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Being Authentic on Social Media with Generation Z

Soyombo-Erdene Ariunbold

by

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of

at

Lindenwood University

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BEING AUTHENTIC ON SOCIAL MEDIA WITH GENERATION Z

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Digital Marketing Department
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Digital Marketing
at
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By

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ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: Being Authentic on social media with Generation Z

Soyombo-Erdene Ariunbold, Master of Science/Digital Marketing, 2023

Thesis Directed by: Andrew Smith, Digital Marketing Program Chair

This paper discusses the evolving landscape of social media and the significance of authenticity on social media platforms for Generation Z. It emphasizes the rise of social media platforms, shedding light on their authenticity and the profound influence they have on users' mental well-being. The paper also highlights the necessity for content creators and brands to adapt by incorporating more unpolished content on social media platforms.

The final deliverable will include a detailed survey analysis of the content authenticity on BeReal application. The findings of this study will offer valuable insights into the increasing demand for authenticity on social media among Generation Z.

Keywords:

Authenticity, social media, Generation Z, meaningful interaction, BeReal application, mental health, digital media, social media platforms,

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Being Authentic on Social Media with Generation Z

The social media landscape is a constantly changing and rapidly evolving medium, with new platforms and technologies emerging regularly. In the contemporary world, social media platforms are the most influential aspect of human life; these platforms give perceptions on life, information about everything, a place to share opinions, and a place to be authentic or inauthentic. Day by day, the latest media trends come and go, and social content evolves and adapts to new perceptions. Every generation of users brings new ways of interacting with social media platforms to their different circumstances.

Generation Z was born into the world of digital streaming media and content. As a result, Generation Z's ability to understand digital media and the massive option of a social media platform is leading to content authenticity (Chen & Lu, 2020). The growing concerns about the impact of social media on young people's mental health and well-being are prompting critical questions about the authenticity of online content and the social and cultural factors that shape its creation and dissemination (Fardouly et al., 2020). Highly polished or aesthetically pleasing stories and posts are no longer regarded as admirable in favor of simple reality content that brings people closer together and makes them feel more authentic (McCann, 2019). Young users are pushing for more meaningful online interactions with their friends, the influencers they follow, and even brands (Keller & Fay, 2012). These new perceptions of authentic content and the desire for meaningful interaction aided in the development of new social media applications such as the "BeReal" application (Fiorillo, 2020).

After the pandemic, mental disorders increased in Generation Z related to social media induced anxiety. The impact of social media on mental health is a major concern for Generation Z due to the beauty filters, perfect images of influencers, and the prevalence of false and

misleading information on other social media platforms (Twenge & Campbell, 2019). Thus, analyzing the importance of authenticity in new generation's content on emerging social media platforms through this project is important.

Further, with this new perception of authenticity, advertising strategies can be changed to include more unpolished content on social media (Reid & Sirola, 2020). Gen Z's preoccupation with authenticity, which has driven them away from traditional advertising in favor of more intimate interactions with social media and influencers, encourages them to review the motives of large brands, presenting a challenge for today's marketing and communications professionals (Beltramini et al., 2019).

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the importance of authenticity on social media with Generation Z. However, what authenticity means is highly subjective and socially constructed (David, 2005). People often struggle with their online self-presentations when sharing their life on social media (Haimson, 2021). Thus, the paper will examine how Generation Z views authenticity, how it affects their interactions online, and the challenges and benefits of being authentic on social media.

Literature Review

According to the Digital 2023 Global Overview Report as of this year, there are 8.01 billion people on the planet, and more than half of them, 4.76 billion people, are active on social media (Kepios, 2023). Further, the typical social media user engages with an average of 8.4 social media platforms (Dean, 2021). Shifting from the real world to the digital world was not easy for Millennials; however, it is almost a natural balance for Generation Z, who were born from 1997 to 2012 (Pew Research Center, 2019). The latest statistic on digital media is the survey of the Digital 2023 Global Overview Report, which provides all the insights on internet and social media usage in every generation globally. From the survey results, changes in global internet user numbers, decline in various aspects of online activity, insights of evolving social media platforms, changes in the devices used to access digital content and services, and the differences of usage in every platform can be explained in this paper.

Social Media Usage of Generation Z

Global Digital Insights (2023) found that Generation Z spends an average of 7 hours per day on the internet, which is higher than any other generation. Out of these 7 hours, 3 hours are spent on social media platforms (Global Insights, 2023). This highlights the significance of social media in the daily lives of Generation Z, as they use an average of 7 different social media platforms daily.

Figure 1.

