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# EXPLORING IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA: THE IMPACT ON SELF-PERCEPTION, BODY IMAGE AND SOCIAL COMPARISON IN GENERATION Z

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### Abstract:

The rapid evolution of social media platforms such as TikTok has significantly reshaped the identity development process among Generation Z. This study explores how engagement with social media influences three key psychological constructs which are self-perception, body image, and social comparison, where it is vital to the formation of personal identity. As digital natives, Generation Z is constantly exposed to curated content, trends, and visual representations that may affect how they view themselves and others. This quantitative study employed a survey design using validated instruments adapted to reflect the influence of social media content, particularly short-form videos. A total of 168 participants aged 17 to 28 completed a questionnaire divided into five sections: demographic information, self-perception, body image, social comparison, and identity development. Data were analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). The findings revealed that both body image and self-perception significantly and positively influenced identity development, with body image demonstrating the strongest effect, followed by self-perception. However, social comparison did not have a significant impact on identity development. These results suggest that visual and internalized self-appraisals are more influential than social comparison in shaping identity among generation Z.

#### **Keywords:**

Z

Identity Development, Self-Perception, Social Comparison, Body Image, Gen



#### Introduction

Over the past decades, the understandings of identity development in psychology have shifted markedly. Early theoretical models conceptualised identity as singular, stable entity, emphasizing a generalised and enduring view of the self. Previous research predominantly focused on isolated components such a self-concept and self-esteem. However, contemporary approaches view identity development as a dynamic, multifaceted process, increasingly understood through the lens of cognitive schemas that adapt and evolve in response to social and environmental influences (Iwasa et all., 2023). In particular, one of the most significant contemporary influences on identity development, particularly among younger generations is the pervasive role of digital technologies and social media.

In today's digital era, social media has become an indispensable part of daily life, especially for young people. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok offer opportunities for entertainment, self-expression, and social interaction. In Malaysia, these platforms have grown into powerful arenas for cultural discourse and personal identity exploration, particularly among youth. The increasing integration of visual content, interactive features, and real-time feedback mechanisms has transformed how individuals present themselves online and relate to others (Nasidi et al., 2024). This digital shift has profoundly impacted the ways in which Generations Z, in particular, construct and negotiates their sense of self.

Among these platforms, TikTok has risen as one of the most influential, especially for Generation Z, who were born into a world where digital interaction is not just common but expected. Known for its addictive short-form video format and vertical scrolling design, TikTok appeals to Generation Z through highly personalized content feeds that are curated by sophisticated algorithmic systems. These systems rely on users' preferences, behaviours, and digital footprints to deliver a constant stream of relevant and engaging content (Hermann & Puntoni, 2024; Harwood, 2021; Song, 2021).

Given their developmental stage and deep immersion in digital culture, Generation Z represents a critical population for understanding how online environments particularly visual-centric platforms like TikTok, contribute to the formation and evolution and self-perception, body image and social comparison processes. As a result, TikTok has not only redefined how young people consume media but also how they construct and perform their identities in the digital space (Nasidi et al., 2024).

Moreover, social media platforms, especially TikTok, have become critical sites where Malaysian Generation Z users explore, experiment with, and perform different versions of themselves. However, this process is increasingly mediated by Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools such as beauty filters, facial editing, and Augmented Reality (AR) effects. While these features may enhance user engagement, they also contribute to the normalization of unrealistic standards of beauty and success (Zulfiqar et al., 2024). Consequently, Generation Z may begin to internalize these digital ideals, altering their self-perception and becoming reliant on external validation through likes, comments, and follower counts (Yu, Zhang & Liu, 2022).

