

Self-Care in the Scroll Era: Mental Health Strategies Used by Gen Z Social Media Influencers

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the self-care strategies employed by Generation Z social media influencers in Tehran to manage their mental health amidst the challenges of constant digital engagement, online visibility, and emotional labor. A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 20 self-identified Gen Z social media influencers aged 19 to 26, all based in Tehran. Participants were purposively sampled and included only those with over 10,000 followers and at least two years of content creation experience. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically using NVivo software, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. Analysis revealed four main themes: (1) navigating digital boundaries, which included time management, curating online presence, and offline rituals; (2) emotional self-regulation strategies, such as coping with negative feedback, using mindfulness, and leveraging peer support; (3) identity and authenticity management, which highlighted tensions between public and private personas and struggles with impostor syndrome; and (4) preventive and proactive self-care, including structured routines, creative expression, and engagement with professional mental health resources. Participants described social media as both a source of stress and a medium for coping, emphasizing the dual role of digital platforms in their mental health experiences. Gen Z influencers practice multidimensional self-care strategies that are deeply integrated with their digital lives. These findings underscore the need for nuanced approaches to youth mental health, digital wellness education, and platform responsibility. The study offers valuable insights for researchers, clinicians, and social media stakeholders interested in supporting the psychological resilience of young digital creators.

Keywords: Generation Z, social media influencers, mental health, self-care, qualitative research, digital well-being

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Introduction

The digital era has radically transformed how individuals engage with self-care, particularly among Generation Z (Gen Z), a cohort born between 1997 and 2012 who have grown up immersed in online platforms. Social media is not merely a communication tool for Gen Z—it functions as a primary space for identity formation, emotional expression, career development, and social interaction (1, 2). Within this context, a subset of Gen Z known as social media influencers (SMIs) has emerged as both producers and

consumers of online culture, often negotiating intense pressures around performance, visibility, and personal branding (3, 4). This study explores how Gen Z influencers manage their mental health through self-care strategies, offering a unique lens into the psychosocial adaptations of young digital laborers navigating the complexities of perpetual connectivity.

The rise of the influencer economy has shifted perceptions of labor and self-representation. Influencers are often seen as aspirational figures, but behind the curated posts lie emotional labor, algorithmic demands, and audience expectations that can exact a heavy mental toll (5, 6). Recent research highlights that Gen Z influencers may be especially vulnerable to digital fatigue and emotional dysregulation due to their early and prolonged exposure to social media environments (7, 8). The pressure to maintain authenticity while adhering to platform trends often results in cognitive dissonance and emotional exhaustion (3). Moreover, self-care for this demographic is not confined to offline practices but often becomes entangled with online behaviors such as boundary-setting, content curation, and digital detoxing (1, 9).

Mental health discourse among Gen Z has grown increasingly visible on social media, with many influencers openly discussing anxiety, burnout, and self-care routines. These practices are not only personal coping mechanisms but also act as social signals that shape followers' perceptions and behaviors (10, 11). Influencers occupy a paradoxical position: they are both subjects and agents within digital economies, simultaneously under pressure and influential over mental wellness narratives (12, 13). While prior studies have explored the impact of social media on Gen Z's purchasing behavior and brand loyalty (5, 14), fewer have examined how influencers themselves cope with the emotional consequences of their digital visibility.

The platform-mediated nature of self-care among Gen Z influencers must be understood within the broader psychological and cultural landscape of this generation. Characterized by high levels of self-awareness, social consciousness, and digital savviness, Gen Z individuals often seek purpose and alignment between personal values and public personas (2, 15). However, this desire for congruence is frequently challenged by the performative nature of influencing, where authenticity is both commodified and scrutinized. Studies indicate that Gen Z often experiences tension between personal well-being and digital obligations, especially when online engagement becomes a primary source of income or social status (7, 16). These pressures can contribute to a heightened need for self-care strategies that are adaptive, proactive, and embedded within the digital ecosystem (17, 18).

Moreover, the cultural, social, and economic contexts within which Gen Z influencers operate can mediate their access to and expression of self-care. In societies like Iran, where social norms, technological access, and governmental policies shape digital behaviors, influencers must navigate additional layers of complexity. Research shows that Gen Z in urban centers such as Tehran is particularly engaged with social media not only for entertainment but also for activism, education, and income generation (9, 19). Consequently, self-care strategies among Iranian Gen Z influencers may reflect both global trends and local specificities, such as religious values, social stigma around mental health, and infrastructural constraints (10, 20).

