

# Generation Z Girls and the Quest for Authenticity: A Psychological Perspective

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## Article Info

### Article type:

Original Research

### How to cite this article:

Derakhsh, A., Alizadeh Damie, T., Seifsadat, T., & Barzgar, S. (2024). Generation Z Girls and the Quest for Authenticity A Psychological Perspective. *Psychology of Woman Journal*, 5(1), 101-108.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.pwj.5.2.12>



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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aims to explore the quest for authenticity among Generation Z girls in Tehran, Iran, through a psychological perspective.

**Methods and Materials:** The study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 26 female adolescents aged 15 to 20 years from various high schools and universities in Tehran. The interviews, conducted in Persian, were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes and subthemes related to authenticity.

**Findings:** Four main themes emerged from the analysis: understanding authenticity, challenges to authenticity, strategies for maintaining authenticity, and the impact of authenticity on well-being. Participants described authenticity as being true to oneself and influenced by social factors, emotional connections, and role models. Challenges included social media impact, societal expectations, internal conflicts, balancing relationships, and external pressures. Strategies for maintaining authenticity involved self-reflection, support systems, boundary setting, positive reinforcement, adaptive coping mechanisms, and engaging in authentic activities. Authenticity positively impacted mental health, social relationships, academic and career success, personal growth, and overall life satisfaction.

**Conclusion:** The quest for authenticity is a central aspect of the psychological and social development of Generation Z girls in Tehran. Despite numerous challenges, these adolescents employ various strategies to maintain their authenticity, which significantly enhances their well-being. Understanding the factors that influence authenticity and supporting authentic self-expression can help foster resilience and personal growth among Generation Z girls.

**Keywords:** Authenticity, Generation Z, Psychological well-being, Adolescents, Tehran, Social media impact, Societal expectations

## 1. Introduction

The quest for authenticity is a central theme in the lives of many adolescents, particularly among Generation Z girls who are navigating a complex social landscape influenced by rapid technological advancements and evolving societal norms. Authenticity, broadly defined as the alignment of one's actions with their true self, is critical for psychological well-being and social functioning (Wood et al., 2008).

Authenticity involves being true to oneself, maintaining consistency between one's values, beliefs, and behaviors, and resisting external pressures to conform (Vess, 2019). Theoretical frameworks suggest that authenticity is not merely a static trait but a dynamic process that evolves over time and across different contexts (Wood et al., 2008). The American Psychological Association underscores the importance of fostering authenticity in psychological practice with girls and women, highlighting its role in promoting mental health and resilience (Grijak, 2017).

Research has consistently shown that authenticity is linked to various positive outcomes, including enhanced well-being, better relationships, and improved academic and career performance (Chevalier et al., 2021; Theran, 2010). For instance, Bayır-Toper et al. (2020) found that authenticity moderates the relationship between self-compassion and compassion for others, suggesting that being true to oneself can facilitate more meaningful and empathetic interactions (Bayır-Toper et al., 2020).

Generation Z, born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, has been characterized by their digital nativity and profound exposure to social media (Chen, 2024; Haratikka & Purba, 2023). This cohort faces unique challenges in their quest for authenticity, as they navigate a world where the lines between the real and the virtual are increasingly blurred. Social media platforms, while offering opportunities for self-expression, also impose pressures to conform to curated images and societal expectations (Hu, 2024).

Several studies have highlighted the psychological impact of social media on Generation Z. For example, Hu (2024) discusses how social media can create a dichotomy between online personas and offline identities, leading to internal conflicts and challenges in maintaining authenticity (Hu, 2024). Similarly, Santer et al. (2023) explored how Generation Z uses social media to construct narratives of the self, balancing authenticity with the need for social approval and branding (Santer et al., 2023).

Cultural and societal factors play a significant role in shaping the concept of authenticity. In Tehran, traditional cultural norms and modern influences coexist, creating a unique environment for Generation Z girls. Studies have shown that societal expectations, such as academic pressure and gender roles, can impact adolescents' ability to be authentic (Berkovich & Gueta, 2020; Dong, 2023).

Research by Berkovich and Gueta (2020) emphasizes the role of gender in authenticity, particularly in educational settings, where female students often face different expectations and pressures compared to their male counterparts (Berkovich & Gueta, 2020). Similarly, Culen et al. (2017) highlight the importance of considering cultural context when addressing the needs of girls and women in medical and psychological practice (Culen et al., 2017).

Generation Z girls face numerous challenges in their quest for authenticity. Social media, as mentioned, is a double-edged sword, providing both a platform for self-expression and a source of pressure to conform (Ranieri et al., 2021). The comparison culture fostered by social media can lead to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, hindering authentic self-expression (Fletcher & Everly, 2021).