This digital environment facilitates a type of identity development that is often performative, curated, and heavily influenced by peer approval and trending content. Studies have shown that the use of AI-enhanced visuals correlates with a decrease in authenticity and spontaneity in online interactions (Zulfiqar et al., 2024), while also increasing psychological pressure to



conform to idealized images. In the Malaysian context, where cultural beauty standards emphasize fair skin, slim physiques, and well-groomed appearances, these impacts are even more pronounced. Influencers frequently reinforce these ideals by sharing polished and AI-edited images, further shaping how young people, particularly females, perceive beauty and self-worth (Kumar, 2023; Veloo & Mustafa, 2023; Harwood, 2021).

The continuous stream of curated content on TikTok and other platforms promotes social comparison. This comparison can lead to emotional distress, feelings of inadequacy, and low self-esteem (Barry et al., 2024). Moreover, many individuals begin to prefer their filtered, idealized online selves over their real, unaltered appearances, resulting in body dissatisfaction and distorted self-image (Scully, Swords & Nixon, 2020; Yu, Zhang & Liu, 2022). These effects are especially concerning during critical developmental stages, where young individuals are forming their identities, navigating peer relationships, and determining their sense of self (Tufail et al., 2024).

As the first generation to grow up with social media fully integrated into their social environment, Malaysian Gen Z is particularly susceptible to the psychological effects of these digital interactions. Social media validation through likes and shares has become a key driver of self-esteem, while constant exposure to digitally altered images creates unrealistic benchmarks for beauty, success, and popularity (Hermann & Puntoni, 2024). Over time, this can result in compulsive social media use, dependency on external validation, and negative emotional outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion (Pescott, 2020; Isroilova, 2024).

Given the widespread adoption of TikTok and the increasing reliance on AI tools for content creation and curation, it is crucial to investigate how these platforms influence the identity development, body image, and self-perception of Malaysian youth. Therefore, this study aims to explore the psychological implications of Tik Tok content on Generation Z identity development, specifically focusing on interrelationship between self-perception, body image and social comparison. As digital technologies continue to evolve, understanding these dynamics is essential for developing appropriate interventions and support systems to promote healthier social media use and identity development among Generation Z in Malaysia.

#### **Problem Statement**

The rise of AI-driven content on social media platforms, such as beauty filters and augmented reality tools, has raised urgent concerns about its impact on self-perception, body image, and social comparison, particularly among young people. These technologies encourage users to compare their digitally altered selves with idealized versions of beauty and success, leading to negative self-evaluations, body dissatisfaction, and a reliance on external validation. This constant cycle of comparison can severely distort users' self-image, making it difficult for them to develop a healthy and authentic sense of identity. As the result, there has been a notable increase in mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and eating disorders (Isroilova, 2024; Tufail et al., 2024; Zulfiqar et al., 2024). Despite the widespread use of these technologies, there is a significant gap in understanding how AI-generated content influences identity development alongside the psychological processes of social comparison, making it crucial to address the long-term effects on youth well-being (Kouros & Papa, 2024; Auf et all., 2023).



#### **Research Objective**

- 1. To examine the relationship between self-perception and identity development on digital age among generation Z.
- 2. To examine the relationship between body image, and identity development on digital age among generation Z.
- 3. To examine the relationship between social comparison identity development on digital age among generation Z.

### **Literature Review**

#### Identity Development and Social Media

Identity development, particularly in the context of social media, refers to the process through which individuals, especially Generation Z, form and shape their sense of self. This process is increasingly influenced by AI-driven technologies, such as filters, augmented reality, and other content-enhancing tools that shape how users present themselves online (Kouros & Papa, 2024). These AI tools allow users to enhance their appearance, create avatars, and present an image that aligns with societal beauty standards, which are often unattainable and distorted. However, this pressure to conform to algorithmic beauty standards can lead to a disconnect between an individual's authentic self and their digital persona, particularly during critical stages of identity development (Zulfigar et al., 2024, Pescott, 2020). For adolescents and young adults, whose identities are still in flux, this discrepancy can be especially troubling, as their sense of self is highly susceptible to external influences, such as social comparison and validation. The process of self-evaluation is fundamental to individuals, and in the absence of objective benchmarks, they often turn to social comparisons with others as a means of assessment (Barry, Berbano, Anderson & Levy, 2024). Typically, individuals seek comparisons with those they perceive as similar to themselves in order to enhance the accuracy of their self-appraisals. The constant reinforcement of idealized images on social media, driven by AI, can create feelings of inadequacy and confusion, making it harder for young people to develop a stable, authentic sense of identity (Cedrún & Civila, 2024). This growing reliance on AI-curated social content not only amplifies the challenges of self-assessment but also intensifies identity conflicts, as individuals struggle to reconcile their real selves with the idealized versions promoted online. This shift in how young people view themselves through the lens of social media and AI technologies has profound psychological consequences, complicating the process of self-identity formation during a critical stage of personal growth (Taylor, Muchnik, Kumar & Aral, 2023).

