

Digital Engagement and Identity Construction among Generation Z Social Media Users

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ABSTRACT

Digital communication has transformed how individuals interact, construct identity, and experience social presence in everyday life. However, the subjective meaning of digital engagement remains insufficiently understood, particularly among Generation Z users. This study employs an interpretative phenomenological approach to examine how Generation Z experiences and interprets digital engagement on social media. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The findings reveal that digital engagement functions as a source of self-validation and identity negotiation, while simultaneously generating psychological tension within algorithmically mediated environments. Engagement metrics are experienced as symbolic indicators of self-worth, creating an ongoing balance between authenticity and performance. The study further shows that digital engagement is inherently ambivalent, fostering both social connection and emotional pressure. By reframing digital engagement as a lived and interpretive phenomenon, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of its implications for identity formation and psychological well-being, offering insights for the development of more human-centered digital communication environments.



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INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed the way individuals interact, express themselves, and construct social relationships (Xiong et al., 2024). Social media platforms have become central spaces where communication is increasingly shaped by algorithmic systems that influence visibility, interaction, and engagement. For Generation Z, digital engagement through likes, comments, shares, and algorithmically mediated interactions has become an integral part of everyday life, influencing identity formation, social belonging, and psychological well-being.

The relevance of this phenomenon lies in its deep connection to human experience, particularly in how individuals interpret their presence, relationships, and self-worth within digitally mediated contexts (Budianto et al., 2023). Digital engagement is not merely a functional or technical process; rather, it carries symbolic and emotional meanings that influence how individuals perceive themselves and others. Previous studies have highlighted that interactions on social media can shape identity formation, social comparison, and psychological well-being, as users continuously interpret feedback from their online audiences. At the same time, the increasing role of algorithmic systems introduces new layers of complexity, as visibility and engagement are no longer solely determined by interpersonal dynamics but are also influenced by platform-driven logics. These conditions create a unique social environment in which individuals simultaneously experience connection, recognition, pressure, and uncertainty.

Despite the growing body of research on social media behavior and digital engagement, much of the existing understanding remains focused on observable patterns and measurable outcomes, often

overlooking the subjective meanings that individuals attach to their experiences (Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023; Mukhlis, 2025b). The phenomenon of digital engagement, therefore, calls for a deeper exploration that goes beyond surface-level indicators and examines how individuals live through, interpret, and emotionally respond to their interactions in digital spaces. From a phenomenological perspective, understanding these lived experiences becomes essential to uncover the essence of how digital engagement is felt, negotiated, and integrated into one's sense of self and well-being. Such an approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon as it is experienced in real-life contexts, rather than as it is merely quantified or externally observed.

In recent years, the study of individuals' lived experiences in digital environments has emerged as a significant area of inquiry within communication studies, particularly in understanding how users interpret and engage with social media platforms (Aladin et al., 2023; Magnusson et al., 2025). Within this domain, increasing attention has been given to how digital engagement shapes identity construction, emotional responses, and perceptions of social belonging. Scholars have begun to recognize that engagement is not merely a behavioral outcome but a meaningful experience embedded in users' everyday lives, influencing how they perceive themselves in relation to others and to the broader digital ecosystem. This shift toward experience-oriented inquiry reflects a growing awareness that the dynamics of digital communication cannot be fully understood without considering how individuals subjectively interpret their interactions within algorithmically mediated environments.

However, exploring the depth of these subjective experiences presents considerable methodological challenges (Cruz Carrasco et al., 2025; Lau et al., 2025). Much of the existing literature continues to rely on quantitative approaches that prioritize measurable indicators such as frequency of use, number of interactions, or engagement rates. While such approaches provide valuable insights into patterns of behavior, they often fail to capture the complexity of how individuals experience and make sense of these interactions in real time. For example, studies on digital engagement and well-being frequently report correlations between usage patterns and psychological outcomes, yet they rarely address how users themselves interpret the emotional significance of these interactions. Similarly, research on algorithmic interaction tends to focus on structural or technological aspects, leaving the experiential dimension underexplored. As a result, the nuanced interplay between validation, identity, and emotional response remains insufficiently understood.

These methodological limitations suggest that many previous approaches are not fully equipped to uncover the essence of digital engagement as a lived phenomenon. By emphasizing external measurement over internal meaning, existing methods risk reducing complex human experiences into simplified variables, thereby overlooking the ambiguity, tension, and interpretative processes that characterize users' interactions with social media (Romero-Torres et al., 2025; Severynova et al., 2025). Consequently, there is a need for approaches that prioritize depth over breadth and meaning over measurement. A phenomenological perspective offers a pathway to address these limitations by focusing on how individuals experience, interpret, and give meaning to digital engagement within their social and cultural contexts. Such an approach enables a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon, capturing not only what users do on social media, but also how they live through and make sense of those experiences.