Understanding the psychological experiences of Gen Z influencers is crucial not only from a mental health perspective but also for informing educational, organizational, and policy-level interventions. For instance, studies have linked work-life balance and flexible arrangements to improved well-being and retention among Gen Z employees in traditional sectors (20, 21). However, such models are underdeveloped in the informal

economy of influencing, where professional boundaries are blurred, and labor is often unpaid or underregulated. Influencers frequently work without formal contracts, institutional support, or mental health protections—conditions that exacerbate the need for self-directed coping mechanisms (8, 22).

The commodification of self-care on social media adds another layer of complexity. While influencers often promote wellness products and lifestyles, this can obscure the genuine psychological struggles they face and create unrealistic expectations for followers (6, 11). Scholars have argued that self-care narratives on social media risk becoming superficial or commercialized, masking deeper systemic issues related to algorithmic labor, platform capitalism, and identity commodification (3, 4). For Gen Z influencers, negotiating these tensions requires strategic emotional labor, selective vulnerability, and sometimes the conscious curation of breakdowns and recoveries as part of their brand.

Yet, self-care among Gen Z influencers is not solely reactive or individualistic—it is often communal, strategic, and informed by evolving understandings of digital citizenship. Research suggests that Gen Z is more likely than previous generations to seek therapy, practice mindfulness, and share mental health struggles online (12, 23). This openness is often influenced by the decentralized, peer-to-peer learning environments of digital platforms, where mental health information is disseminated by both experts and laypeople (7, 17). As such, the influencer space becomes both a site of stress and a source of support, with shared experiences forming the basis for collective coping and identity reinforcement. Against this backdrop, this study aims to explore the self-care strategies employed by Gen Z social media influencers living in Tehran.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretative approach to explore the mental health strategies employed by Generation Z social media influencers. The aim was to gain a deep, contextualized understanding of how these individuals navigate self-care in the highly digitalized and image-centric environment of social media. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the study objective. The inclusion criteria required participants to self-identify as members of Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012), actively maintain a public social media presence as influencers, and be based in Tehran.

A total of 20 participants (11 females and 9 males) were interviewed for this study. The sample size was determined based on the principle of theoretical saturation, which was reached when no new themes or insights emerged from the data. All participants had at least two years of experience as content creators or influencers on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube and had an active follower base exceeding 10,000 individuals.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted over a three-month period. Interviews were carried out in Persian, either face-to-face or via secure online platforms, depending on participants' preferences and availability. Each interview lasted between 45 to 75 minutes. An interview guide was developed to explore key areas such as daily self-care practices, the emotional impact of content

creation, digital boundaries, experiences with burnout, and coping mechanisms. Open-ended questions allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences, while follow-up prompts encouraged deeper reflection.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Ethical considerations, including confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any stage, were strictly upheld throughout the research process.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify and interpret patterns within the data. Transcripts were analyzed using NVivo qualitative data analysis software to assist in coding and organizing the data systematically. The analytical process followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Initial coding was conducted inductively, allowing themes to emerge directly from the data rather than being imposed a priori.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, strategies such as peer debriefing, member checking, and maintaining an audit trail were employed. Two researchers independently coded a subset of transcripts to ensure inter-coder reliability, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Member checks were conducted by returning preliminary findings to selected participants for validation and clarification.

Findings and Results

The study sample consisted of 20 Generation Z social media influencers based in Tehran, aged between 19 and 26 years ($M = 22.4$). Of the participants, 11 identified as female and 9 as male. All participants had a minimum of two years of experience as active content creators and maintained a public presence on platforms such as Instagram ($n = 17$), TikTok ($n = 9$), and YouTube ($n = 4$), with some operating across multiple platforms. The majority ($n = 15$) had a follower base between 10,000 and 100,000, while the remaining five had over 100,000 followers. Educational backgrounds varied: 6 participants were university students, 9 held undergraduate degrees, and 5 had completed postgraduate studies. Content niches included lifestyle ($n = 8$), fashion and beauty ($n = 5$), mental health and self-help ($n = 4$), and education or tech ($n = 3$). Most participants ($n = 13$) reported full-time involvement in influencing, while the remainder balanced it with other occupations or studies.