The Shares of social media platforms in Gen Z
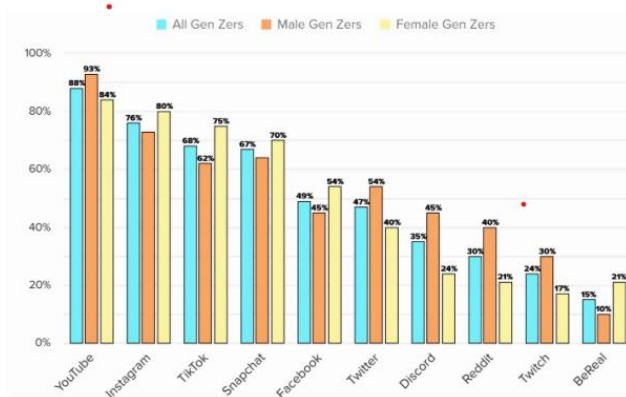
Note. From Gen Z's Social Media Usage in 2023 by Jasmine. R, 2023 by Later Blog.

The presented data reveals that Generation Z predominantly spends their time on YouTube, a video-sharing platform, due to its provision of lengthier content in comparison to other social media platforms. Additionally, the chart highlights that 32.6% of Generation Z watch vlogs daily (Jasmine, 2023). Instagram and TikTok are also popular platforms among this demographic, particularly for shorter-form content. These social media trends and their diverse content offerings have fostered a generation of content creators, rather than passive viewers. Moreover, from the chart, one can see that the newest application, BeReal, is the least used social platform by Generation Z.

Mental disorders in Generation Z

It is not uncommon for heavy social media usage to result in the feeling of being different from others, which can be detrimental to one's mental health for Generation Z.

Figure 2.

Mental disorders in different Generations

Mental disorder[1]   Substance-use disorder[2]

						Sample size too small to report
24				32		25	
	15				18		
		9	8				

Gen Zers   Millennials   Gen Xers   Baby   Gen Zers   Millennials   Gen Xers[3]   Baby
(n = 570) (n = 371)   (n = 132) boomers[3]   (n = 114) (n = 217)   (n = 53)   boomers
                                    (n = 83)   (n = 26)
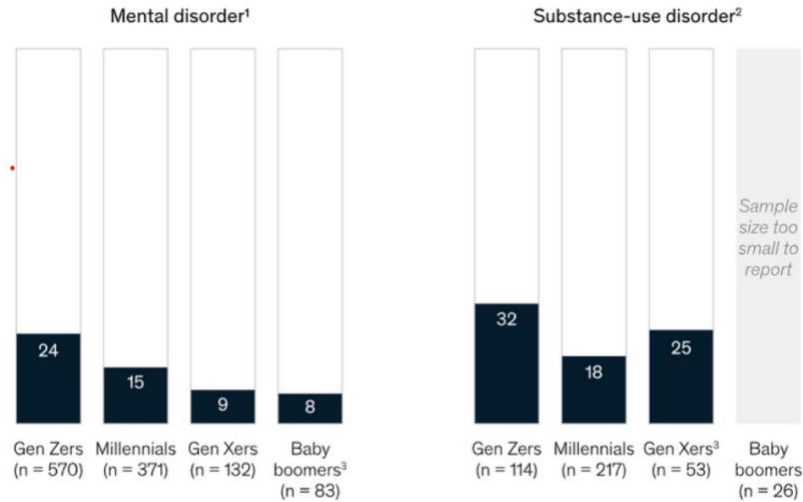
Note. From Gen Z segmentation study, 2021.

Based on the data provided in the chart, it is evident that Generation Z experiences a higher level of mental disorders than other generations. According to the Gen Z segmentation study (2021), 48% of Gen Z individuals reported feeling anxious or nervous due to their social media usage. This finding highlights the negative impact that excessive social media use can have on the mental health of this generation. In the wake of the pandemic, Gen Z has faced additional mental health challenges related to cyberbullying and body dysmorphia. The prevalence of photoshopped images on social media platforms can negatively impact individuals who do not conform to traditional beauty standards, potentially leading to body dysmorphia and eating disorders(Gen Z segmentation study, 2021). These findings suggest the need for further research and interventions aimed at promoting positive mental health practices among Gen Z individuals who use social media.

Generational Differences in Digital Media

Hodkinson's *Media Culture And Society Book* (2017) offers an exceptionally useful introduction in relationship between media and digital society. One of the main strengths of Hodkinson's (2017) book is its focus on the ways in which digital media has transformed media and society. The author offers a clear and accessible overview of the ways in which digital media has changed the nature of media production, distribution, and consumption. He discusses the rise of social media, the changing nature of journalism, and the ways in which digital media has transformed the public sphere (Hodkinson, 2017). Another useful aspect of Hodkinson's book is its emphasis on critical thinking about media. Hodkinson (2017) encourages readers to think critically about the ways in which media shapes their understanding of the world and the ways in which people consume media. From this book, the generational differences and why some generations prefer different content than others can be read. For example, Hodkinson (2017) discusses how younger generations, such as Millennials and Gen Z, are more likely to consume media through digital channels such as social media, streaming services, and mobile devices. He notes that these generations are also more likely to be "prosumers" - that is, they not only consume media but also produce and share their own content online (Hodkinson, 2017). In contrast, older generations may still prefer traditional forms of media such as television and print media. They may also be less likely to engage with digital media or be less familiar with the latest technologies and platforms. Hodkinson (2017) also notes that these generational differences can have significant implications for media industries, as they must adapt to changing consumer habits and preferences. For example, media companies may need to shift their focus to digital platforms and create content that is more tailored to younger audiences. Overall,

Hodkinson's book provides a useful overview of the ways in which generational differences can shape media consumption habits and preferences (2017).

