reality technologies have become prominent tools of the spectacle (Manovich, 2019). Additionally, individuals' access to technological devices plays a critical role in facilitating this transformation (Anderson et al., 2023). People today not only passively consume content from traditional media but also actively construct and perform their own lives as spectacles. This development intensifies the alienation and erosion of authenticity that Debord initially predicted. As a result, the boundary between reality and appearance in modern society becomes increasingly blurred, and individuals' life experiences are more frequently shaped by the logic of the spectacle (Andrejevic, 2011).

A defining feature of the society of the spectacle is the substitution of appearance for reality and the mediation of social relations through commodities. As everyday practices are increasingly reduced to systems of visual representation, individuals become spectators of their own lives (Baudrillard, 2019). Debord's analysis reveals the endpoint of commodity fetishism in modern capitalist society: not only objects, but life itself has become commodified. As a contemporary and widespread manifestation of this theory, social media platforms have turned into arenas where individuals continuously exhibit, render visible, and commodify both themselves and their lifestyles (Bakić-Mirić, 2018).

In the society of the spectacle, image production and consumption are at the center of social relations. Accordingly, individuals constantly strive to make themselves and their lives "suitable for the show." As a result, authentic identities are replaced by "ideal" appearances, and individuals become increasingly focused on displaying fictionalized versions of their lives. This condition, predicted by Debord, has reached its climax in today's digital age through social media platforms. Users are continually reproducing themselves and seeking social approval through their presentation of the "ideal self" (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020).

Social media has become a living laboratory for Debord's theory. Users document, organize, and exhibit their daily lives in a continuous flow. Indeed, the very structure and algorithms of social media platforms contribute to this process (Aydın, 2020).

In this process, the boundaries between the authentic experiences of users and their staged representations of reality become increasingly blurred. At some

point, life experiences are reduced to visual content that can be shared, liked, and commented on (Gorea, 2021).

For Generation Z – born into an era of rapid technological development – this dynamic has become a fundamental component of identity construction. The desire to be seen and liked on social media now plays a decisive role in shaping self-perception (Onjewu et al., 2025).

At the end of the twentieth century, Baudrillard (1994) emphasized that we had entered an era of hyperreality, in which the boundaries between reality and representation were increasingly blurred. This situation, as highlighted by Baudrillard, remains highly relevant in interpreting today's digital media environment.

In his work *Media Spectacle*, Kellner (2003) examines how the media transforms everyday life into a spectacle. Within this transformation process, the concept of impression management, originally introduced by Goffman (2023), becomes significantly more complex and intensified on digital platforms. Marwick and Boyd's (2011) research on Twitter users reveals that social media users are constantly performing for an "imaginary audience."

Van Dijck (2013) argues that social media platforms have fundamentally changed how users present themselves and engage with others. This shift has had a profound impact on the identity construction processes of younger generations. As Boyd (2014) highlights, today's widely used digital platforms have become indispensable components of young people's social lives.

An earlier study by Zhao et al. (2008) on Facebook illustrates how users construct "hoped-for possible selves" in online environments. These digital self-presentations reinforce the tendency for individuals to continually compare themselves with others, as proposed in Festinger's social comparison theory (Wheeler, 2024).

Twenge's (2017) findings in the "iGen" study show the psychological effects of constant connectivity and social media use on younger generations. On the other hand, research results indicate that intensive use of social media may be associated with increased rates of anxiety and depression.

Identity Construction and Social Media

Identity construction is defined as the process of defining, attributing meaning to, and presenting oneself in both individual and social contexts. From a

psychological perspective, Erikson draws attention to the close relationship between this process and the individual's sense of self, belonging, and self-esteem (Maree, 2022). From a sociological standpoint, identity is regarded as a dynamic structure that is constantly negotiated and reconstructed through the individual's interaction with social roles, norms, and values (Giddens, 2023).

In Goffman's (2023) theory of social interaction, identity is conceptualized as the sum of the various roles and performances that individuals adopt in social life. As emphasized by Festinger in his social comparison theory, this process is shaped by individuals' ongoing tendency to compare themselves with others and to evaluate themselves based on these comparisons (Wheeler, 2024). Baudrillard (1994) suggests that identity construction in modern society occurs within a simulated universe where the boundaries between reality and representation are increasingly blurred.