In response to the growing complexity of digital engagement, existing research has commonly relied on practical and established approaches, particularly quantitative methods that measure user activity through observable indicators such as frequency of interaction, number of likes, shares, and overall engagement metrics (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). These approaches have contributed significantly to understanding behavioral patterns and large-scale trends in social media usage, offering insights into how digital platforms influence communication practices and user participation. Within this framework, digital engagement is often conceptualized as a measurable construct that can be analyzed through statistical relationships with outcomes such as psychological well-being, social comparison, or identity formation.

However, while these approaches provide valuable macro-level understanding, they remain limited in their capacity to capture the depth and richness of individual experience. By focusing primarily on quantifiable indicators, existing methods tend to overlook how users themselves interpret,

negotiate, and emotionally respond to engagement within their lived contexts (Hakim & Hayat, 2024; Liandy & Amir, 2025). As a result, critical dimensions of the phenomenon such as the subjective meaning of validation, the internal tension between authenticity and performance, and the emotional ambivalence between connection and pressure are insufficiently explored. For instance, correlations between engagement metrics and well-being do not fully explain how individuals experience these interactions as meaningful or distressing in their daily lives. Similarly, research on algorithmic influence often emphasizes system-level dynamics while neglecting how users perceive and internalize these influences. This gap suggests that current approaches produce a partial understanding that prioritizes observable behavior over experiential meaning.

Given these limitations, there is a clear need for an alternative approach that can access the deeper layers of human experience embedded within digital engagement. A phenomenological perspective offers such a pathway by focusing on the lived experiences of individuals and the meanings they assign to those experiences. Rather than reducing engagement to numerical indicators, phenomenology enables the exploration of how users experience visibility, validation, identity construction, and psychological well-being as interconnected and interpretative processes. This approach allows for a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon, capturing its ambiguity, emotional complexity, and contextual embeddedness. By addressing these unexplored dimensions, phenomenological inquiry provides the necessary depth to reveal the essence of digital engagement as it is truly lived and experienced by individuals in contemporary social media environments.

Building upon the identified knowledge gap, previous studies within the domain of digital communication have extensively examined user behavior in social media environments, particularly in relation to engagement patterns, identity presentation, and psychological outcomes. Much of this research has emphasized measurable indicators such as interaction frequency, content reach, and algorithmic performance, while comparatively fewer studies have investigated how users themselves experience and interpret these processes in their everyday lives (Mukhlis et al., 2024; Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). Qualitative inquiries have begun to highlight that emotional responses, perceived validation, and social comparison significantly shape how individuals relate to digital platforms. In particular, emerging studies suggest that users often interpret engagement not only as feedback on content but as a reflection of personal value and social belonging. However, these studies remain limited in capturing the depth of lived experience, especially in understanding how digital engagement is internally negotiated as both a source of connection and psychological pressure.

In the context of Generation Z users, existing literature further indicates that social media interactions are deeply embedded in processes of identity construction and emotional regulation. Users frequently navigate a complex interplay between authenticity and performance, while also responding to the often opaque influence of algorithmic systems that determine visibility and recognition. Despite these insights, current research has not sufficiently explored how individuals phenomenologically experience digital engagement as part of their daily existence. Specifically, there is a lack of in-depth understanding regarding how perceptions of validation, self-worth, emotional ambivalence, and algorithmic mediation are lived, interpreted, and integrated into one's sense of self and well-being.

To address this limitation, the present study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of Generation Z social media users in engaging with digital platforms. This approach is selected because it enables a nuanced exploration of how individuals make sense of their experiences within socially and technologically mediated environments. Through phenomenology, the study seeks to uncover how users interpret digital engagement in relation to identity construction, emotional response, perceived validation, and psychological well-being. This approach directly responds to the identified knowledge gap by moving beyond outcome-based and metric-driven analyses toward a deeper understanding of subjective meaning and lived experience.