Societal expectations related to academic performance, career aspirations, and gender roles also pose significant challenges. Dong (2023) discusses how parental educational anxiety can lead to psychological control, affecting adolescents' self-efficacy and authenticity (Dong, 2023). Moreover, Gray and Leyland (2008) found that societal pressures related to body image can impact psychological well-being, particularly among adolescent girls (Gray & Leyland, 2008).

Internal conflicts, such as self-doubt and fear of judgment, further complicate the pursuit of authenticity. McKenney and Bigler (2014) highlight the role of internalized sexualization in shaping young girls' self-perceptions, leading to body surveillance and body shame (McKenney & Bigler, 2014). These internal struggles are compounded by external pressures, such as economic constraints and cultural traditions, which can create additional barriers to authenticity (Grijak, 2017).

Despite these challenges, Generation Z girls employ various strategies to maintain their authenticity. Self-reflection practices, such as journaling and meditation, are commonly used to foster self-awareness and emotional honesty (Bayır-Toper et al., 2020). Support systems, including peer and family support, play a crucial role in reinforcing authentic behaviors and providing a safe space for self-expression (Theran, 2010).

Boundary setting is another important strategy, allowing individuals to prioritize self-care and manage time effectively. Chevalier et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of positive reinforcement, such as self-affirmations and celebrating achievements, in maintaining authenticity (Chevalier et al., 2021). Additionally, adaptive coping mechanisms, including stress management and seeking mentorship, help individuals navigate the complexities of their social environments while staying true to themselves (Han & Woo, 2018).

Engaging in authentic activities, such as hobbies and creative expression, provides an outlet for self-expression and personal growth. Pichler and Williams (2016) discuss how activities that align with one's values and interests can enhance feelings of authenticity and well-being (Pichler & Williams, 2016).

Authenticity has a profound impact on various aspects of well-being. Research indicates that being true to oneself can reduce anxiety, increase resilience, and foster a positive self-image (Grijak, 2017). In terms of social relationships, authenticity is associated with deeper connections, improved communication, and trust-building (Bayır-Toper et al., 2020).

Academic and career success are also influenced by authenticity. Authentic individuals tend to be more motivated, experience greater career satisfaction, and perform better academically (Chevalier et al., 2021; Theran, 2010). Personal growth, encompassing self-acceptance, empowerment, and lifelong learning, is another significant outcome of living authentically (Hoff et al., 2020).

Overall life satisfaction, including happiness, fulfillment, and a sense of purpose, is closely linked to authenticity. Studies have shown that individuals who live authentically report higher levels of life satisfaction and overall well-being (Berkovich & Gueta, 2020; Wood et al., 2008).

In conclusion, the pursuit of authenticity is a multifaceted and dynamic process that plays a crucial role in the psychological well-being of Generation Z girls. This study aims to explore the experiences and perceptions of authenticity among female adolescents in Tehran, providing valuable insights into the factors that influence their quest for authenticity. By understanding the challenges and strategies associated with authenticity, we can better support the psychological and social development of Generation Z girls, helping them navigate the complexities of their social environments while staying true to themselves. The findings from this study will contribute to the broader discourse on

authenticity and its importance in fostering resilience, well-being, and personal growth among adolescents.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study design and Participant

This qualitative research aims to explore the quest for authenticity among Generation Z girls through a psychological perspective. The study employs a phenomenological approach to gain in-depth insights into the lived experiences of the participants. The research was conducted in Tehran, Iran, focusing on female adolescents aged between 15 to 20 years. The participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of socioeconomic backgrounds, educational levels, and personal experiences.

The final sample size was determined by the principle of theoretical saturation, where data collection continued until no new themes or insights were emerging from the interviews, ensuring the depth and richness of the data collected.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, which provided a flexible yet focused approach to explore the participants' perceptions and experiences regarding authenticity. The interviews were conducted in Persian, the native language of the participants, to facilitate comfortable and natural communication. Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and was held in a quiet, private setting either at the participants' homes or a neutral location agreed upon by the interviewer and the participant.

The interview guide comprised open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses about the participants' understanding and pursuit of authenticity in their daily lives. Key questions included:

"What does being authentic mean to you?"

"Can you describe a situation where you felt you were being your authentic self?"

"What challenges do you face in trying to be authentic?"

"How do social media and societal expectations impact your sense of authenticity?"

All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process involved several steps to ensure a rigorous and comprehensive analysis of the interview transcripts:

**Familiarization with the Data:** The researcher repeatedly read the interview transcripts to become thoroughly acquainted with the data.