Social media platforms have introduced a new dimension to the process of identity construction. Digital platforms allow individuals to continuously reorganize and re-present their identities (Van Dijck, 2013). In a study on the online behavior of younger generations, it is noted that social media enables users to engage in "multiple identity" performances and to present different versions of the self in different contexts (Boyd, 2014).

In fact, the role of identity construction in self-presentation has become a prominent topic of discussion with the growing prevalence of digital platforms in recent years. As previously mentioned, a study on Twitter users demonstrates that individuals frequently perform for an "imaginary audience" in online environments and shape their identities in accordance with the expectations of this audience (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Further research also supports the existence and influence of such imagined audiences (Zhao et al., 2008).

A study on Facebook and WhatsApp found that digital platforms often obscure the process of identity construction, and that individuals tend to exhibit fragmented identities across different contexts (Jakaza, 2022). While this finding supports Goffman's (2023) performative identity theory discussed earlier, it also indicates that identity construction has become increasingly fluid in the digital age. Another study reached a similar conclusion, revealing that young people spend a significant portion of their daily lives on social media, and that these platforms play a critical role in self-presentation and social comparison processes (Jeyanthi, 2022).

In light of current research, identity construction on social media appears to exhibit three main features: First, identities are no longer constructed on a single platform, but rather across multiple platforms simultaneously (Jakaza, 2020). Second, the process has become more strategic and intentional, with individuals enacting different identity performances depending on the platform (Tovar et al., 2023, pp. 49-61). Finally, social media identity construction blurs the boundaries between real and virtual life, creating “identity bubbles,” in which the information and values shared significantly reinforce individuals' self-perception (Kaakinen et al., 2020; Gündüz, 2017).

The Ideal Self

The ideal self is defined as a cognitive structure representing the best version of oneself – who the individual wants to be or believes they can become (Boyatzis & Dhar, 2022). In Rogers' (1959) self-theory, the ideal self is conceptualized as a representation of the self that encompasses the standards and aspirations an individual strives to achieve. Higgins' (2021) self-discrepancy theory frames the ideal self as part of a self-regulation system, representing the positive attributes and desired qualities a person hopes to possess. Bandura (2023), within the framework of Social Cognitive Theory, defines the ideal self as a central component of self-regulation processes. According to this conceptualization, the ideal self serves as a reference point for self-evaluation standards and interacts with self-efficacy beliefs. Bandura emphasizes that the ideal self is shaped through social learning and modeling and plays a critical role in determining behavioral goals. Markus and Nurius (1986), in turn, regard the ideal self as one of the possible selves an individual envisions becoming in the future. In this view, the ideal self-functions as a dynamic structure that shapes one's future goals, hopes, and aspirations.

From a sociological perspective, the ideal self is understood as a construct shaped by social norms, cultural values, and interpersonal interactions. Cooley's concept of the “looking-glass self” suggests that the ideal self is formed in accordance with the expectations and evaluations of others (Siljanovska & Stojcevska, 2018). In Mead's symbolic interactionist framework, the ideal self emerges through social interaction and internalizes the expectations of the “generalized other” (Miyamoto, 2023). Finally, drawing on Bourdieu's (2019) concept of habitus, the ideal self is viewed as a projection of lifestyle shaped by one's social class and cultural capital.

Recent research underscores the multidimensional nature of the ideal self-concept. For example, studies on consumer culture have shown that the ideal self is significantly influenced by material values and media imagery (Dittmar, 2008). Previous studies have also demonstrated that discrepancies between the real self and the ideal self may lead to psychological issues such as depression and anxiety (Vieth et al., 2003). Vignoles and colleagues' (2016) cross-cultural research highlights how the ideal self-varies across cultural contexts, noting that in collectivist societies, it is more strongly shaped by social expectations. Furthermore, other studies emphasize that the ideal self evolves over the life course and plays a role in shaping one's broader life goals (Boyatzis & Dhar, 2022).

It has been observed that social media users generally prefer to present themselves in an idealized manner – regardless of whether the audience consists of close or distant friends. However, when it comes to close friends, users may also seek self-validation by sharing personal weaknesses or even embarrassing information (Zheng et al., 2020; Strimbu et al., 2019).

Numerous studies on social media confirm that these platforms can increase self-concept incongruence by amplifying the gap between the real self and the ideal self. This incongruence may lead young individuals – who frequently display their ideal selves online – to become increasingly detached from real-life activities (Felita et al., 2016).