Table 1. Themes, Subthemes, and Concepts from Interview Analysis

Category (Theme)	Subcategory (Subtheme)	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Navigating Digital Boundaries	Time Management Techniques	Scheduled screen breaks, content batching, time-blocking, app timers
	Managing Online Presence	Limiting posting frequency, disabling comments, avoiding online arguments, muting triggering accounts
	Offline Rituals	Daily digital detox, mindfulness practices, tech-free zones, walking without phone, journaling
	Prioritizing Personal Space	Not sharing private life, maintaining dual identity, filtering DMs, setting boundaries with followers
	Curating Digital Environment	Unfollowing toxic accounts, customizing feed, muting trends, following inspiring creators

2. Emotional Self-Regulation Strategies	Coping with Negative Feedback	Not reading comments, emotional detachment, humor as a defense, peer venting
	Managing Performance Anxiety	Pre-posting rituals, mindset reframing, self-affirmations, therapy sessions
	Seeking Social Support	Talking to friends, influencer group chats, mentorship from senior creators, sibling support
	Handling Burnout Symptoms	Pausing content creation, open conversations with followers, creative breaks, sleep prioritization
3. Identity and Authenticity Management	Mindfulness and Reflection	Meditation apps, breathing exercises, gratitude journaling, reflective captions, solo walks
	Mental Health Disclosure Practices	Sharing struggles online, choosing what to disclose, normalizing mental health talks, receiving community validation
	Balancing Personal vs. Public Identity	Content curation, using pseudonyms, separating influencer vs. real self, restricting live sessions
	Authentic Content Creation	Sharing behind-the-scenes, talking about failures, resisting filters, showing daily struggles
4. Preventive and Proactive Self-Care	Managing Impostor Syndrome	Comparing growth over time, focusing on audience impact, affirmations, mentoring others
	Internalizing Online Validation	Striving for likes, anxiety over engagement, validation through comments, shifting from numbers to impact
	Physical Wellness Practices	Home workouts, meal prepping, hydration reminders, sleep tracking
	Structured Daily Routines	Morning routines, content planning calendar, work-rest balance, scheduled social time, hobby scheduling
	Creative Expression for Relief	Vlogging as catharsis, drawing, music production, storytelling through captions
	Professional Mental Health Support	Therapy access, online counseling, psychology podcasts, mental health apps, psychiatric consultation
	Digital Education on Mental Health	Following mental health pages, attending webinars, sharing infographics, bookmarking mental health tips, collaborating with psychologists for content

Theme 1: Navigating Digital Boundaries

Time Management Techniques were widely adopted by participants to maintain psychological balance. Many described using app timers, scheduled screen breaks, and content batching to control excessive online presence. One participant shared, *“I post three times a week, but everything’s planned on Sundays—it helps me stay sane.”* Time-blocking for both content creation and rest was also a common strategy to avoid burnout.

Managing Online Presence was another crucial aspect of digital self-care. Several influencers limited their posting frequency and engagement with negative content. As one participant noted, *“I’ve turned off my comments—people can be toxic, and I don’t need that energy every day.”* Others reported muting controversial or triggering accounts to protect their mental space.

Offline Rituals served as important grounding practices. Participants incorporated mindfulness, journaling, and tech-free routines into their daily lives. A respondent explained, *“At least one hour a day, I go for a walk without my phone. It’s my reset button.”* These practices offered a conscious separation from the digital world.

Prioritizing Personal Space was emphasized as vital for maintaining emotional boundaries. Many chose not to share intimate life details, or filtered direct messages (DMs). One influencer remarked, *“I’m open, but not transparent—I share 20% of my life; the rest is mine.”*

Curating Digital Environment was also a proactive strategy to reduce psychological strain. Influencers reported unfollowing accounts that triggered comparison or anxiety, and instead followed

inspiring or educational content. As one participant stated, *“If my feed makes me feel bad, I clean it up. It’s that simple.”*

Theme 2: Emotional Self-Regulation Strategies

Coping with Negative Feedback was a recurring challenge. Influencers dealt with hate comments and criticism by emotional distancing and humor. One participant revealed, *“If someone calls me fake, I screenshot it, laugh with my friends, then delete it. It doesn’t define me.”* Avoiding comment sections altogether was also a coping method for many.

Managing Performance Anxiety involved mental preparation before posting and strategies to reduce the pressure of constant audience approval. Techniques included pre-posting rituals, self-affirmations, and therapy. As shared by a participant, *“I still get anxious before every reel, but I remind myself—I’m not performing, I’m just expressing.”*

Seeking Social Support was essential in maintaining emotional resilience. Many influencers relied on group chats with fellow creators or close friends. One described, *“There’s a WhatsApp group of five of us—we talk about trolls, ideas, burnout. It keeps me grounded.”*

Handling Burnout Symptoms emerged as a major concern, particularly due to the 24/7 nature of digital engagement. Participants reported taking intentional breaks from content creation, openly communicating with followers, and prioritizing sleep. As one explained, *“When I feel drained, I post a story saying ‘I need time off’—my audience usually understands.”*

Mindfulness and Reflection were also widely practiced. Techniques ranged from meditation apps to solo reflective walks. One participant shared, *“Every night, I write three things I’m grateful for—even after bad days, there’s always something.”* These small acts were described as anchoring practices.