### Self-Perception in Social Media Context

Self-perception refers to how individuals view themselves, encompassing aspects like their strengths, weaknesses, self-worth, physical appearance, intelligence, personality, and emotional state. It is shaped by personal experiences, relationships, and both internal and external feedback. On social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, users are increasingly able to curate their self-image through image-enhancing filters, captions, and curated content, creating idealized versions of themselves. These platforms allow individuals to construct digital identities influenced by societal standards of beauty, success, and popularity (Nasidi, Norde, Dahiru, & Hassan, 2024). However, while these tools offer opportunities for self-expression, they also risk reinforcing unrealistic beauty standards, which can lead users to internalize distorted perceptions of themselves, both online and offline (Zulfiqar et al., 2024). AI-generated content plays a significant role in amplifying these standards by encouraging



social comparison with curated and often unattainable images, further affecting self-worth (Tufail et al., 2024). The relationship between AI, social media, and self-perception is critical to understanding how digital tools impact the formation of self-concept. As social media fosters new ways for individuals to express themselves, it also places pressure on how they look, fit in, and maintain social status. This dynamic is particularly important for young people, as their self-perception is closely linked to their social identity, influencing how they connect with others and the groups they belong to (Isroilova, 2024).

H1: There is significant relationship between self-perception and identity development on digital age among generation Z.

### Body Image in the Era of AI-Enhanced Social Media

Body image refers to how individuals perceive and feel about their physical appearance, encompassing both cognitive assessments (how people think about their body) and emotional responses (how they feel about their body). A positive body image involves acceptance and appreciation of one's body, regardless of its appearance, while a negative body image can lead to dissatisfaction, self-criticism, and feelings of shame or inadequacy. The rise of AI-generated content on social media platforms has introduced significant challenges for body image, as users are exposed to highly idealized portrayals of beauty (Qiu, 2024; Rahmadiansyah, Amir & Mundzir, 2021). AI tools, such as filters and augmented reality features, allow users to alter their appearance, often presenting an unattainable version of the self that aligns with societal beauty ideals (Nizam & Sahharon, 2024). These alterations can lead to distorted body image perceptions, particularly among young people still forming a stable sense of self.

Research has shown that constant exposure to AI-enhanced content fosters dissatisfaction with one's body, as users compare their real-life appearance to these digitally enhanced representations (Tufail et al., 2024). These comparisons can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy, leading to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and eating disorders (Pescott, 2020). A study conducted in the Punjab region of Pakistan highlighted the negative impact of AI-generated content on self-esteem and body image satisfaction. Using a structured questionnaire distributed to 600 students, the study found significant negative correlations between exposure to AI-generated content and both self-esteem and body image satisfaction. Social comparison was identified as a key mediator in these negative effects, emphasizing the need for awareness and interventions to mitigate the impact of digital media on psychological well-being (Tufail et al., 2024).

H2: There is significant between body image, and identity development on digital age among generation Z.