A study by Zheng et al. (2020) shows that self-presentation on social media varies depending on the perceived audience. The findings suggest that users tend to share self-enhancing content with both close and distant friends but are more likely to engage in self-verification behaviors when posting for close friends. This pattern aligns with Higgins' (1987) self-discrepancy theory, as discussed earlier, and highlights the multilayered nature of identity construction on digital platforms.

Another study examined the role of self-conception in online self-presentation. According to this research, individuals with a strong self-concept exhibit greater inconsistency between their online and offline identities (Strimbu & O'Connell, 2019). These findings are in line with Dittmar's (2008) research on the relationship between consumer culture and the ideal self, illustrating how self-ideals evolve during emerging adulthood.

The study by Vandebosch and Eggermont (2016) explored how mass media and social media contribute to the development of an objectified self-concept. The research demonstrated that following attractive peers and consuming idealized media content increase tendencies toward self-objectification and body surveillance. These findings complement those of Vignoles et al. (2016), which emphasized the role of cultural context in shaping self-perception.

A more recent study by Rafiq and Linden (2024) examined the relationship between social media use and self-concept among university students. Three key correlations were highlighted: (1) the relationship between exposure to idealized body images and body dissatisfaction; (2) the adverse effects of academic comparisons on mental health; and (3) the complex influence of social media interactions on self-concept. These results build upon and update Cross and Markus' (2019) work on self-development, further demonstrating the multifaceted impacts of digital media on identity and self-perception.

Generation Z and Social Media Use

Turner (2015) goes beyond defining Generation Z as “digital natives” and highlights their unique characteristics in terms of technological adaptation and digital literacy. A study conducted by Seemiller and Grace (2018) found that Generation Z spends an average of 10 hours per day on online platforms, with more than 60% of that time dedicated to social media use. This intensive engagement goes beyond quantitative measurement and illustrates how Generation Z has made digital platforms an indispensable part of their daily lives. A study by Anderson and Jiang (2018) supports this finding, showing that Generation Z has adopted multiscreen usage and a constant online presence as a lifestyle, fundamentally altering their social interaction, learning, and information acquisition processes.

It is well established that Generation Z's social media usage practices differ significantly from those of previous generations. Anderson and Jiang (2018) note that the generation's use of social media as a multidimensional platform plays a key role in this divergence.

Social media platforms—accessed through various technological tools such as smartphones, tablets, and computers—are used actively not only for communication but also for identity construction, career development, learning, and even entrepreneurial activities. A study by Dimock (2019) sheds light on

Generation Z's distinctive approach to content creation and consumption, emphasizing the creative and innovative dimensions of their digital engagement. Moreover, Generation Z's proficiency in managing multiple identities, digital branding, and community building is attributed to their internalization of digital-era competencies. For this generation, social media is not merely an entertainment medium but also a strategic tool for self-expression, networking, and professional growth (Seemiller & Grace, 2018).

On the other hand, the intensive use of social media by Generation Z has also been associated with various negative consequences. Twenge and Martin's (2020) research reveals a positive correlation between time spent on social media and levels of depression and anxiety—effects found to be particularly pronounced within this generation. Research by Przybylski et al. (2013) on the concept of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) highlights the detrimental impact of constant online presence on Generation Z's mental health.

Social media addiction is also becoming a growing concern among Generation Z, with documented adverse effects on academic performance, sleep quality, and interpersonal relationships (Treviño Benavides et al., 2023). Additionally, Lup et al. (2015) highlight the harmful consequences of perfectionist self-presentation and the culture of constant comparison on this generation's self-esteem and self-perception. Researchers such as Vițelar (2019) emphasize the need for longitudinal studies to explore the long-term implications of Generation Z's digital behaviors.

Method

Research Model

Our research is a relational survey model study designed based on quantitative research methods. The correlational survey model is a design that aims to describe the existing relationships between variables and to reveal the correlations between them and is widely used in social science studies. This model is considered to provide a suitable methodological basis for analyzing the structural relationships between the selected variables.

Participants

(The target group of the research consists of individuals defined as Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2004. Since members of this generation were born into the digital age, they use social media platforms intensively and express their

identities through these platforms. The sample size of the study was determined via priori power analysis conducted using the G*Power 3.1.9.7 program. Based on parameters including a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$), a 95% confidence level, and 95% statistical power ($1-\beta$), the minimum required sample size was calculated as 272. Considering possible missing or incomplete responses, a total of 300 participants were reached.

The data were collected through an online survey form created electronically and disseminated via social media platforms. Participation was voluntary and conditional upon informed consent approval.