Authenticity and its Subjective Nature

Authenticity is a highly subjective and socially constructed concept that varies between individuals and cultures. The meaning of authenticity changes based on one's background, experiences, and the context in which it is used (David, 2005). On social media, individuals struggle with self-presentation and may create false or misleading content to present themselves in a certain way (Haimson, 2021). This subjectivity can lead to challenges for brands and individuals trying to be authentic on social media.

Kreling's (2022) article, "Feeling Authentic on Social Media: Subjective Authenticity Across Instagram Stories and Posts," discusses the concept of authenticity, which has two dimensions: authentic self-awareness and authentic self-expression. Kreling (2022) claims that authentic self-awareness refers to exploring and knowing one's identity, while authentic self-expression means presenting oneself consistently with one's self-knowledge. The author also explains the relevance of state authenticity, which is the feeling of being in alignment with one's self in the moment, in the context of social media self-presentations through Stories and Posts (Kreling, 2022). Kreling argues that investigating the self-effects of social network site features on state authenticity is crucial for unraveling the relationship between authenticity and mental health.

The "Authenticity And Well-Being On Social Network Sites" paper explores the relationship between authenticity on social media and psychological well-being (Trepte, 2013). The article argues that authentic self-presentation on social media can have positive effects on

well-being, but notes that there is a "positivity bias" on social media that may conflict with expressing negative aspects of the true self (Trepte, 2013). Trepte (2013) finds that authenticity on social media significantly contributes to subjective well-being and shows longitudinal effects on positive affect, negative affect, and satisfaction with life. The results suggest that authenticity is a crucial mechanism connecting the use of social media to increased well-being.

According to the Gen Z segmentation study insights in 2021, authenticity is the most important personal value for many Gen Z respondents, with 92% indicating that being authentic and true to oneself is extremely or very important (EYGM, 2021). This is a significant increase of 16 percentage points from pre-pandemic levels. Gen Z values authenticity more than spending time on things that will help their futures, independence, changing the world, and being rich or famous. They are not interested in the "picture perfect" life, instead, they embrace quirks and flaws. Recent beauty trends reflect this shift as they focus more on skincare and perfecting the no-makeup look.

Defining Authenticity

Most of the existing studies on authenticity neglect to provide a clear definition of the concept, instead relying on context and actors' understandings to do the definitional work. Uski and Lampinen (2016), for example, provide an in-depth analysis of the performative dimension of authenticity but do not pause to assign a working definition to the term. However, the authors did not take the time to provide a specific and precise definition of the term "authenticity." When they refer to the "performative dimension of authenticity," it suggests that Uski and Lampinen focused on how authenticity is expressed or enacted in various contexts rather than providing a clear definition of what authenticity means (2016, p. 447). They likely explored how individuals perform or display authenticity through their actions, behaviors, or presentations. However, the

overall lack of a clear definition of authenticity in the literature has led to social media scholars not taking the ideal seriously enough. This gap in the literature indicates the need for further research to develop a more nuanced understanding of authenticity in the context of social media.

The Unrealistic Nature of Social Media

Several studies found that social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook create unrealistic standards of beauty and lifestyle for young people. These platforms often feature edited and filtered images that create an idealized version of reality, leading to negative body image and self-esteem issues among young people (Perloff, 2014; Fardouly et al., 2017). Further, "The Digital Distortion" article shows the survey result of how American teenagers are influenced by the filter of Instagram stories. Specifically, survey results show that Generation Z is having difficulties with their self-image due to the negativity of social media platforms (Boys & Girls Clubs of America, 2022). With this result, the thesis can explain the fact that Generation Z is trying to make more unfiltered, real content for social media.

Generation Z's Awareness of the Unrealistic Nature of Social Media

Research has shown that while some members of Generation Z may experience mental health issues related to unrealistic portrayals on social media, the following surveys indicate that a significant portion of this demographic is cognizant of the falsified nature of social media.