**Generating Initial Codes:** Initial codes were generated by systematically highlighting significant phrases, sentences, or paragraphs that captured relevant features of the data related to authenticity.

**Searching for Themes:** The initial codes were then grouped into broader themes that represented significant patterns in the data. This involved organizing the codes into potential themes and sub-themes.

**Reviewing Themes:** The themes were reviewed and refined by checking them against the coded extracts and the entire data set to ensure they accurately reflected the participants' experiences and perceptions.

**Defining and Naming Themes:** Each theme was clearly defined and named to capture the essence of the participants' narratives and to provide a coherent account of the data.

**Writing the Report:** The final step involved weaving the themes into a narrative that addressed the research questions, supported by direct quotes from the participants to illustrate the findings.

Throughout the analysis, the researcher maintained reflexivity, acknowledging personal biases and ensuring that the participants' voices were faithfully represented. The analysis was also peer-reviewed by two independent qualitative researchers to enhance the credibility and reliability of the findings.

### 3. Findings and Results

The study included 26 participants, all of whom were female adolescents aged between 15 and 20 years. The participants were selected from various high schools and universities across Tehran to ensure a diverse representation. The majority of participants (16 out of 26) were in high school, while the remaining 10 were university students. Socioeconomic status varied among the participants, with 12 coming from middle-income families, 8 from low-income families, and 6 from high-income families. Regarding educational levels, 14 participants were in the final years of high school (grades 11 and 12), and 12 were first- or second-year university students. In terms of family structure, 18 participants lived with both parents, 5 with single parents, and 3 in extended family settings. This diversity in demographic characteristics provided a comprehensive understanding of the various factors influencing the participants' perceptions and experiences of authenticity.

**Table 1**

*The Results of Thematic Analysis*

Themes	Subthemes	Concepts
1. Understanding Authenticity	1.1 Personal Definition	True self, Honesty, Integrity, Being real
	1.2 Social Influences	Peer pressure, Media portrayal, Cultural norms, Family expectations
	1.3 Emotional Connection	Self-awareness, Emotional honesty, Inner peace
	1.4 Authentic Role Models	Public figures, Influential friends, Family members
	1.5 Evolving Concept	Change over time, Different contexts, Personal growth
2. Challenges to Authenticity	2.1 Social Media Impact	Comparison, Validation, Online persona, Cyberbullying
	2.2 Societal Expectations	Gender roles, Academic pressure, Career aspirations
	2.3 Internal Conflicts	Self-doubt, Fear of judgment, Insecurity, Identity crisis
	2.4 Balancing Relationships	Friendship dynamics, Family relationships, Romantic relationships, Social obligations
	2.5 External Pressures	Economic constraints, Educational demands, Cultural traditions
3. Strategies for Maintaining Authenticity	3.1 Self-Reflection	Journaling, Meditation, Therapy, Personal retreats
	3.2 Support Systems	Peer support, Family support, Community groups
	3.3 Boundary Setting	Saying no, Prioritizing self-care, Managing time
	3.4 Positive Reinforcement	Self-affirmations, Celebrating achievements, Seeking constructive feedback
	3.5 Adaptive Coping Mechanisms	Stress management, Conflict resolution, Flexible thinking, Emotional regulation, Seeking mentorship
	3.6 Engaging in Authentic Activities	Hobbies, Volunteering, Creative expression, Travel, Learning new skills

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4. Impact of Authenticity on Well-being	4.1 Mental Health	Reduced anxiety, Increased resilience, Positive self-image
	4.2 Social Relationships	Deeper connections, Improved communication, Trust building
	4.3 Academic and Career Success	Motivation, Career satisfaction, Academic performance
	4.4 Personal Growth	Self-acceptance, Empowerment, Lifelong learning
	4.5 Overall Life Satisfaction	Happiness, Fulfillment, Life balance, Purpose

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### 3.1. Understanding Authenticity

**Personal Definition:** Participants described authenticity as being true to oneself, maintaining honesty and integrity, and expressing one's real feelings and thoughts. One participant stated, "Being authentic means not hiding who I am, even if it's different from what others expect."

**Social Influences:** The participants highlighted the impact of peer pressure, media portrayal, cultural norms, and family expectations on their understanding of authenticity. A participant mentioned, "Sometimes it's hard to know if I'm being myself or just what others want me to be, especially with what I see on social media."

**Emotional Connection:** Many participants associated authenticity with self-awareness, emotional honesty, and inner peace. They felt that being authentic involved a deep connection with their true emotions. "When I'm authentic, I feel a sense of peace inside, like I'm not pretending," one girl shared.