The ages of participants ranged from 18 to 27. Individuals were eligible to participate if they had maintained accounts on at least two different social media platforms for a minimum of six months and used these platforms for at least two hours per day and ten hours per week—by producing, watching, or following content. All participants were at least high school graduates or held an equivalent degree.

Tools

Three basic tools were used to collect data in the study:

Demographic Information Form: In addition to the basic demographic characteristics of the participants such as age, gender, and education level; it consists of structured questions including variables such as duration of social media use (hours per day), actively used social media platforms, and frequency of use.

Appearance-Related Social Media Consciousness Scale (ARSMBS): Developed by Ökten (2024), this scale aims to measure individuals' level of awareness about the visual content they share on social media and their self-perceptions associated with appearance. The scale consists of 17 items in total. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale.

Social Media Identity Construction Scale (SMIQ): The scale adapted into Turkish by Öngören et al. (2021) was developed to measure individuals' self-presentations and digital identity construction strategies on social media platforms. There is a total of 13 items on the scale. Participants responded with a 7-point Likert-type scale.

Finally, the psychometric properties of the scales used in this study were evaluated. Firstly, in the reliability analysis conducted for the Appearance-

Related Social Media Awareness Scale (ARSMBS), the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was found to be $\alpha = .91$, while the item-total correlations of the scale ranged from .41 to .72, and it was determined that all items made a meaningful contribution to the structure they measured. Accordingly, the scale has internal consistency, and all items make a meaningful contribution to the structure they measure. Secondly, for the Social Media Identity Construction Scale (SMIQ), Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated as $\alpha = .88$. Based on this calculation, the scale is reliable. The item-total correlations for the scale ranged from .38 to .67. All items adequately measure the construction they represent.

Data Collection Process and Analysis of Data

The data collection process of the research was conducted online. The questionnaire form created through Microsoft Forms was delivered to the participants through social media platforms and various youth groups. In the introduction part of the questionnaire form, the purpose of the research was explained, and the participants were asked to participate voluntarily and by protecting the confidentiality of their personal information. Individuals who did not approve the informed consent form were denied access to the survey. The data collection process took approximately four weeks after the ethics committee's approval was obtained. Participants were not given any incentives.

The data obtained from the research were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 30.0 software. In the first stage, preliminary analyses of the dataset were conducted. In this context, missing data analysis was performed, and when the proportion of missing data was below 5%, the gaps were filled using mean substitution. Subsequently, outlier analysis was conducted using boxplot graphs and Z-scores; data with $Z > \pm 3$ was excluded. The assumption of normality was tested using both the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests.

Within the scope of descriptive statistics, frequency, percentage, mean, median, standard deviation, and confidence intervals were calculated. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was computed to assess the internal consistency of the scales, and item-total correlations were analyzed.

Pearson correlation analysis was employed to test the main hypotheses of the study. For group comparisons based on socio-demographic variables, independent samples t-tests and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were conducted. When significant differences were identified in the ANOVA results, post-hoc analyses were performed using the Games-Howell test, considering

Levene's test results, which indicated unequal variances across groups. A significance level of $p < .05$ was adopted for all statistical analyses.

Ethical Principles

This study was conducted in accordance with the approval of the university ethics committee dated 02.05.25 and decision number 2025.05. All participants approved the informed consent form online and participated in the study completely voluntarily. During the research process, utmost attention was paid to the principles of confidentiality and anonymity, and the data obtained were used only for scientific purposes and within the framework of ethical principles.

Findings

Within the scope of the study, participants' appearance-related awareness regarding social media use and their digital identity construction tendencies were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Of the total sample of 300 participants, 187 were women and 113 were men. Female participants had an average score of 48.33 (SD = 11.85) on the Appearance-Related Social Media Awareness Scale, while male participants had an average score of 28.54 (SD = 7.43). These findings indicate that women exhibit higher levels of awareness and sensitivity toward appearance-based content on social media.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

	Gender	N	Mean	SD
Appearance-Related Social Media Consciousness Scale	Female	187	48.33	11.85
	Male	113	28.54	7.43
Identity Construction Scale in Social Media	Female	187	69.65	18.17
	Male	113	42.52	12.63

Regarding the Social Media Identity Construction Scale, female participants scored an average of 69.65 (SD = 18.17), whereas male participants scored an average of 42.52 (SD = 12.63). These averages suggest that women are more inclined than men to present themselves, perform identity, and construct social selfhood in digital environments.