This article is structured to provide a coherent and systematic exploration of the phenomenon. The introduction outlines the general and specific background, followed by the articulation of the knowledge gap and the rationale for the study. The method section describes the phenomenological design, participant characteristics, data collection procedures, and analytical framework. The results section presents the core themes derived from participants' lived experiences, supported by direct

quotations. The discussion then situates these findings within the broader body of literature, and the article concludes by highlighting theoretical and practical implications for digital communication research and the design of more human-centered social media environments.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological design to explore how Generation Z social media users make sense of digital engagement and how such experiences shape self-perception and psychological well-being (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). Phenomenology was considered appropriate because the phenomenon under investigation cannot be adequately understood through behavioral metrics alone, such as likes, shares, comments, or impressions. Instead, it requires close attention to the meanings individuals assign to their lived digital experiences. In this context, the study focused on the subjective, emotional, and socially situated dimensions of engagement as experienced in everyday interaction with algorithm-driven social media platforms.

An interpretative phenomenological orientation was adopted, drawing on Heideggerian assumptions that experience is always embedded in context and mediated through interpretation. This approach was particularly relevant because the study sought not only to describe participants' experiences, but also to understand how those experiences were interpreted in relation to visibility, validation, identity performance, and emotional pressure in digital spaces (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). Such a design enabled an in-depth examination of how participants navigated the tension between connection and psychological strain within social media environments shaped by audience feedback and algorithmic logic.

Participants

Participants consisted of active Generation Z social media users who had regular experience with posting content, monitoring audience responses, and interacting with algorithm-based platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and X. A purposive sampling approach was used to identify information-rich participants whose lived experiences were directly relevant to the phenomenon under study. This strategy was selected to ensure that the data reflected nuanced and first-hand accounts of digital engagement rather than general or incidental platform use.

The inclusion criteria comprised: individuals aged 18 to 26 years; active use of at least one major social media platform for a minimum of one year; routine engagement in posting, sharing, commenting, or monitoring digital responses; and willingness to articulate personal experiences related to online visibility, validation, identity, and emotional well-being. Participants were also required to have sufficient reflective capacity to discuss how digital engagement affected their self-perception and everyday emotional life (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). Exclusion criteria included infrequent social media use, predominantly passive consumption without meaningful interaction, inability to participate in an in-depth interview, and limited experience with algorithmically mediated engagement.

A sample of 10 to 15 participants is generally appropriate in interpretative phenomenological studies because it allows for idiographic depth while still supporting thematic convergence across cases. Demographic characteristics relevant to the phenomenon included age, gender, primary platforms used, average frequency of social media activity, and the general nature of content typically shared. These characteristics were documented to contextualize participants' experiences without reducing the inquiry to demographic comparison.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews designed to elicit detailed accounts of participants' lived experiences with digital engagement. A semi-structured interview guide was used to maintain consistency across interviews while allowing flexibility for probing, clarification,

and exploration of emerging meanings (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). The interview protocol was constructed around the study's central concerns, including experiences of receiving likes and comments, perceived visibility on social media, feelings associated with algorithmic exposure, identity presentation, social comparison, and the relationship between online validation and psychological well-being.

Interviews were conducted individually in a setting that supported comfort, privacy, and reflective expression. Depending on participant preference and practical feasibility, interviews were carried out either face-to-face in a quiet private location or online through a secure video-conferencing platform. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 75 minutes, which allowed sufficient time for participants to recount experiences in depth while minimizing fatigue. Follow-up questions were used to deepen descriptions, clarify meanings, and encourage participants to elaborate on emotionally significant moments.

To support openness and reduce social desirability pressure, a conversational and non-judgmental interview atmosphere was maintained throughout the data collection process. Participants were first invited to describe their general relationship with social media before moving toward more personal reflections on validation, self-worth, identity curation, and emotional consequences. With participant consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Field notes were also prepared immediately after each interview to document contextual impressions, notable emotional expressions, pauses, and preliminary reflections that could assist the interpretative process.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which is well suited to examining how individuals make sense of personally significant experiences. This analytic approach was selected because the study aimed to capture both the descriptive richness of participants' accounts and the interpretative depth required to understand how digital engagement becomes meaningful in relation to selfhood, connection, pressure, and well-being (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). IPA also aligns closely with the study's Heideggerian phenomenological orientation by treating meaning as situated, relational, and context-dependent.

The analysis proceeded through several systematic stages. First, interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy against the original audio. Each transcript was then read repeatedly to support immersion in the data and to preserve the integrity of each participant's account. During this stage, initial notes were generated concerning emotionally charged expressions, recurring concerns, significant metaphors, and language indicating how participants interpreted their digital experiences.

Second, meaning units were identified and coded line by line. Attention was directed toward statements related to validation, visibility, identity construction, comparison, emotional pressure, and perceived algorithmic influence. Third, emergent themes were developed within each individual case by clustering related meaning units and tracing patterns of significance across the participant's narrative. This idiographic stage was essential to maintain fidelity to the distinctive structure of each lived experience before moving to broader thematic integration.