Mental Health Disclosure Practices varied, but many participants acknowledged the importance of vulnerability. They shared struggles with their audience to humanize their online personas. As one influencer said, *“When I talked about my anxiety, I got hundreds of DMs saying ‘thank you for being real.’”*

Theme 3: Identity and Authenticity Management

Balancing Personal vs. Public Identity was a significant concern. Many influencers consciously curated content to reflect a version of themselves while protecting their private lives. A participant explained, *“There’s a version of me online, and then there’s me. I’ve learned to separate them.”*

Authentic Content Creation was a goal for many, despite the pressures of perfectionism. Participants emphasized showing behind-the-scenes content, being honest about failures, and resisting excessive filters. One influencer commented, *“Sometimes I post my messy room or a bad skin day—people relate more to that.”*

Managing Impostor Syndrome was another prevalent experience. Influencers countered self-doubt by reflecting on their progress and focusing on community impact. As one shared, *“I look back at my old content and think—wow, I’ve grown. That helps me push forward.”*

Internalizing Online Validation remained a source of tension. Some participants admitted to chasing likes and comments, while others worked to shift their focus from metrics to meaningful engagement. One remarked, *“Likes used to rule my mood. Now, if I get one heartfelt DM, that’s enough.”*

Theme 4: Preventive and Proactive Self-Care

Physical Wellness Practices were integrated as a form of mental health maintenance. Influencers reported regular home workouts, meal prepping, and hydration tracking. One participant explained, *“If I don’t move, I spiral. So I do 20 minutes of yoga before I open Instagram.”*

Structured Daily Routines provided a sense of control amid the chaotic nature of digital work. Morning rituals, weekly content calendars, and scheduled offline time were commonly mentioned. A participant shared, *“Having a routine makes me feel like I’m managing my life, not just reacting to my feed.”*

Creative Expression for Relief helped influencers process emotions. Some described vlogging or writing captions as therapeutic. As one said, *“When I’m stressed, I just talk to the camera—it’s like venting to a diary, but with edits.”*

Professional Mental Health Support was accessed by many participants through therapy, mental health apps, or counseling. One explained, *“I started online therapy last year—it changed how I handle pressure and people’s opinions.”*

Digital Education on Mental Health was a growing trend among influencers. Participants followed psychology-focused accounts, shared infographics, and sometimes collaborated with mental health professionals. As noted by a respondent, *“I learn so much from mental health creators—I try to pass that knowledge on to my followers.”*

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to explore the self-care strategies used by Generation Z (Gen Z) social media influencers in Tehran to maintain mental well-being in the face of digital pressures, emotional labor, and online visibility. Through thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 20 participants, four overarching themes were identified: navigating digital boundaries, emotional self-regulation strategies, identity and authenticity management, and preventive and proactive self-care. These findings highlight the multifaceted ways Gen Z influencers engage in self-care and reflect a complex interplay between digital life, personal well-being, and public identity.

A central finding was the prominence of digital boundary-setting as a critical coping mechanism. Participants used time management techniques, such as content batching and scheduled screen breaks, to prevent digital fatigue. This aligns with findings that Gen Z exhibits increasing awareness of the need to balance online and offline engagement, especially in contexts of prolonged screen time and algorithmic demands (1, 23). Practices like curating digital feeds and muting toxic content reflect a strategic approach to controlling digital exposure and emotional input, reinforcing the idea that Gen Z individuals are not passive users but active managers of their online environments (8, 9). These behaviors are consistent with trends identified in broader Gen Z digital behavior studies, where filtering information is used to reduce stress and protect mental health (2, 7).

The second theme—emotional self-regulation strategies—demonstrated the psychological burden of online criticism and the need for continuous emotional labor. Many participants spoke of coping with negative feedback through emotional distancing, humor, and support networks. These findings mirror those of Ghosh et al., who emphasized the mediating role of emotional responses in shaping Gen Z consumers' online behavior (5). The use of peer networks and influencer group chats as emotional buffers supports prior

work suggesting that Gen Z is highly peer-oriented and often turns to digital communities for emotional support (3, 13). Additionally, mindfulness practices, such as journaling and meditation, reflect a cultural shift in how mental health is perceived and managed, particularly among young digital natives who are more open to non-clinical coping strategies (10, 23).