The study also examined the relationship between daily social media usage time and scores on both the Social Media Identity Construction and Appearance-Related Social Media Awareness scales. The results indicated that increased daily usage time is associated with significantly higher scores on both

measures. Individuals who spend more time on social media tend to have a greater tendency toward digital identity performance and higher levels of appearance-based awareness. This relationship was found to be statistically significant ($p = .002$).

Additionally, the study investigated whether the number of social media platforms used by participants was associated with differences in either of the two scale scores. The analysis revealed no statistically significant differences based on the number of platforms used ($p = .176$). This suggests that digital identity construction and appearance-related awareness levels are independent of the number of platforms on which individuals are active.

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Analysis

	Identity Construction Scale in Social Media
Appearance-Related Social Media Consciousness Scale	$r = .776, p < .001$

A Pearson correlation analysis was applied to determine the relationship between identity construction on social media and social media awareness related to appearance. The analysis revealed a positive, high-level, and statistically significant relationship between these two variables ($r = .776, p < .001$). This finding indicates that as appearance-related social media awareness increases, individuals become more intensely involved in identity construction processes on social media. As a result, a positive and high-level relationship was observed between social media awareness related to appearance and digital identity construction ($r = .776, p < .001$). Therefore, this finding confirms hypothesis H1.

Table 3. Independent Samples t-Test Results by Gender

	t	df	p	Average Difference
Identity Construction Scale in Social Media	17.78	297.57	.000	19.79
Appearance-Related Social Media Consciousness Scale	15.22	292.16	.000	27.12

Within the scope of the research, an independent samples t-test was conducted to determine whether there were significant differences in participants' scores on the Social Media Identity Construction Scale and the Appearance-Related Social Media Awareness Scale based on gender. The results indicated that female participants scored significantly higher on the Social Media

Identity Construction Scale ($M = 69.65$, $SD = 18.17$) compared to male participants ($M = 42.52$, $SD = 12.63$), $t(292.16) = 15.22$, $p < .001$.

Similarly, female participants scored significantly higher on the Appearance-Related Social Media Awareness Scale ($M = 48.33$, $SD = 11.85$) than male participants ($M = 28.54$, $SD = 7.43$), $t(297.57) = 17.78$, $p < .001$.

These findings suggest that female participants engage more extensively in digital identity construction and demonstrate higher levels of appearance-related awareness on social media compared to their male counterparts. The results underscore that the influence of social media on appearance and identity construction varies significantly by gender.

Finally, the fact that female participants scored significantly higher than males ($p < .001$) confirm H2 hypothesis. The show that women's digital identity construction scores are significantly higher than men's ($p < .001$) confirms H3 hypothesis.

Table 4. Identity Construction on Social Media and Social Media Awareness Related to Appearance According to Different Income Levels One-Way ANOVA Analysis

	F(4, 295)	p
Appearance-Related Social Media Consciousness Scale	15.52	< .001
Identity Construction Scale in Social Media	14.29	< .001

Firstly, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine whether participants' Social Media Identity Construction and Appearance-Related Social Media Awareness scores differed by income level. The results showed a statistically significant difference in Social Media Identity Construction scores across income levels, $F(4, 295) = 15.52$, $p < .001$. Similarly, scores on the Appearance-Related Social Media Awareness Scale also differed significantly by income level, $F(4, 295) = 14.29$, $p < .001$.

These findings suggest that individuals' processes of identity construction and appearance-based awareness on social media are associated with their economic background. Specifically, behaviors such as self-presentation and aesthetic sensitivity in digital environments appear to be shaped not only by individual preferences but also by financial resources and class position.

In addition, to identify which income groups differed significantly, a Games-Howell post-hoc test was performed. For the Social Media Identity

Construction Scale, participants in the “very low” income group scored significantly lower than those in the “medium,” “high,” and “very high” income groups ($p < .001$). Additionally, individuals in the “high” income group scored significantly higher than those in the “very low” income group. A similar pattern was observed in the Appearance-Related Social Media Awareness Scale: participants with “very low” income obtained significantly lower scores compared to those with “medium,” “high,” and “very high” incomes ($p < .001$).

These results indicate that self-presentation and appearance-based awareness on social media vary significantly with income level. Individuals with higher incomes tend to engage more actively in aesthetically oriented and identity performance-driven participation. This supports the notion that digital self-construction is not only a psychological phenomenon but also an economic one, reinforcing the relevance of Debord’s spectacle society in the context of socio-economic stratification.