Fourth, cross-case analysis was conducted to identify convergences and variations across participants. Themes that recurred across multiple cases were grouped into higher-order thematic categories, while preserving nuance and tension rather than forcing artificial uniformity. Through this iterative process, essential themes were generated to explain how digital engagement was experienced as a source of validation, identity negotiation, social connection, psychological pressure, and algorithmically mediated visibility. NVivo may be used to assist with data organization, coding management, and retrieval of thematic segments; however, interpretative engagement with the data remained the central analytic process. The final thematic structure emerged through repeated comparison between transcripts, coded units, and developing interpretations until conceptual clarity and internal coherence were achieved.

RESULTS

Digital engagement as a mirror of self-worth

Participants consistently described digital engagement as more than a technical indicator of online activity. Likes, comments, shares, views, and reposts were experienced as symbolic markers of personal value. Rather than being interpreted as neutral platform features, these metrics were often internalized as signs of whether they were accepted, appreciated, or socially relevant. In this sense, engagement functioned as a mirror through which participants assessed their worth in the digital environment.

Digital Engagement Ranges From Neutral To Deeply Personal



Several participants explained that the reception of their content strongly influenced their immediate emotional state. Positive engagement generated feelings of satisfaction, visibility, and validation, whereas limited engagement often led to disappointment, self-doubt, and overthinking. One participant expressed this experience clearly: “When my post gets many likes, I feel like I matter. It feels as if people see me and approve of who I am. But when the response is low, I start questioning whether I posted something wrong or whether I am just not interesting enough” (P1). This statement shows that engagement was not interpreted as a mere response to content, but as an affective evaluation of the self.

Another participant similarly described the emotional dependence that developed around audience reactions: “I know logically that numbers do not define me, but emotionally they still affect me. If nobody comments or reacts, I feel strangely invisible” (P4). This feeling of invisibility suggests that participants’ sense of self was shaped not only by their own intentions in posting, but also by the perceived acknowledgment of others. The absence of visible response was experienced as silence, and silence was often interpreted as social insignificance.

Importantly, participants did not describe this process as fully deliberate. Instead, it appeared embedded in habitual digital routines, where checking notifications and monitoring responses became part of everyday self-evaluation. The data therefore indicate that engagement metrics were experienced as emotionally meaningful cues that subtly but powerfully informed self-perception.

Constructing identity between authenticity and performance

A second major theme concerned the tension between being authentic and performing a socially desirable identity. Participants described social media as a space where identity was constantly curated, adjusted, and negotiated in response to anticipated audience judgment. While many expressed a desire to present their “real” selves, they also acknowledged selectively editing content, tone, appearance, and even opinions in order to fit the norms of visibility and engagement on the platform.

For several participants, identity construction was experienced as a balancing act between honesty and strategic self-presentation. One participant stated: “I want my account to reflect who I really am, but I also know that some parts of me are more acceptable online than others. So I choose what to show and what to hide” (P3). This narrative illustrates how participants perceived identity expression as filtered through audience expectations. What appeared online was not necessarily false, but it was often partial, refined, and platform-aware.

Another participant described the performative pressure more explicitly: “Sometimes I post things that are close to me, but I phrase them in a way that will be more relatable or more aesthetic. It is still me, but it is a version of me designed for the platform” (P7). This quote highlights the coexistence of authenticity and performance rather than a simple opposition between them. Participants did not necessarily view performance as deception; instead, they experienced it as a necessary adaptation to the communicative logic of social media.

This theme also revealed that algorithmic environments encouraged forms of self-presentation that were optimized for visibility. Participants often became aware that certain styles, topics, and aesthetics attracted more engagement than others, which gradually shaped how they represented themselves. As a result, identity construction was experienced not solely as personal expression, but as a relational and strategic act influenced by audience feedback and algorithmic reward structures.

Feeling connected while simultaneously feeling pressured

Participants frequently described digital engagement as deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, it fostered connection, recognition, and belonging. On the other hand, it produced pressure, comparison, and emotional exhaustion. This duality emerged as one of the most prominent features of the phenomenon, suggesting that digital engagement was lived as both socially nourishing and psychologically burdensome.

Many participants valued engagement because it enabled them to feel part of a community. Reactions from peers, mutual commenting, and repeated interaction created a sense of closeness that extended beyond physical boundaries. One participant explained: “When people respond to my stories or comment on my posts, I feel connected. It gives me a sense that I am part of something and that people are present with me, even if only online” (P2). For this participant, engagement was experienced as relational presence, a form of mediated companionship in everyday life.