#### Social Comparison in the Digital Age

Social comparison, the psychological process by which individuals evaluate their own characteristics in relation to others, is a common method for self-assessment. People often compare themselves to those they perceive as socially similar, a tendency that is magnified on social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook (Soh, Talaifar & Harari, 2024). Social comparison theory, originally outlined by Festinger, suggests that individuals engage in upward comparison by comparing themselves to those they perceive as superior which can lead to feelings of inadequacy and diminished self-esteem (Virós-Martín, Montaña-Blasco & Jiménez-Morales, 2024). This phenomenon is particularly pronounced on social media, where



AI-driven content, such as filters and curated images, promotes idealized beauty standards, triggering negative self-comparisons. As AI technologies allow users to create "perfect" versions of themselves, the ease of generating these enhanced images heightens social comparison dynamics, influencing self-perception and social identity (Tufail et al., 2024).

Social comparison on social media can result in two types of effects: upward and downward comparisons. Upward social comparison occurs when individuals compare themselves to those they perceive as better, which often leads to negative emotions such as envy, insecurity, and low self-esteem. On the other hand, downward social comparison, where individuals compare themselves to those they perceive as worse off, may offer temporary relief but does not contribute to long-term improvements in self-worth (Tufail et al., 2024 & Rahmadiansyah, Amir & Mundzir, 2022). With the proliferation of AI-generated content, these comparisons are intensified, as idealized images create unrealistic beauty standards, fostering greater dissatisfaction with one's own body and life. This phenomenon contributes to increased insecurity, particularly among youth who are still developing their self-concept. In addition, as users encounter selectively curated, idealized portrayals of others' lives, they are often faced with distorted perceptions of themselves, leading to increased anxiety, jealousy, and dissatisfaction (Qiu, 2024). Therefore, fostering critical engagement with social media and providing support systems are essential for mitigating the negative psychological effects of digital self-presentation and promoting healthier online environments (Luyckx et al., 2008)

H3: There is significant relationship between social comparison identity development on digital age among generation Z.



#### **Conceptual Framework**



#### **Research Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

This research adopted a quantitative research design to investigate the relationship between social media use and identity development, self-perception, body image, and social comparison among generation Z. A quantitative approach was selected because it allows for the systematic measurement of psychological constructs through standardized instruments and enables



statistical analyses to identify patterns and relationships among variables. This method supports the objective evaluation of hypotheses and enhances the generalizability of findings.

#### Sample

The study sample consisted of 168 participants, classified as Generation Z, defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012. Participants' ages ranged from 17 to 25 years, and all were active users of social media platforms, particularly TikTok. Inclusion criteria were required participants to be within the specified age range, daily users of at least one social media platform, and willingness to provide informed consent. Participants outside this age range or those who reported minimal or no social media use were excluded from the study to ensure relevance to the research focus.

#### Instruments

#### Identity Development

Identity development was measured using the Dimensions of Identity Development Scale (DIDS), which consists of 25 items covering five dimensions: commitment making, identification with commitment, exploration in breadth, exploration in depth, and ruminative exploration. Each dimension is assessed by five items, rated on a 5-point Likert scale. The internal consistency for the DIDS subscales is as follows: commitment making ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ), identification with commitment ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ), exploration in breadth ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ), exploration in depth ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ), and ruminative exploration ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ).

#### **Body Image**

Body image was assessed using the Body Esteem Scale for Adolescents and Adults (BESAA) developed by Mendelson, Mendelson, and White (2001). The BESAA includes 23 items covering three domains: appearance, weight, and attribution which rated on a 5-point Likert scale. In previous studies, the instrument has demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a reported Cronbach's alpha of 0.92 for the total scale (Mendelson et al., 2001).

#### Self-Perception

Self-perception, specifically self-concept clarity, was evaluated using the Self-Concept Clarity Scale (SCCS) developed by Campbell et al. (1996). The SCCS consists of 12 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, where higher scores reflect greater self-concept clarity. The original study reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.86, indicating good internal consistency.