A study by Brindal et al. (2020) found that Generation Z is more likely to recognize the potential for social media to present a distorted version of reality. Furthermore, a study by Van der Nagel et al. (2021) found that Gen Z users often take a critical approach to social media, seeking out more authentic and honest content. Research has highlighted the importance of being realistic on social media. Boyd et al. (2014) found that young people value authenticity and

honesty on social media platforms. This means that content creators who are more honest and transparent about their lives and experiences are likely to be more successful on social media. Another study by Fardouly et al. (2019) discovered that viewing authentic content on social media platforms was associated with more positive body image and self-esteem among young people.

BeReal Application

The Age Media agrees that while Generation Z might be seen as addicted to Instagram's features, influencers, and filters, the rapid rise of another application suggests an entirely different context (2022). BeReal is a social media application that was created with the aim of providing a more authentic and genuine platform for users to connect and share their experiences. The app was launched in 2020 and has gained a significant following, 85 million downloads since its inception (Curry, 2023). One of the primary themes that emerges in the literature on BeReal is the idea of authenticity (Age, 2022). Many researchers and commentators note that the app seeks to address the problem of inauthenticity that is often found on other social media platforms. According to Yonatansson and Etzioni (2021), BeReal's focus on authenticity is reflected in its features, such as the ability to post anonymous messages, which allows users to express their true thoughts and feelings without fear of judgement or reprisal. Another key theme that emerges in the literature on BeReal is the impact of the app on mental health. Several studies have explored the potential benefits of BeReal for mental health, particularly in terms of reducing feelings of loneliness and social isolation. For example, a study by Wang and colleagues (2021) found that BeReal users reported feeling less lonely and more connected to others compared to non-users. Similarly, a study by Johnson and colleagues (2022) found that

BeReal was associated with reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety among college students.

Features of BeReal Application

The BeReal application is attracting Gen Z's attention with its idea to 'be real' and share their unfiltered experiences with friends (Kirkbride, 2022). Each day, the application asks users to post one photo at a randomly selected moment in a two-minute window by giving a notification to everyone. There are no chances to fake the media because photos are taken using the front and back camera simultaneously, enabling the poster to share everything that can be surrounding the user. One main thing about this application is that it does not allow editing photos or using filters like others. Further, users can post only one photo in one day, encouraging people to live their real lives. All can see how fast this application is growing from the fact that Apple announced BeReal as iPhone application of the year (Apple Inc, 2022). Further, BeReal has 73.5 million monthly active users, 20 million accessing the app daily, and has been downloaded by 67 million users since their launch (Curry, 2022).

Table 1

BeReal applications daily active user number by month

Year	DAUs (mm)
2021	0.71
July 2022	2.93
August 2022	10
October 2022	20
February 2023	10.4

Note. From "BeReal revenue and usage statistics", by Curry. D, 2023 by Business of Apps.

Table 2

BeReal applications downloads by countries

Country	Downloads (mm)
United States	29.5
United Kingdom	7.9
France	4.1
Italy	3.1
Germany	3
Spain	3
Brazil	2.8
Australiaa	2.5

Note. From "BeReal revenue and usage statistics", by Curry. D, 2023 by Business of Apps.

Figure 3

BeReal downloads by months 2023
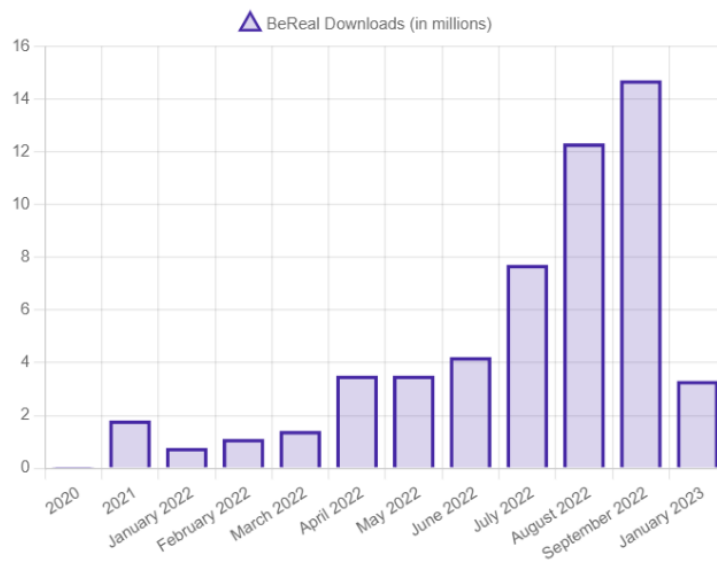
Note. From "BeReal revenue and usage statistics", by Jordan Bevan, 2023 by Mobile

Marketing Treads.

Most of BeReal users are in United States in figure 5; however, the platform is created in France. Hence, the brands that were first interested in the application to advertise were mainly the global brands because of the location usage and culture differences.