**Authentic Role Models:** The influence of public figures, influential friends, and family members who embody authenticity was significant. Participants often looked up to these role models for inspiration. "Seeing someone like my older sister, who's always herself, makes me want to be true to myself too," remarked a participant.

**Evolving Concept:** The idea of authenticity was seen as evolving over time, changing with different contexts and personal growth. One participant reflected, "I think what being authentic means to me now is different from a few years ago. It changes as I learn more about myself."

### 3.2. Challenges to Authenticity

**Social Media Impact:** Social media was identified as a major challenge, causing comparison, seeking validation, managing online personas, and dealing with cyberbullying. "It's tough to stay true to yourself when everyone is showing their best side online," said one participant.

**Societal Expectations:** Participants felt pressured by societal expectations related to gender roles, academic performance, and career aspirations. "There's always this pressure to do well in school and plan for the future, which

sometimes makes me feel like I can't be myself," explained a participant.

**Internal Conflicts:** Internal conflicts such as self-doubt, fear of judgment, insecurity, and identity crisis were common challenges. One participant expressed, "I often worry about what others think of me, which makes it hard to be authentic."

**Balancing Relationships:** Managing friendship dynamics, family relationships, romantic relationships, and social obligations posed significant challenges. "Trying to keep everyone happy while being true to myself is really hard," shared a participant.

**External Pressures:** Economic constraints, educational demands, and cultural traditions were also cited as obstacles. A participant noted, "Sometimes cultural expectations clash with what I want for myself, making it difficult to stay authentic."

### 3.3. Strategies for Maintaining Authenticity

**Self-Reflection:** Practices like journaling, meditation, therapy, and personal retreats helped participants maintain authenticity. "Writing in my journal helps me understand my true feelings," one participant mentioned.

**Support Systems:** Peer support, family support, and community groups were crucial for participants. "Having friends who accept me for who I am makes it easier to be myself," a participant said.

**Boundary Setting:** Participants found saying no, prioritizing self-care, and managing time important for maintaining authenticity. "Learning to say no without feeling guilty has been a big step for me," one participant remarked.

**Positive Reinforcement:** Techniques such as self-affirmations, celebrating achievements, and seeking constructive feedback were beneficial. "I remind myself of my strengths and achievements to stay grounded," explained a participant.

**Adaptive Coping Mechanisms:** Stress management, conflict resolution, flexible thinking, emotional regulation, and seeking mentorship were vital strategies. "Talking to a

mentor who understands my struggles helps me stay true to myself," one participant shared.

Engaging in Authentic Activities: Hobbies, volunteering, creative expression, travel, and learning new skills helped participants remain authentic. "When I paint or draw, I feel like I'm expressing my true self," said a participant.

### 3.4. *Impact of Authenticity on Well-being*

**Mental Health:** Participants reported that being authentic reduced anxiety, increased resilience, and fostered a positive self-image. "When I'm true to myself, I feel less anxious and more confident," a participant noted.

**Social Relationships:** Authenticity led to deeper connections, improved communication, and trust-building. One participant commented, "My friendships are stronger when I'm honest about who I am."

**Academic and Career Success:** Motivation, career satisfaction, and academic performance were positively influenced by authenticity. "I do better in school when I'm not trying to be someone I'm not," said a participant.

**Personal Growth:** Self-acceptance, empowerment, and lifelong learning were significant outcomes. "Being authentic has helped me accept myself and grow as a person," explained a participant.

**Overall Life Satisfaction:** Participants associated authenticity with happiness, fulfillment, life balance, and a sense of purpose. "Living authentically makes me feel more fulfilled and content with my life," shared a participant.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The current study aimed to explore the experiences and perceptions of Generation Z girls in Tehran, Iran, regarding their quest for authenticity. The findings revealed several key themes: understanding authenticity, challenges to authenticity, strategies for maintaining authenticity, and the impact of authenticity on well-being. Participants described authenticity as being true to oneself, influenced by personal definitions, social influences, emotional connections, role models, and evolving concepts. Challenges to authenticity included social media impact, societal expectations, internal conflicts, balancing relationships, and external pressures. Strategies for maintaining authenticity involved self-reflection, support systems, boundary setting, positive reinforcement, adaptive coping mechanisms, and engaging in authentic activities. The impact of authenticity on well-being was evident in improved mental health, social

relationships, academic and career success, personal growth, and overall life satisfaction.