### Social Comparison

Social comparison tendencies were measured using the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM) by Gibbons and Buunk (1999). The INCOM consists of 11 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale. It captures the frequency and importance of social comparison behaviours. The reported Cronbach's alpha for this measure is 0.83, indicating strong reliability.

### Data Collection

Data collection was conducted online through a self-administered survey hosted on Google Forms. Participants were provided with an information sheet explaining the purpose of the study and a consent form. Once consent was obtained, participants proceeded to complete the



demographic questionnaire followed by the four standardized instruments. The survey took approximately 15 to 20 minutes to complete.

#### Data Analysis

Collected data we analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). Descriptive statistics, reliability analyses (Cronbach's alpha), and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) techniques were employed to assess measurement models and test the proposed hypotheses.

#### **Research Findings**

#### **Respondent Demographics**

A total of five demographic factors were chosen for this research specifically gender, age, ethnicity, citizenship, and education level. A total of 168 respondents participated in this research.

Table 1: Gender Statistic						
Frequency Percent						
Valid	Male	64	38.1			
	Female	104	61.9			
Total 168 100.0						

Based on Table 1 shown above, there were 104 individuals (61.9%) of female respondents whereas male respondents accounted for 64 individuals (38.1%). The range of age was between 17 to above 28 years old as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Age Statistics						
Frequency Percent						
Valid	17-20	40	23.8			
	21-24	119	70.8			
25-28 9 5.4						
	Total	235	100.0			

Based on the table shown above, there are three age groups used in this research and respondents are mostly from the age of 21 to 24 years old which comprised 70.8%. 23.8% of total respondents are from the age of 17 to 20 years old whereas the age group from 25 to 28 years old have the lowest percentage which is 5.4%. Therefore, generally, the respondents in this research were youngsters ranging from 21 to 24 years old.

Table 3: Ethnicity					
Frequency Percent					
Valid	Malay	38	22.6		
	Chinese	49	29.2		
	Indian	14	8.3		
_	Bumiputera Sabah	23	13.7		



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Bumiputera Sarawak	36	21.4	
Others	8	4.8	
Total	168	100.0	

In terms of the ethnicity of the respondents, Table 3 shows that majority of respondents came from the Chinese ethnic group with a total of 29.2% followed by the Malay ethnic group with 22.6% and closely next is Bumiputera Sarawak with 21.4%. Next is Bumiputera Sabah with 13.7% then Indian with 8.3% and lastly other ethnicity which is 4.8%.

Table 4: Citizenship						
Frequency Percent						
Valid	Malaysian	162	96.4			
	Non-Malaysian	6	3.6			
	Total	168	100.0			

As shown in Table 4, most of the respondents are Malaysian with a total percentage is 96.4% and non-Malaysian respondents are only 3.6%. The last respondent demographic used in this research is the education level.

Table 5: Education Level						
Frequency Percent						
Valid	Certificate	7	4.2			
	Foundation	11	6.5			
	Undergraduate	135	80.3			
	Postgraduate	5	3			
	Other	10	6			
	Total	168	100.0			

Based on Table 5 above, majority of the respondents who took part in this research are from the undergraduate level with a total of 80.3% and then followed by foundation level and other level with the percentage of 6.5% and 6%. the balance of respondents is from the certificate and postgraduate level at 4.2% and 3%.

#### Structural Model Results

To examine the relationships among the constructs, the research employed Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). The structural model results shown in Table 6 indicate that Body Image and Self-Perception significantly and positively predict Identity Development among Gen Z respondents. Specifically, Body Image yielded a path coefficient of 0.432 (p = 0.000), indicating a strong and significant relationship. Self-Perception followed with a coefficient of 0.363 (p = 0.001), also reflecting a significant influence. In contrast, Social Comparison had a negligible and non-significant effect on Identity Development ( $\beta = 0.021$ , p = 0.816), suggesting that it does not contribute meaningfully within this model.