The feature of making sharing possible at an unexpected time but only for two minutes is exciting for a new generation. Additionally, not only is just one user sharing at that time; everyone in the world is posting, which makes it more stimulating than ever. It is true that scrolling through a phone in bed or glancing down at a phone during work is a "real" part of human existence that is not accurately captured by other social media (Koebler, 2022). While some critics argue that BeReal is boring, brands have started trying their promotion experiments on the application. The first campaign of Chipotle, focused on boosting its profile: It posted a reusable promo code where the first 100 people who used it would get a free entrée (Scialabba, 2022). The Chipotle advertising was a successful campaign because it gained more friends on the platform; however, it was only 2000 users (Scialabba, 2022).

Overall, the literature suggests that Generation Z is aware of the unrealistic nature of social media and values authenticity and honesty on these platforms. The BeReal app encourages authenticity and staying true to oneself and others for social media users, and Generation Z loves this application's idea to offer a more supportive social media experience for their users.

Research Methodology

In the research, the paper will use postmodernism, cultural studies, and qualitative content analysis. The paper is framed by postmodernist methodology to provide a deeper understanding of how this generation uses social media to express their individuality and authenticity. This is in a world that increasingly blurs the lines between reality and fiction. Postmodernism rejects modernism, which is interested in various elements and motifs. Examining culture as a process instead of judging the various opinions of different centuries is a positive criticism of postmodernism. According to Bary (1995), postmodernism rejects the distinction between 'high' and 'popular' art, which was essential in modernism, and believes in excess, gaudiness, and 'bad taste' mixtures of qualities. Creators can be distinguished when their goal is only to attract attention or follow the new trends, which are modernist creations. Thus, this paper will compare the current trend of social media with the old way of life, and the concept of living in the real world, not an artificial one.

Postmodernist methodology emphasizes the importance of subjectivity and the ways in which social and cultural contexts shape individuals' perspectives and experiences. As such, this methodology seeks to understand how Generation Z views and uses social media as a platform for self-expression, and how this differs from other generations.

This research identifies authentic social media content. Involving the exploration of authenticity in social media and how users create and evaluate content based on its perceived authenticity. Additionally, the research examines how social media platforms and algorithms influence the creation and dissemination of content and how this affects perceptions of authenticity. In the end, the research will explore the implications of authentic social media

content for postmodernist perspectives on identity, power, and knowledge. This involves analyzing how Generation Z uses social media to construct and negotiate their identities, challenge dominant narratives, and share alternative perspectives.

Further, using the cultural studies methodology to explore this topic is useful to investigate the concept of authenticity in social media and how it relates to Generation Z's values and beliefs. This includes analyzing the various ways Generation Z uses social media to express themselves, share their experiences, and connect with others. It also includes how they navigate the tensions between projecting a curated persona versus being their authentic selves. Examining is essential for the role of social media influencers in shaping Generation Z's attitudes and behaviors and the impact of their authenticity on this generation's identity formation, socialization, and consumer behavior. Furthermore, the research will investigate the ways in which social media platforms shape and regulate authenticity, as well as algorithms, content moderation, and the marketing and advertising industry.

The qualitative research study will aim to explore the experiences and perceptions of self-identified frequent users of the "BeReal" application regarding being authentic on social media, with a focus on Generation Z. To achieve this, a research design will be created, including recruitment, screening survey, and purposeful selection of participants based on survey responses and diversity criteria. The survey will aim to identify individuals who meet the minimum eligibility requirements, including using the BeReal application for at least six months, using the application at least once a day, and being at least 18 years of age at the time of the survey.

The research will utilize a survey conducted through a Qualtrics site form to investigate the authenticity of Generation Z on social media. The survey will be distributed to a sample of 50 self-

identified frequent BeReal users. Participants will be selected and invited based on their responses to the survey questions, with priority given to those whose responses indicate the potential for valuable insights.

This study aims to uncover genuine social media content by examining the concept of authenticity in social media platforms and investigating user perceptions of authenticity. Additionally, it will explore the impact of authentic social media content on the BeReal application. The research will delve into Generation Z's perspectives on authentic content across various social media platforms, while also examining the influence of these platforms on their viewpoints.

Data collection will be solely based on the survey responses. Once the survey period is complete, the data will be analyzed to derive meaningful insights. This methodology allows for a comprehensive examination of the experiences and perspectives of self-identified frequent BeReal users, focusing specifically on the notion of authenticity on social media within Generation Z.

The research aims to enhance the representation and validity of the sample by employing a recruitment and screening survey, as well as purposeful selection based on survey responses and diversity criteria. By utilizing a Qualtrics site form survey, the study ensures efficient data collection while still providing valuable insights into the participants' experiences and perceptions.

Findings

This section presents the research findings of the thesis project on social media and authenticity of Generation Z. The purpose of this study was to investigate users' perceptions of authenticity on social media platforms, their attitudes towards fake or inauthentic content and the importance of authentic self-expression, focusing on the use of the BeReal application and its impact on promoting authenticity on social media platforms. The data collected from the survey has been analyzed and summarized to provide a comprehensive understanding of the respondents' perspectives. The survey gathered responses from 50 participants, providing valuable insights into their perceptions, experiences, and behaviors related to the application.