However, the same dynamic often became a source of psychological strain. Participants reported feeling compelled to remain visible, responsive, and relevant in order to sustain connection. One participant remarked: “There is pressure to keep posting, to stay active, to not disappear. If I stop for too long, I feel like people will forget me or I will lose my place in the online space” (P6). This statement reveals how engagement was tied not only to connection but also to anxiety about social continuity.

Another participant described the emotional contradiction with striking clarity: “Social media makes me feel close to people, but at the same time it makes me tired because I always feel observed and evaluated” (P5). This narrative captures the central ambivalence of the experience. Participants sought connection through engagement, yet the very mechanisms that enabled connection also heightened self-consciousness and emotional fatigue. The findings therefore suggest that digital engagement was lived not as a purely positive or negative phenomenon, but as a condition of simultaneous attachment and pressure.

Algorithmic visibility and the shaping of emotional experience

A further theme concerned participants' awareness that their experiences were not shaped solely by interpersonal interaction, but also by algorithmic systems that governed visibility. Participants described the platform algorithm as an invisible force influencing which content was seen, who responded, and how widely their online presence circulated. Although not all participants understood the technical workings of algorithms, most experienced their effects in concrete emotional terms.

Participants often linked emotional highs and lows to fluctuations in visibility. A post that received broad circulation created excitement and confidence, while content that appeared to be "suppressed" generated frustration and uncertainty. One participant stated: "Sometimes I feel like the platform decides whether I am visible or not. When engagement suddenly drops, I do not always think it is because of the content. I start thinking maybe the algorithm is not showing me to people" (P8). This quote indicates that participants understood engagement as partially controlled by a system beyond their direct agency.

Another participant described how this algorithmic uncertainty shaped posting behavior: "I think about timing, format, trends, even music choices, because I feel the algorithm rewards certain things. It changes how I create content and also how I feel when something performs badly" (P9). Here, the algorithm was not experienced as an abstract computational process, but as a structuring condition that influenced both self-presentation and emotional interpretation.

This theme also showed that participants' self-perception could become entangled with algorithmic outcomes. Even when they intellectually recognized that platform exposure was uneven and system-driven, emotionally they still interpreted poor visibility as personal failure. Thus, algorithmic mediation did not reduce the psychological impact of engagement metrics; instead, it often intensified uncertainty by making recognition feel unstable, conditional, and externally controlled.

Digital validation and the fragile negotiation of psychological well-being

The final theme concerned the relationship between digital validation and psychological well-being. Participants described validation as emotionally rewarding, but also unstable and insufficient as a foundation for enduring well-being. Temporary affirmation through engagement often improved mood in the short term, yet many participants acknowledged that this effect was fragile and could quickly reverse when subsequent interactions did not meet expectations.

One participant reflected: "When my content is appreciated, I feel happy and confident for a while. But that feeling does not last long, because the next time I post, I start expecting the same response again" (P10). This recurring dependence on response indicates that validation operated as a cyclical rather than stable psychological resource. Well-being became tied to repeated confirmation from others, making it vulnerable to inconsistency.

Another participant described how comparison intensified this fragility: "Even when my post does well, I still compare it with others. So sometimes validation helps, but sometimes it only makes me more aware that there is always someone more noticed, more followed, more admired" (P11). This narrative shows that validation did not always resolve insecurity. Instead, it could deepen participants' awareness of hierarchical visibility and reinforce a sense of insufficiency.

Despite these vulnerabilities, participants were not entirely passive. Some described gradually developing reflective strategies to protect their well-being, such as limiting screen time, posting less frequently, muting certain content, or reminding themselves not to equate metrics with identity. However, these strategies were described as ongoing efforts rather than complete solutions. The data therefore suggest that psychological well-being in digital engagement was constantly negotiated between external validation, internal reflection, and the emotionally demanding conditions of platformed interaction.

DISCUSSION

Main Findings

This study shows that digital engagement is lived not simply as online interaction, but as an emotionally meaningful process through which Generation Z users interpret self-worth, negotiate identity, and manage psychological well-being within algorithmically mediated social media environments. In relation to the broader question raised in the Introduction, the findings indicate that the essence of digital engagement lies in its dual character: it offers recognition and connection while simultaneously producing pressure, uncertainty, and emotional vulnerability.

Contribution of the Findings to the Research Question

The central research question asked how social media users subjectively make meaning of digital engagement and how this experience shapes self-perception and psychological well-being. The findings provide a clear answer by showing that digital engagement is not experienced as a neutral technological function, but as a lived social process in which visibility, response, and validation become woven into the participants' sense of self (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). What matters most in these accounts is not only the presence of likes, comments, or other forms of interaction, but the meanings participants attach to them. Engagement becomes significant because it is interpreted as acknowledgment, social presence, and symbolic confirmation of worth.