Table 6: Path Coefficient							
	Original sample	Sample mean	Standard deviation	T statistics	P values		
Body Image → Identity Development	0.432	0.425	0.104	4.162	0.000		
Self-Perception → Identity Development	0.363	0.376	0.107	3.384	0.001		
Social Comparison → Identity Development	0.021	0.031	0.090	0.232	0.816		



Figure 2: PLS-SEM Diagram

#### **R-Square**

The R-square value for Identity Development is 0.493 as shown in Table 7, implying that approximately 49.3% of the variance in this construct can be explained by the three predictors—Body Image, Self-Perception, and Social Comparison indicating moderate explanatory power. About 49.3% of the differences we see in Identity Development among individuals can be explained by how they feel about their body image, their self-perception, and how much they compare themselves to others.

Table 7: R-Square				
R-square R-square adjuste				
Identity Development	0.493	0.483		

The R-square value for Identity Development is 0.493, implying that approximately 49.3% of the variance in this construct can be explained by the three predictors which are Body Image, Self-Perception and Social Comparison that can be referred to above Table 7, indicating moderate explanatory power. About 49.3% of the differences we see in Identity Development among individuals can be explained by how they feel about their body image, their self-perception, and how much they compare themselves to others.



#### **F-Square**

The F-square effect size further supports the prominence of Body Image ( $F^2 = 0.272$ ) and Self-Perception ( $F^2 = 0.131$ ) as contributors to Identity Development, whereas Social Comparison has no observable effect ( $F^2 = 0.000$ ).

Table 8: F-Square					
	Body Self - Social				
	Image	Perception	Comparison	Development	
Body Image				0.272	
Self - Perception				0.131	
Social Comparison 0.0				0.000	
Identity Development					

Body Image has an  $F^2$  of 0.272, which is considered a medium to large effect size. This means Body Image makes a strong contribution to explaining Identity Development. Self-Perception has an F<sup>2</sup> of 0.131, which is a small to medium effect. It still matters, but not as much as Body Image. Social Comparison has an F<sup>2</sup> of 0.000, which means it has no observable effect, reinforcing the finding that its inclusion in the model does not enhance explanatory capacity.

#### Average Variance Extracted (AVE)

Regarding construct reliability, all variables demonstrate acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values exceeding the 0.7 threshold. However, issues emerge with convergent validity, as none of the constructs achieve an Average Variance Extracted (AVE) above the recommended 0.5. This suggests the indicators may not fully represent the constructs they intend to measure.

Table 9: Construct Reliability					
	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)	
Body Image	0.819	0.828	0.852	0.219	
Self - Perception	0.878	0.892	0.904	0.454	
Social Comparison	0.839	0.864	0.876	0.409	
Identity Development	0.925	0.944	0.929	0.369	

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#### **Discriminant Validity**

Concern were also raised regarding discriminant validity, particularly between Self-Perception and Social Comparison, which share a high inter-construct correlation (0.747), indicating potential overlap between these concepts. The correlation between Self-Perception and Social Comparison was relatively high (r = 0.747), which raises concerns regarding discriminant validity, this level of correlation approaches the threshold where conceptual overlap could compromise construct distinctiveness.



Table 10: Discriminant Validity					
	Body	Identity			
	Image	Perception	Comparison	Development	
Body Image					
Self - Perception	0.455				
Social Comparison	0.427	0.747			
Identity Development	0.522	0.615	0.480		

#### Discussion

This research investigated the impact of body image, self-perception, and social comparison on identity development among Generation Z social media users. The findings provide compelling evidence that body image and self-perception are both significant and positive predictors of identity development, while social comparison does not exert a meaningful influence within the proposed model.

The strongest predictor of identity development was body image, as indicated by the path coefficient ( $\beta = 0.432$ , p < .001) and a medium-to-large effect size (F<sup>2</sup> = 0.272). This aligns with previous research highlighting the critical role of body-related self-evaluations in shaping one's identity, particularly in adolescence and young adulthood (Pelau, Ene, Irina & Pop, 2021). In the digital era, where visual self-presentation is central to social media engagement, individuals who maintain a positive body image may develop a more stable and coherent sense of self. This finding underscores the increasing significance of appearance-based validation in identity processes among digital-native populations.