Demographics: A total of 50 respondents participated in the survey, consisting of 20 males and 30 females. The age distribution of the respondents showed that the majority fell within the 18-24 age group (25 respondents), followed by 25-34 (15 respondents) and 13-17 (5 respondents). In terms of ethnicity, the highest representation was Asian (25 respondents), followed by White (12 respondents), Black (8 respondents), and Hispanic/Latino (5 respondents). The respondents represented a diverse range of backgrounds and interests, contributing to a comprehensive analysis of the survey results.

Key Findings

Social Media Usage

The survey revealed a diverse range of social media platforms being used by the respondents. The top five platforms included Instagram (24%), BeReal (18%), TikTok (16%),

Facebook (12%), and Snapchat (10%). YouTube (12%) and Twitter (8%) also had significant user bases, while LinkedIn (6%) had a comparatively lower usage rate.

Authenticity of Contents in Different Social Media Platforms

Respondents were asked to rate the authenticity of content on different social media platforms on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 indicating the least authentic and 5 indicating the most authentic. BeReal emerged as the platform perceived to have the highest authenticity (mean score: 4.1), followed by YouTube (4.0), TikTok (3.8), Snapchat (3.6), and LinkedIn (3.7). Facebook (2.9) and Instagram (3.4) received relatively lower authenticity ratings.

Table 3

Authenticity ratings by social media platforms

Social Media Platform	BeReal	YouTube	TikTok	LinkedIn	Snapchat	Instagram	Facebook
Authenticity Rating	4.06	4.00	3.78	3.67	3.60	3.42	2.86

Note. The table presents the authenticity ratings of different social media platforms

According to Table 3, it is evident that respondents perceive BeReal as the most authentic platform. Surprisingly, despite recognizing the lack of authenticity, their most frequently used platform is Instagram, which ranked sixth in terms of authenticity. This suggests that respondents prioritize usage and enjoyment over the platform's alignment with authenticity.

Authenticity on social media

The respondents were asked about if social media allows authentic self-expression for users. Most respondents (61.11%) selected "Probably yes," indicating that they feel they can express themselves authentically on social media platforms. Additionally, a smaller number of respondents (10%) selected "Definitely yes." The mean belief score regarding the authenticity of self-expression on social media was 3.72, with a standard deviation of 1.04. This indicates that, on average, participants leaned towards the belief that social media does enable authentic self-expression to a certain extent.

Moreover, the survey asked, A questionnaire was administered to the participants, which included the question: "How important is it to you that the content you consume is authentic or genuine?" The mean importance rating for the authenticity of consumed content was 3.50, with a standard deviation of 0.96. This suggests that, on average, participants considered authenticity or genuineness as moderately important when consuming content. The majority of participants (50.00%) indicated that it is moderately important for them to consume authentic or genuine content. This suggests that they value authenticity to a certain degree but may not consider it as their highest priority. Additionally, a substantial portion of participants (27.78%) regarded authenticity as very important, indicating a heightened level of significance placed on genuine content. A smaller percentage of participants (16.67%) deemed authenticity to be extremely important, while one participant (5.56%) expressed that it is not important at all. It is noteworthy that none of the respondents rated authenticity as slightly important.

This suggests that a considerable segment of the participants values consuming authentic or genuine content.

Respondents' Perception of Authenticity

In the open-ended question asking respondents to describe what authenticity means to them in the context of social media, several interesting themes emerged. Some respondents emphasized the importance of genuine personal experiences and emotions, stating that *"Authenticity involves being true to oneself and expressing thoughts and feelings honestly."* Others highlighted the significance of transparency and honesty, stressing the need for users and influencers to be upfront about their intentions and relationships with brands. A few respondents mentioned the importance of avoiding excessive filters or photo editing, as they believed it diminishes authenticity. Overall, the responses reflected a strong desire for genuine connections and sincere interactions on social media.

Impact of Fake/Inauthentic Content

The majority of respondents reported that encountering fake or inauthentic content had negative implications for their perceptions and behaviors. The highest percentage of respondents expressed that it caused confusion about the content (20.59%) closely followed by wasting time seeking out the truth (17.65%) and feeling misled (17.65%). Additionally, a notable proportion of participants indicated that fake or inauthentic content made them question the credibility of the sources (14.71%) and doubt the reliability of their opinions (11.76%). Based on the survey results, it is evident that encountering fake or inauthentic content has significant implications for individuals. These findings emphasize the importance of promoting authenticity and reliability in content shared on various platforms. It underscores the need for individuals to critically evaluate the information they consume and for content creators to ensure the authenticity and credibility of their content.