The findings of this study align with existing literature on authenticity and its significance in adolescent development. Authenticity was consistently described by participants as being true to oneself, a concept supported by Wood et al. (2008), who emphasized the importance of aligning one's actions with their true self (Wood et al., 2008). The participants' personal definitions of authenticity, influenced by honesty and integrity, resonate with the theoretical framework proposed by Vess (2019), which views authenticity as a dynamic process evolving over time and contexts (Vess, 2019).

Social influences, particularly the impact of peer pressure, media portrayal, cultural norms, and family expectations, were prominent in shaping participants' understanding of authenticity. This aligns with the findings of Berkovich and Gueta (2020), who highlighted the role of societal expectations in shaping adolescents' self-perceptions. Similarly, Hu (2024) and Santer et al. (2023) discussed the dual role of social media in providing a platform for self-expression while also imposing pressures to conform, which can hinder authentic self-expression (Hu, 2024; Santer et al., 2023).

Emotional connection was another significant aspect of authenticity, with participants associating it with self-awareness, emotional honesty, and inner peace. This finding is supported by Bayır-Toper et al. (2020), who found that authenticity moderates the relationship between self-compassion and compassion for others, suggesting that being true to oneself facilitates more meaningful and empathetic interactions (Bayır-Toper et al., 2020).

The challenges to authenticity identified in this study, such as social media impact, societal expectations, and internal conflicts, are consistent with previous research. Ranieri et al. (2021) highlighted the negative impact of social media on adolescents' self-perception and well-being (Ranieri et al., 2021). Dong (2023) discussed how societal pressures related to academic performance and career aspirations can affect adolescents' ability to be authentic (Dong, 2023). McKenney and Bigler (2014) emphasized the role of internalized sexualization and body image concerns in shaping young girls' self-perceptions, leading to body surveillance and body shame (McKenney & Bigler, 2014).

Participants employed various strategies to maintain authenticity, such as self-reflection, support systems, and boundary setting. These strategies are supported by the literature, which emphasizes the importance of self-

awareness and emotional honesty in maintaining authenticity (Bayır-Toper et al., 2020). The role of support systems, including peer and family support, in reinforcing authentic behaviors and providing a safe space for self-expression, is also well-documented (Theran, 2010).

The positive impact of authenticity on well-being, including reduced anxiety, increased resilience, and improved social relationships, is consistent with existing research. Grijak (2017) found that authenticity is linked to better mental health outcomes (Grijak, 2017), while Chevalier et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of authenticity in fostering trust and improved communication in relationships (Chevalier et al., 2021). The influence of authenticity on academic and career success, personal growth, and overall life satisfaction further supports the findings of previous studies (Hoff et al., 2020; Theran, 2010).

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the experiences and perceptions of Generation Z girls in Tehran regarding their quest for authenticity. By understanding the challenges and strategies associated with authenticity, we can better support the psychological and social development of Generation Z girls, helping them navigate the complexities of their social environments while staying true to themselves. The findings from this study contribute to the broader discourse on authenticity and its importance in fostering resilience, well-being, and personal growth among adolescents.

## 5. Limitations and Suggestions

Despite the valuable insights provided by this study, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the study's qualitative design, while providing in-depth insights, limits the generalizability of the findings. The sample size was relatively small and drawn from a specific cultural and geographic context, which may not be representative of all Generation Z girls. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias, as participants may have provided socially desirable responses. The study also focused solely on female adolescents, which limits the ability to compare findings across genders.

Future research should consider a more diverse and larger sample to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Comparative studies involving participants from different cultural and geographic contexts could provide a broader understanding of the quest for authenticity among Generation Z. Additionally, longitudinal studies could

explore how perceptions of authenticity evolve over time and across different life stages. It would also be beneficial to include male participants to examine potential gender differences in the experience and pursuit of authenticity. Finally, incorporating quantitative measures alongside qualitative methods could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing authenticity and its impact on well-being.

The findings of this study have important implications for practitioners working with Generation Z girls. Educators, counselors, and mental health professionals should focus on fostering environments that support authenticity. This can be achieved by promoting self-reflection practices, such as journaling and meditation, and providing safe spaces for adolescents to express their true selves. Support systems, including peer and family support, should be encouraged to reinforce authentic behaviors and provide a sense of belonging. Practitioners should also emphasize the importance of setting boundaries and managing time effectively to prioritize self-care. Additionally, positive reinforcement techniques, such as self-affirmations and celebrating achievements, can help adolescents maintain their authenticity. Finally, adaptive coping mechanisms, including stress management and seeking mentorship, should be promoted to help adolescents navigate the challenges associated with maintaining authenticity.

## Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

## Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

## Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

## Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

## Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

### Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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