Self-perception measured via self-concept clarity, also showed a significant positive effect on identity development ( $\beta = 0.363$ , p = .001; F<sup>2</sup> = 0.131). This supports Campbell et al.'s (1996) assertion that individuals with clearer self-concepts tend to experience greater psychological well-being and identity coherence. Given that social media environments often encourage curated self-presentation, those with higher self-concept clarity may be more resistant to identity confusion and better able to maintain internal consistency in the face of external influences.

On the contrary, social comparison was not a significant predictor of identity development ( $\beta = 0.021$ , p = .816;  $F^2 = 0.000$ ). This finding diverges from traditional theoretical expectations derived from Social Comparison Theory, which posits that individuals evaluate themselves through comparison with others. One possible explanation for this non-significance is the adaptive use of social comparison among Gen Z, where comparison may serve more as a motivational tool than a source of identity disturbance. Alternatively, it may reflect the desensitization or normalization of social comparison processes in heavily mediated environments, thereby diminishing its unique influence on identity outcomes.

The  $R^2$  value of 0.493 suggests that nearly half the variance in identity development can be explained by the combined effects of body image, self-perception, and social comparison, indicating moderate explanatory power. This model highlights the psychological dimensions of digital life, particularly how internal self-evaluations, rather than interpersonal comparisons, serve as primary drivers of identity construction in contemporary youth.



Nevertheless, concerns regarding convergent validity and discriminant validity emerged. The low AVE scores across all constructs indicate that the measurement instruments may not have captured the intended latent constructs sufficiently. Additionally, the high inter-correlation between self-perception and social comparison (r = 0.747) suggests conceptual overlap, raising questions about the distinctiveness of these constructs in the context of identity development.

### Conclusion

Overall, this research contributes to a growing body of literature on Gen Z psychosocial development by affirming the central role of internal self-evaluations on particularly related to body image and self-perception in the construction of personal identity. It also provides meaningful insights for both academic research and practical application. The significant influence of Body Image and Self-Perception on Identity Development among Gen Z suggests the need for educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers to emphasize positive self-image cultivation in young adults. University programs, for instance, may benefit from incorporating wellness and self-concept modules into orientation or personal development curricula to foster healthier self-views.

In clinical or counselling contexts, the findings underscore the importance of addressing bodyrelated insecurities and distorted self-perceptions as central elements of identity-related issues. Interventions that promote body positivity, self-compassion, and authentic self-assessment could play a vital role in enhancing the overall well-being and identity stability of young people. At a broader societal level, these results signal the need to critically assess media and cultural narratives that shape youth body ideals and self-worth. Campaigns that advocate for diverse representations of beauty and value could help shift public discourse toward healthier identity formation frameworks.

While this research this study offers valuable findings, several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the sample was drawn primarily from Malaysian undergraduates, limiting the generalizability of the results to other age groups, educational levels, or cultural contexts. Additionally, the cross-sectional design restricts the ability to make causal inferences; it remains unclear whether Body Image and Self-Perception cause changes in Identity Development over time or vice versa. Another limitation lies in the measurement model, particularly the low Average Variance Extracted (AVE) scores and the high correlation between Self-Perception and Social Comparison. These issues suggest potential construct overlap and insufficient convergent validity, which may weaken the interpretability of the findings.

Future studies should consider employing a longitudinal design to track changes in identity development across time and explore causality more robustly. Including diverse demographic

groups such as working youth, non-students, and individuals from different cultural backgrounds can also improve generalizability and offer a more comprehensive understanding of identity development mechanism. Additionally, qualitative approaches, such as in-depth interviews or focus groups, could complement quantitative findings and uncover nuanced narratives surrounding identity formation in generation Z.



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