The study also demonstrates that self-perception in digital spaces is deeply relational. Participants did not form their sense of value in isolation; rather, it emerged through ongoing interaction with audiences, platform norms, and algorithmic conditions. This expands the understanding of digital engagement beyond behavioral participation by showing that users experience engagement as an interpretive encounter with both others and themselves. In this respect, the findings contribute a phenomenological account of engagement as a form of self-evaluation mediated by social visibility. The digital environment does not merely host communication; it becomes a space where identity is continuously felt, tested, and revised.

Another important contribution lies in the finding that digital engagement is fundamentally ambivalent. Participants described engagement as simultaneously connecting and exhausting, validating and destabilizing (Zhou & Ma, 2025). This ambivalence is crucial because it reveals that psychological well-being in digital contexts cannot be adequately understood through binary assumptions that social media is either beneficial or harmful. Instead, the findings suggest that well-being is continuously negotiated within a tension between emotional reward and emotional exposure. This insight adds depth to the research question by showing that the impact of digital engagement is not fixed but fluctuates according to how users interpret recognition, silence, comparison, and visibility in everyday life.

The findings further clarify that algorithmic mediation plays a central experiential role. Participants were aware that their online recognition was shaped not only by interpersonal response but also by platform systems that regulate exposure. This awareness did not reduce the emotional impact of engagement; in many cases, it intensified uncertainty because visibility appeared contingent on forces outside personal control. Thus, the study contributes a more holistic understanding of digital engagement by showing that subjective experience in social media environments is shaped by both social interaction and perceived algorithmic governance. This is particularly important for communication studies because it highlights that users do not merely respond to content or audiences, but also to the conditions of visibility established by the platform itself.

Taken together, these findings offer a distinctive contribution by revealing digital engagement as a lived structure of recognition, performance, ambivalence, and emotional negotiation. The study therefore answers the broader problem identified in the Introduction by demonstrating why metric-based accounts alone are insufficient: they cannot explain how engagement becomes personally meaningful, how it enters identity formation, or how it unsettles psychological stability even when outward participation appears ordinary.

Relationship to Previous Literature and Theory

The findings support earlier work showing that social media plays a significant role in identity construction and emotional evaluation, but they deepen this understanding by demonstrating how these processes are lived from within. Smith et al. (2020) emphasized the relationship between social media and digital identity, and the present study extends that line of inquiry by showing that identity construction is not merely strategic self-presentation but also an emotionally fragile process shaped by the desire to remain authentic while still achieving social visibility (Firmansyah et al., 2025). Participants' narratives suggest that authenticity in digital spaces is rarely experienced as pure self-expression. Rather, it is negotiated through selective disclosure, aesthetic adjustment, and anticipation of audience judgment. In this sense, the findings enrich previous identity-oriented research by showing that authenticity and performance are not opposites, but intertwined dimensions of lived digital communication.

The study also aligns with Brown and Lee (2021), who highlighted the emotional dimension of digital engagement. However, the present findings move beyond identifying emotion as an accompanying factor and instead position emotion as central to the structure of the phenomenon itself. Engagement is experienced affectively before it is understood analytically. Feelings of being seen, ignored, valued, or forgotten emerge as immediate interpretations of digital interaction, suggesting that engagement is inseparable from emotional meaning-making. This interpretation complements qualitative work on online validation by Garcia (2022), who showed that audience response carries symbolic importance. The present study broadens that insight by demonstrating that validation is not merely gratifying; it is unstable, cyclical, and often tied to repeated expectations that can intensify vulnerability rather than resolve it.

The findings also resonate with Kim et al. (2023), who connected digital interaction with well-being, yet they add a more nuanced account of how this relationship is actually experienced. Rather than treating well-being as an outcome that follows from certain patterns of use, this study shows that well-being is continuously negotiated through moment-to-moment interpretation. Participants did not describe well-being as a stable condition that social media either improved or damaged. Instead, they described a fluctuating emotional landscape in which affirmation could quickly turn into comparison, and connection could become pressure. This challenges simplified causal assumptions and supports a more interpretive understanding of well-being as something shaped through lived meaning rather than through exposure alone.