Of particular note was how participants engaged in mental health disclosure—sharing experiences of anxiety, burnout, and depression as part of their content strategy. While these disclosures were often strategic, they also served therapeutic and communal functions. This supports the idea that Gen Z influencers are reframing mental health narratives, contributing to the destigmatization of psychological struggles through vulnerability and authenticity (11, 15). As noted by Trang et al., Gen Z influencers often resist perfectionism by intentionally presenting “imperfect” or unfiltered content, which fosters relatability and trust among their audiences (3). Thus, self-disclosure becomes both a coping mechanism and a tool for digital intimacy, aligning with trends in digital authenticity among youth influencers (12).

The third theme—identity and authenticity management—illustrated the ongoing negotiation between personal values and public performance. Participants expressed difficulty separating their offline and online selves, often reporting a dual identity: one curated for public consumption and another kept private. These findings resonate with studies on digital branding and identity tensions among Gen Z, where managing personal versus professional personas becomes emotionally taxing (2, 4). The pressure to appear authentic, while simultaneously optimizing for engagement, reflects a broader cultural paradox: authenticity is both commodified and surveilled (3). Several influencers described coping with impostor syndrome and validation-seeking behaviors, consistent with findings that self-esteem in Gen Z is increasingly shaped by digital feedback loops and perceived audience approval (6, 21).

Interestingly, many participants viewed creative expression as a form of self-care, such as vlogging or content creation as a therapeutic outlet. This reflects a positive reframing of digital labor, where influencers harness their creative agency to process emotions and regain control over their narrative. Previous research has found similar patterns in Gen Z populations, where self-expression and creative autonomy are central to well-being (10, 22). These findings also resonate with the behavioral tendency among Gen Z to seek alignment between personal growth and digital output, challenging traditional dichotomies between work and leisure (14, 18).

The final theme—preventive and proactive self-care—emphasized the importance of structured routines, physical wellness, and mental health literacy. Influencers described engaging in activities such as morning routines, therapy, digital learning, and content planning as protective factors against burnout. These behaviors align with emerging evidence that Gen Z is increasingly proactive in managing mental health, often using technology itself as a support tool (17, 24). For example, digital education on mental health, such as following psychology-themed accounts or attending online seminars, was reported as both informative and empowering. This supports prior findings that Gen Z values autonomy in health-related decision-making and often turns to decentralized sources of information to build self-efficacy (9, 19).

A recurring theme across all categories was the strategic use of social media itself as a tool for mental health management, despite being a primary source of stress. This dual function reinforces the need for more nuanced understandings of social media—not merely as a risk factor but also as a site for resilience-building, emotional expression, and community formation (12, 23). While influencers acknowledged the psychological

costs of constant engagement, they also highlighted its therapeutic potential when used with intention and boundaries. This finding complicates binary narratives of social media as either wholly beneficial or harmful, instead pointing to the importance of user agency and context (14, 25).

Taken together, the findings suggest that self-care among Gen Z influencers is a dynamic, multilayered process involving digital boundary negotiation, emotional resilience, identity performance, and proactive wellness behaviors. These practices are shaped not only by platform affordances and audience expectations but also by cultural norms, economic conditions, and individual agency. This study contributes to the growing literature on Gen Z mental health by centering the voices of influencers as active agents in their wellness journeys—individuals who are not only impacted by digital culture but also shaping it through their self-care narratives and practices.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The sample was limited to 20 participants from Tehran, which may constrain the generalizability of findings to other cultural or geographic contexts. Additionally, participants were all self-identified influencers, which may introduce selection bias, as those more reflective or articulate about mental health may have been more likely to participate. The reliance on self-reported data through interviews may also lead to social desirability bias, especially given the public-facing nature of participants' roles. Finally, while the use of NVivo strengthened the analysis, interpretive subjectivity remains inherent in qualitative research.

Future studies could expand this inquiry by incorporating comparative cross-cultural samples, exploring how self-care strategies differ across regions or platform types. Quantitative methods could also be employed to measure the relationship between specific self-care behaviors and mental health outcomes among influencers. Longitudinal designs may offer insights into how these strategies evolve over time, especially in response to algorithmic changes or life transitions such as aging out of influencer status. Furthermore, future research should investigate the role of intersectional identities—such as gender, socioeconomic status, or religion—in shaping self-care access and practices in influencer contexts.

The insights from this study suggest that social media platforms, educational institutions, and mental health professionals should collaborate to develop targeted interventions that support influencers' well-being. Platform designers could integrate mental health resources directly into user interfaces, while influencer management agencies might consider offering psychological support as part of their services. Educators and parents can play a role in fostering digital literacy and emotional intelligence from an early age, helping future generations navigate the mental health challenges of online life with greater resilience. Moreover, influencers themselves can be empowered through workshops or peer support groups that validate their experiences and offer tools for sustainable digital engagement.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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