Notably, the “very low” income group scored significantly lower than all other groups on both scales ($p < .001$). The “low” income group also scored significantly lower than the “high” and “very high” income groups ($p < .001$). Furthermore, participants in the “medium” income group scored significantly lower than those in the “very high” group ($p < .001$). Across both scales, most of the significant differences favored the “very high” income group, indicating that scale scores increased consistently with rising income levels. Significant differences in scale scores according to income level ($p < .001$) indicate that hypothesis H6 is confirmed.

Conclusion

In our study, female participants scored significantly higher than male participants on both the Social Media Identity Construction Scale and the Appearance-Related Social Media Awareness Scale (Table 1). This finding is consistent with previous studies in literature. For instance, Van Dijck (2013) and Marwick & Boyd (2011) found that female users engage more frequently in “visual presentation” and “self-performance” on social media. Similarly, Jakaza (2022) emphasized that women exhibit greater aesthetic concern and a stronger desire for visibility in their digital identity construction processes. In this regard, our findings align with earlier research, while also highlighting that women demonstrate higher levels of appearance-related awareness and a greater tendency to construct digital identities compared to men.

However, some studies suggest that gender differences in self-presentation vary across platforms and contexts, reflecting the dynamic and fluid nature of identity spaces within social media environments (Marwick & Boyd, 2011).

The consistently higher scores observed among female participants on both scales also underscore the relevance of examining Debord's (2024) notion of "appearance replacing reality" within the theory of the society of the spectacle from a gendered perspective, revealing gender-specific patterns in self-representation (Table 1).

In addition, correlation analysis revealed a positive and statistically significant relationship between social media usage time and both digital identity construction and appearance-related awareness among all participants ($p = .002$) (Table 2). This suggests that as members of Generation Z spend more time on social media, they are increasingly invested in self-presentation and visual-based representation practices.

Turner (2015) and Seemiller & Grace (2018) emphasize that Generation Z's intense engagement with social media serves not merely as a mode of communication but also as a domain for identity performance. The results of our correlation analysis support these findings (Table 2). Dimock (2019) similarly notes that this generation's creative approach to content production and self-presentation evolves in parallel with the amount of time spent on social media. In line with this, our study found that as social media usage time increased, participants' scores on both scales also increased. This suggests that increased time spent on digital platforms corresponds not only to greater activity but also to the transfer and visual reproduction of social identities within online spaces. Thus, time spent on social media holds significance not only quantitatively, but also in terms of identity construction.

According to the independent samples t-test results, female participants scored significantly higher than male participants on both the Social Media Identity Construction Scale and the Appearance-Related Social Media Awareness Scale (Table 3). This finding is consistent with prior research highlighting gendered patterns in digital self-presentation. Marwick and Boyd (2011), in their early study during the rise of social media, found that women manage their digital identity performances more strategically emphasizing visibility, aesthetic control, and the pursuit of likes. Similarly, Jakaza's (2022) research demonstrates that women exhibit higher levels of visual anxiety in their

posts and invest more in the presentation of an idealized self. The higher scores observed among female participants in our study align with literature suggesting that aesthetic and approval-based expectations are more pronounced for women in the digital identity construction process. When interpreted through the lens of Baudrillard's (2019) theory of simulation, these findings suggest that women are more deeply involved in producing "hyperreality" within social media environments.

On the one hand, the relatively low average scores of male participants suggest that they may engage with social media primarily as a functional or entertainment-oriented tool, rather than as a medium for identity presentation. This interpretation is supported by several studies in literature. Sheldon (2008) found that men are more likely to use social media for information gathering and entertainment, whereas women tend to use it for maintaining social relationships and interpersonal communication. Similarly, Muscanell & Guadagno (2012) observed that while men often utilize social media to establish new connections, women predominantly use it to sustain existing ones.

Furthermore, the independent samples t-test results presented in Table 3 ($t(297.57) = 17.78, p < .001$) demonstrate that women exhibit significantly greater sensitivity to digital visibility and identity performance compared to men. These results are consistent with previous research on gender-based differences in social media self-presentation and support findings reported by Haferkamp et al. (2012) and Tifferet & Vilnai-Yavetz (2014).