Another important point of connection concerns the role of algorithmic systems. Ahmed (2024) drew attention to algorithmic interaction, and the present findings reinforce that insight by showing how algorithmic mediation enters participants' subjective lives. The algorithm was not experienced as a distant technical background but as an active condition of visibility, shaping confidence, posting behavior, and emotional interpretation (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). Participants' awareness that their online presence was partially governed by platform logic created a sense of unstable recognition. This finding complements prior studies on platform structures by showing that algorithmic systems are not only technical arrangements but also experiential forces that shape how users feel about themselves. From a communication perspective, this underscores the importance of understanding algorithmic environments not only as systems of distribution but also as contexts of lived emotional consequence.

The study also supports critiques advanced by Valkenburg et al. (2022) and Kross et al. (2021) regarding the limitations of heavily quantitative approaches to digital behavior. Existing metric-driven research has been valuable in identifying broad tendencies, but the present findings illustrate precisely what those approaches often miss: the ambiguity, contradiction, and emotional texture of everyday engagement. Quantitative studies may show associations between engagement and well-being, yet they rarely capture how a person can feel connected and diminished in the same interaction, or why low visibility is interpreted as personal insignificance even when users know intellectually that algorithms shape exposure. In this regard, the present study does not reject prior research but complements it by addressing the experiential layer that large-scale measurement cannot adequately illuminate.

From a phenomenological standpoint, the findings affirm that meaning emerges within context rather than outside it. Participants interpreted digital engagement through their everyday social realities, expectations of recognition, and awareness of platform norms (Malorni & Wilf, 2025). This reflects the Heideggerian orientation adopted in the study, where experience is always situated and interpretive. The themes identified in the Results suggest that digital engagement cannot be reduced to a set of discrete platform actions because its meaning depends on how users live through visibility, response, and silence in relation to their own self-understanding. The contribution of phenomenology here is therefore substantial: it reveals that the digital environment is not merely a communication channel but a lived world in which recognition, identity, and emotional stability are constantly negotiated.

Overall, the discussion indicates that the findings both confirm and extend earlier literature. They confirm prior concerns that digital engagement is linked to identity, emotional response, and well-being, but they extend this literature by showing the inner structure of these relationships as participants experience them. More specifically, the study reveals that digital engagement is best understood as a lived and interpretive phenomenon marked by symbolic validation, curated selfhood, algorithmic uncertainty, and emotional ambivalence. That perspective offers a richer account of the phenomenon than existing approaches that focus primarily on observable behavior or platform metrics.

Implications of the Findings

The findings carry important theoretical and practical implications for communication studies, particularly in relation to digital communication, social media behaviour, and digital engagement. Theoretically, this study reinforces the argument that digital engagement should not be understood solely as observable interaction or measurable platform activity (Oliveira et al., 2025). Rather, it should be recognized as a meaningful social experience through which users interpret visibility, validation, and belonging. This perspective is significant because it helps reposition engagement from a behavioral indicator to an experiential phenomenon embedded in identity negotiation and psychological well-being. In doing so, the study adds depth to previous work that has linked social media to identity formation and emotional response by clarifying how those processes are actually lived by users in everyday digital environments.

The findings also have practical implications for the design and governance of social media platforms. Because participants experienced engagement as both affirming and emotionally burdensome, platform design should not treat visibility and interaction merely as mechanisms for maximizing participation. The results suggest that features that intensify comparison, overexposure, or unstable validation may contribute to emotional vulnerability, particularly among users whose sense of self is closely tied to audience feedback. In this regard, the study supports growing concerns in the literature that digital well-being cannot be separated from the communicative and structural conditions of platform use. More human-centered platform practices may therefore require greater attention to how algorithmic visibility, public metrics, and patterns of feedback shape users' subjective experiences rather than only their activity levels.

The findings are equally relevant for educators, counselors, and professionals working with young adults in digitally saturated environments. Since participants described engagement as a process through which self-worth is repeatedly tested, support strategies should move beyond warning users about "too much screen time" and instead address the meanings users attach to online feedback, silence, comparison, and visibility. From this perspective, digital literacy should include reflective awareness of how platform interaction influences emotional life and self-perception. Such an implication aligns with prior concerns that technological systems do not operate neutrally but shape social and psychological experience through the conditions they create for recognition and participation. The study therefore suggests that improving digital well-being requires not only behavioral regulation but also interpretive awareness.