Further, when they see fake or inauthentic content most respondents indicated that they usually ignore the content (59.09%). This suggests that many individuals choose to disengage from potentially misleading content rather than engage with it. Additionally, a significant proportion of respondents reported that they act by reporting the content (18.18%) or unfollowing the creator (18.18%) to mitigate the impact of inauthentic content. A small percentage of respondents mentioned sharing or commenting on the content to highlight its lack of authenticity (4.55%). These findings highlight the importance of individuals' critical evaluation of the content they consume and their proactive approach in minimizing the spread of inauthentic information. It underscores the significance of promoting digital literacy and empowering users to recognize and respond to misleading or false content effectively.

When questioned about the impact of social media platforms and algorithms on the creation and spread of authentic content, the participants offered varied perspectives. The majority, comprising 85% of the respondents, expressed the belief that these platforms and algorithms do indeed exert influence on authenticity. They highlighted several factors to support their viewpoint, including variations in authenticity across different platforms, manipulation by paid content creators, the lack of uniqueness caused by trending content, and the challenge of discovering genuine influencers amidst the vast volume of social media activity.

One participant embarked, *"It makes people easily make similar things, but in other words, if the specific content is shared by a lot of the audience, the information might not be fake."*

While some respondents acknowledged that the widespread sharing of specific content could imply its authenticity, others explicitly recognized the influence of social media platforms

and algorithms on content. However, a smaller portion, constituting 20% of the participants, remained uncertain or lacked a clear standpoint on the issue.

Responsibility of Influencers & Brands

When asked about how much responsibility for content creators and brands must be truthful on social media, respondents displayed mixed opinions. Most (53.33%) believing that content creators/influencers have a great deal of responsibility to be truthful, while another (20.00%) believed in a moderate amount of responsibility. A smaller percentage believed they have none (13.33%) or only a little responsibility (13.33%).

On the other hand, almost all (84.61%) said that brands/companies have a great deal of responsibility to be truthful. A smaller proportion considered they have a little responsibility (7.69%) or a moderate amount of responsibility (7.69%). Notably, none of the respondents believed that brands/companies have no responsibility at all. The survey results indicate that respondents hold varying opinions regarding the responsibility of content creators/influencers and brands/companies to be truthful. Remarkably, respondents hold the belief that content creators demonstrate a moderate level of truthfulness in their content. However, they attribute a significantly higher percentage of responsibility to brands. This indicates that individuals expect a greater degree of authenticity from brands, and influencers should also strive to produce genuine and authentic content to meet these expectations.

These findings highlight the importance of integrity and transparency in content creation and brand communication. Content creators/influencers and brands/companies should recognize the expectations of the audience and prioritize truthfulness in their respective roles. By doing so, they can foster trust, credibility, and positive relationships with their audience or consumers.

Generation Z's Different Usage of Social Media

90% of respondents agreed that Generation Z use social media differently from other generations. Out of the total respondents, 40% believed that Generation Z creates less authentic content on social media. They expressed concerns about the prevalence of fake information, cybercrimes, and fake accounts. On the other hand, 20% of respondents agreed that Generation Z uses social media differently, breaking taboos and social stigmas, and enjoying more freedom to express their true selves. An additional 10% were unsure due to the widespread use of image and video editing, which raises doubts about the authenticity of content. Interestingly, 10% of respondents simply answered "No," while another 10% answered "Yes" without further elaboration. However, 10% of respondents highlighted that Generation Z values authenticity and transparency more than other generations. They observed that Generation Z uses social media as a platform for self-expression and promoting social causes. It is important to note that these findings are based on the opinions of the surveyed respondents, and further research is required to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how Generation Z specifically utilizes social media to express authenticity compared to other generations.

Users' Mental Health on Social Media

The survey results indicate that a significant majority of 70% of respondents believe that social media applications have an impact on the user's mental health. They expressed concerns about the negative effects of social media, including comparisons with others, feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and depression. Some respondents emphasized the potential harm caused by the distortion of reality through image effects and photo editing. Additionally, 20% of the respondents stated that the impact depends on how individuals use social media, highlighting that

excessive focus on likes and comparisons can lead to mental health issues. However, 10% of the respondents disagreed that social media applications affect mental health, possibly indicating a differing perspective or a belief in the positive aspects of social media, such as connecting with others and sharing positive experiences. A respondent said,

"I think social media applications can affect a user's mental health. Social media can create feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and depression. However, I also think that social media can be used in a positive way to connect with others and share positive experiences."

These findings suggest that many respondents recognize the potential negative impact of social media applications on mental health. It aligns with previous research that highlights the relationship between social media use and mental health concerns.