In addition, the ANOVA results revealed significant differences in participants' awareness and engagement with social media-based identity construction and appearance according to income level (Table 4). Specifically, individuals in the "very low" and "low" income groups scored lower than those in the "medium," "high," and "very high" income groups. This suggests that strategies of self-presentation and visibility on social media are shaped by class-based distinctions.

When interpreted through the lens of the spectacle society theory, these findings support the idea that an individual's capacity to appear – and thus to exist socially in digital spaces – is mediated by economic resources. Debord (2024) argues that in modern society, appearance has supplanted reality, and the sustainability of that appearance relies on various forms of capital – economic, aesthetic, and cultural. In particular, the fact that the "very low" income group scored significantly lower than all other groups on both identity construction and

appearance-related awareness ($p < .001$) underscores the central role of economic capital in shaping digital self-presentation.

Marwick and Boyd (2011) emphasize that digital platforms operate within the framework of the visibility economy, and that users are constrained not only by social approval but also by technical capabilities in content production. In our study, the finding that individuals in the high-income group had higher scale scores suggests that digital identity presentation is shaped not only by personal preferences but also by socioeconomic capacities. Indeed, significant economic differences – even disparities – are known to exist among online content creators, one of the most visible groups on social media (Schradie, 2011). This indicates that similar economic differences may also exist among general users and are reflected in their levels of digital visibility.

Leo and colleagues (2016) noted that social networks reinforce distinctions between socioeconomic classes and that individuals tend to interact more frequently with others of similar class status. This suggests that self-presentation and visibility strategies on social media are influenced by class-based dynamics. Similarly, Li and Samsurijan (2025) found that middle-class individuals employ specific visual and textual strategies to reinforce their class identity on social media platforms, and that algorithms further reduce cross-class interaction. These findings support the notion that identity construction and appearance-related awareness on social media are closely tied to socioeconomic status. The ANOVA results in our study are consistent with these findings (Table 4).

However, contrasting results can also be found in the literature. For example, Sabatini and Sarracino (2015) observed that social media use may lead to increased income dissatisfaction, and that this effect may occur independently of individuals' actual socioeconomic status. This implies that digital self-presentation may be shaped not only by material conditions but also by mechanisms of social comparison.

In this context, the findings of our study broadly align with the literature emphasizing that identity construction and appearance-related awareness on social media are influenced by socioeconomic status. Nonetheless, the existence of divergent findings in previous studies indicates that this relationship is complex and multifaceted, warranting further empirical investigation.

In this study, a positive and statistically significant relationship was found between social media usage time and both digital identity construction and

appearance-related social media awareness ($p = .002$). This finding indicates that, particularly among Generation Z users, increased time spent on social media is associated with greater investment in self-presentation and appearance-oriented representations.

Regarding gender-based findings, female participants scored significantly higher than male participants on both the Social Media Identity Construction Scale and the Appearance-Related Social Media Awareness Scale. This result is consistent with previous research reporting gender-based differences in digital self-presentation.

In analyses based on income level, the observation that individuals in the high-income group scored higher on both scales suggests that digital identity construction is shaped not only by personal preferences but also by socioeconomic capacities.

However, some studies have reported divergent findings. For instance, Sabatini and Sarracino (2015) found that social media use may increase individuals' dissatisfaction with their income, regardless of their actual socioeconomic status. This suggests that digital self-presentation may be influenced not only by economic factors but also by social comparison processes

Limitations and Recommendations

This study has several methodological limitations. First, the use of a cross-sectional research design limits the ability to establish causal relationships. Future research employing longitudinal designs may provide a clearer understanding of the causal dynamics between Generation Z's social media use and identity construction processes.

In addition, the use of self-report measures may have introduced social desirability bias. Therefore, future studies incorporating mixed-method approaches supported by qualitative techniques – such as in-depth interviews or digital ethnography – could enrich and triangulate the findings. Moreover, the psychological and sociological mechanisms underlying the gender and income-level differences observed in this study warrant deeper investigation. In particular, interpreting the income-related differences presented in Table 3 through the lens of Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital may offer a more nuanced understanding of class-based distinctions on social media.

It is also important to conduct comparative analyses of different social media platforms to uncover platform-specific dynamics in identity construction. Additionally, future studies could explore the associations between Generation Z's social media usage and psychological variables such as well-being, self-esteem, and social anxiety, in order to better understand the mental health implications of digital engagement. Lastly, cross-cultural comparisons of Generation Z's social media practices may shed light on the influence of cultural factors on digital identity construction.

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