At a broader social and cultural level, the findings illustrate how recognition in contemporary life is increasingly mediated through digital platforms. Participants' experiences show that the search for acknowledgment, authenticity, and connection is now deeply entangled with algorithmically structured environments. This means that the phenomenon under study is not restricted to a small subset of highly active users; rather, it reflects a wider condition in which social presence is increasingly

experienced through metrics, visibility, and mediated response. For this reason, the findings are relevant beyond the immediate participant group, offering insight into how digital environments shape the emotional texture of social life for younger generations more broadly. However, this relevance should be understood as contextual and interpretive rather than universal.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. First, the study was grounded in a phenomenological design that prioritizes depth of understanding over breadth of coverage. As a result, the findings illuminate the meaning and structure of lived experience but are not intended to support statistical generalization across all social media users or all digital contexts. The goal of the study was to uncover the essence of the phenomenon as experienced by a particular group of participants, and this purpose necessarily limits claims about wider population-level patterns.

Second, the study focused on Generation Z users who were active in algorithmically mediated social media environments (Lan, 2024). While this focus was appropriate for the research question, it also means that the findings are shaped by the communicative habits, developmental context, and platform familiarity of that cohort. Users from different age groups, cultural settings, or levels of digital access may interpret engagement differently. Likewise, experiences may vary across platforms with distinct affordances, audience cultures, and visibility structures. Therefore, the meanings described in this study should be understood within the social and technological context in which they were generated.

Third, the study relied primarily on self-reported narratives obtained through in-depth interviews. This approach was necessary to access participants' subjective meanings, but it also means that the findings were shaped by memory, self-reflection, and participants' ability to articulate emotionally complex experiences. Certain aspects of digital engagement may remain partially unspoken, normalized, or difficult to express in interview settings. Although careful attention was given to credibility through strategies such as member checking, triangulation, and audit trail, interpretation remained an inherent part of the analytic process, consistent with the Heideggerian phenomenological orientation of the study.

A further limitation concerns the temporal character of digital engagement itself. Social media environments evolve rapidly, and users' experiences are shaped by changing platform norms, algorithmic adjustments, and emerging cultural expectations. Accordingly, the meanings captured in this study reflect a particular moment within a dynamic digital landscape. This does not reduce the value of the findings, but it does suggest that lived experiences of engagement should be revisited over time as digital environments continue to change.

Prospective Statement for Future Research

The findings open several important directions for future research. Because this study revealed digital engagement as a lived experience of recognition, ambivalence, and emotional negotiation, future studies may expand this inquiry by examining how such meanings develop across different social, cultural, and technological settings. Comparative phenomenological work involving users from different age groups, cultural backgrounds, or platform ecosystems would be valuable in clarifying which aspects of digital engagement are context-specific and which appear more widely shared. Such work could deepen the field's understanding of how digital communication is lived under varying social conditions.

Future research may also build on this study by exploring how experiences of digital engagement shift over time. Longitudinal qualitative designs would be particularly useful for understanding how users' relationships with visibility, validation, and self-perception evolve as they mature, change platforms, or develop new forms of digital literacy. This would extend current knowledge by showing whether the ambivalence identified in this study remains stable, intensifies, or becomes more manageable through reflective adaptation.

In addition, the findings suggest a productive opportunity for dialogue between phenomenological inquiry and broader communication research. While this study has shown the value

of exploring subjective meaning, future research could combine in-depth experiential approaches with broader contextual analysis to better understand how lived digital engagement relates to social norms, platform structures, and patterns of mediated interaction. Such work would not replace phenomenology, but rather extend its contribution by connecting lived experience with wider communicative environments.

Finally, future studies may use the present findings to address larger questions concerning digital well-being, identity, and mediated recognition in contemporary social life. Since participants experienced engagement as both connective and pressuring, further inquiry is needed into how individuals and institutions can foster healthier relationships with social media without ignoring its social significance. In this sense, the contribution of the present study lies not only in explaining one particular phenomenon, but also in offering a foundation for future research on how human experience is increasingly shaped by digital forms of communication and visibility.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Generation Z users experience and interpret digital engagement within algorithmically mediated social media environments, with a particular focus on self-perception and psychological well-being. The findings demonstrate that digital engagement is lived as a meaningful process of recognition, where metrics such as likes and comments function as symbolic indicators of self-worth rather than neutral interactions. The study also reveals that users continuously negotiate identity between authenticity and performance, while experiencing a persistent tension between social connection and emotional pressure. These insights address limitations in previous research by moving beyond metric-based analyses and providing a deeper understanding of how engagement is subjectively experienced and interpreted in everyday life. In doing so, the study contributes to a more holistic conceptualization of digital engagement as an interpretive and emotionally embedded phenomenon shaped by both social interaction and algorithmic influence. Future research may extend these findings by exploring longitudinal experiences, cross-cultural contexts, and evolving platform dynamics to further understand how digital engagement shapes human experience in increasingly complex digital environments.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article. The research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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