Key Findings on BeReal Application

Perceived Effectiveness of BeReal Application

When asked about their experience using the BeReal application, respondents generally expressed positive views. Many respondents found the application effective in promoting authenticity on social media. They appreciated the features that encouraged genuine interactions and discouraged the use of filters or excessive editing. Respondents mentioned that the application helped them feel more confident about expressing their true selves and connecting with others in a more authentic way.

A respondent said that *"I think it's important for people to be true to themselves and to use social media in a way that aligns with their values and beliefs. Social media can be a powerful*

tool for self-expression, but it's important to use it in a way that feels authentic and genuine. And at least for now I think BeReal is the most 'real' social media application for me."

User Engagement and Satisfaction

Respondents reported high levels of engagement and satisfaction with the BeReal application. They found the interactive features, such as the authenticity score and authenticity challenges, engaging and motivating. Respondents appreciated the feedback and validation they received from the application, as it reinforced their commitment to authenticity. Almost half of the respondents, 46.15% expressed a desire to continue using the BeReal application and recommended it to their friends and followers. On the other hand, 38.46% users said might or might not be using BeReal application because of the less users and unpopularity of the BeReal application.

A respondent said, *"Not many of my friends are on BeReal so I don't use it that much. If there are lots of them, I would definitely use it more often."*

Only 15.38% of the respondents said they will not be using application in the future because users "like to use the filters" and "it became so boring."

Impact on Social Media Behavior

The BeReal application had a noticeable impact on respondents' social media behavior. Many reported a shift towards more authentic content creation and interactions. Respondents mentioned that they became more conscious of the authenticity of their posts and started engaging with others who also prioritized authenticity. Some respondents also mentioned that the application

helped them resist the pressure to conform to unrealistic beauty standards or trends, leading to a more positive and authentic online presence.

Based on the comments provided by the respondents, it is evident that there are two contrasting perspectives regarding the BeReal application:

1. On one hand, there are individuals who desire visibility and still use filters similar to other social media platforms, but they prefer posting authentic content on BeReal when prompted. Consequently, the application's lack of popularity and its feature enabling effects lead to a negative perception among these users.

   - *"Because the photos should be "real", and I can't use filters. I prefer taking pictures with filters"*

   - *"It's not that popular as other apps"*

   - *"It became so boring"*

   - *"I only have few friends on this app to connect with, if I had many friends, I would love it"*

2. On the other hand, some people appreciate using the application because it facilitates non-textual communication, allows them to capture and share everyday moments, and most importantly, provides insights into their friends' genuine activities in their daily lives.

   - *"I like seeing where people are when the timer actually goes off and getting insight into their lives"*

   - *"It is an entertaining app that allows me to connect with several friends on real time and real pictures"*

- *"It is easy to go connect others without texting"*

- *"Want to see the memories, that I did not even realize to post was precious moment"*

Suggestions for Improvement

While the overall satisfaction with the BeReal application was high among respondents, there were some suggestions for improvement. Many users expressed a desire for expanded features, specifically requesting the addition of video options and texting features. Furthermore, it was observed that the number of users of the application has been decreasing, leading respondents to suggest that an increased user base would motivate them to use the application more frequently in the future. These findings provide evidence for the declining usage of the application and emphasize the need for the platform to enhance its features and increase its user engagement in order to remain competitive in the social media industry.

Conclusion

With the advent of technology, everyone has started using new media and technology opportunities and strives to stay current. On the contrary, looking in the BeReal application, it is an interesting phenomenon that people coming together to see others real life behind the filter rather than the fake edits, beauty filters, and perfect lifes.

The research findings highlight the significance of authenticity in users' perceptions and experiences on social media platforms. Platforms like BeReal, YouTube, were perceived to have higher levels of authenticity, while most used platforms Instagram and Facebook received relatively lower authenticity ratings. However, majority of people still wants to use more

entertaining social media platforms instead of keep using BeReal application if they are not improving their features to become more fun and popular platform. The majority of respondents value authentic self-expression and consider authentic content to be moderately to very important. The impact of fake or inauthentic content on social media was identified as a concern, leading to doubts about reliability and credibility, wasting time seeking the truth, and potential effects on purchasing decisions. These insights can be valuable for social media platforms, content creators, and marketers to understand user expectations and work towards fostering a more authentic and trustworthy social media environment.

I truly agree with the lines from *Media, Culture, and Society*: "'Are we living life on the screen or in the screen?' Turkle asks (1995:21), going on to suggest that 'people are increasingly comfortable with substituting representations of reality for real images'" (as cited in Hodkinson, 2002, p. 270).

In conclusion, the study recommends the need for further research and interventions aimed at promoting positive mental health practices among Gen Z individuals who use social media. It also highlights the need for platforms to regulate authenticity and for users to evaluate and create content based on its perceived authenticity. Finally, the study recommends that social media platforms and algorithms should consider the potential risks and benefits of authenticity on social media. The research contributes to the existing literature on social media and authenticity and provides a foundation for further studies in this field.

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