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## DIGITAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION

# Personal Branding Construction on Gen Z Instagram: Differences in Self-Presentation on Gen Z's First and Second Accounts

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#### **Abstract**

This study examines the construction of personal branding on Instagram among Gen Z by comparing self-presentation on primary and secondary accounts. Using Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgy theory as the main framework, this study highlights how Gen Z conducts impression management through digital media, where Instagram functions as a "stage" where they present various versions of themselves. Core concepts used include impression management, front-stage-back-stage dynamics, and self-disclosure. This study does not establish formal hypotheses, but tentatively expects differences in self-presentation strategies between the two types of accounts. The method used is a descriptive qualitative approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with selected informants using a purposive sampling technique based on certain criteria: Gen Z individuals aged 18–22 who actively use both types of Instagram accounts. The main focus of this study was to observe patterns of selfexpression and image management on each account. To ensure the validity of the data, source triangulation techniques were used. The results show that primary accounts are used as a front stage to display a curated and socially accepted self-image, such as achievements or aesthetic content. In contrast, the second account serves as a more authentic, expressive, and emotional backstage, aimed at a closer social circle. This finding supports Goffman's theory and aligns with previous research. In conclusion, Instagram allows Gen Z to strategically construct and display multiple identities. This study contributes to communication studies by demonstrating the role of social media in shaping personal branding in the digital age.

Keywords: Gen Z; Personal Branding; First Account; Second Account; Self-Presentation.

### Introduction

Amidst globalization and rapid advances in science and technology, information can now spread rapidly, and access to telecommunications and transportation services has become increasingly easy. This situation has directly and indirectly impacted society in various ways, both positive and negative. These impacts are not limited to specific groups but have affected all levels of society, including adolescents (Afandi 2020).

The definition of social media has changed with the development of social media, although its core principles remain the same. Generally, social media and social networks are platforms and

technologies that enable collaborative, interactive content creation and the exchange of information among users.

The increasing use of social media has led some users to project an idealized image on social media. Gen Z tends to prioritize a modern and contemporary image. This has given rise to a phenomenon where social media has become a space for individuals to develop and project a specific self-image, hoping to gain recognition from others. In this process, self-image is often created, both consciously and unconsciously (Septiharyana 2023).

Social change is an integral part of societal development, and social media has become a major factor in shaping this change. One of the most popular social media platforms today is Instagram. Instagram has created a unique environment where users can share their photos, videos, and stories with the world (Shidiqie, Akbar, and Faristiana 2023). Currently, social media is quite facilitating someone in building a personal brand, especially Instagram (Fajriati 2020).

Furthermore, Instagram is a social media platform frequently used to gain validation from its users. The like and comment features on Instagram play a crucial role. In this regard, increasing interaction between users is crucial. Without the like feature, we wouldn't be able to determine how much our uploaded photos are liked by others. These features also create a virtual communication space that allows for interaction between users. However, often more people appreciate our posts than we see in person. This can also encourage a person to remain positive, consistent, and resolute in responding to the various responses they receive (Situmorang and Hayati 2023).

Instagram's impact on teenagers' lifestyles can be seen in the numerous photos and videos uploaded that follow popular trends. Teenagers generally have a tendency to imitate and exhibit a high level of curiosity about things they find interesting. This occurs because at that age, their thought patterns and behaviors are still unstable. Many of them imitate lifestyles they find attractive without considering the pros and cons. An example of this is their dress code, which often does not conform to prevailing norms or dress codes (Agianto, Setiawati, and Firmansyah 2020).

However, most social media users don't yet understand this concept and haven't yet fully embraced it. Teenagers are inherently capable of understanding reality, including recognizing the boundaries between what they can and cannot do. In everyday life, their behavior typically adapts to the conditions and social environment around them. However, when they're on Instagram, they feel they have the freedom to construct a new identity distinct from their real-world selves (Shidiqie et al. 2023).

In social psychology, self-presentation refers to a person's efforts to shape others' perceptions of them, while simultaneously shaping their own perspectives on themselves. Individuals typically project different self-images depending on the social situations they encounter. Although self-presentation is a part of everyone's social life, its application can vary significantly across individuals. In general, individuals tend to be more aware of how they want to be perceived than how others perceive them. Some people prefer a strategic self-presentation approach to constructing a specific impression, while others tend to choose self-verification, which involves presenting themselves as they truly are. Links this difference to the concept of self-monitoring, which is the tendency of individuals to adjust their behavior to conform to existing social norms and expectations.

Therefore, currently, many teenagers have not just one Instagram account, but two at once. These two accounts are usually known as the first account and the second account. The primary account (first account) is generally used to build self-image and demonstrate existence before the public or other users at large. Meanwhile, the second account is more private and used to share daily activities that can only be accessed by a circle of friends who are considered close or trusted (Safitri and Harianto 2023). When viewed by gender, women often feel greater pressure to project a perfect and attractive image on social media. Women pay more attention to aspects of physical appearance, lifestyle, and achievements that are considered ideal in the public eye (Eka Yan Fitri and Chairoel 2019).

According to Wattimena, Ramadhani, and Marsetio (2022), on the primary account, impression management is carried out by selectively curating content and maintaining an attractive appearance that aligns with the desired image, as well as by using polite language. This primary account also serves as their front stage because a large audience can watch them. Conversely, secondary accounts are typically followed only by select individuals who are already known or trusted, so there is no formal impression management requirement.

Second account has distinct characteristics from the first account. The difference between the first and second accounts lies in the followers, where in the second account, only those closest to the owner

are allowed to follow. In the second account, the account is private or restricted. Furthermore, through the second account, informants not only share daily activities or general information, but also express various emotions such as sadness, disappointment, and even happy moments, which they then pour into posts on Instagram (Prihantoro, Damintana, and Ohorella 2020).

Second account in Indonesian: A second account is an alternative space for users to express themselves more freely without any specific restrictions. This phenomenon aligns with Erving Goffman's dramaturgy theory, in which individuals present different sides of themselves depending on the social context they encounter. This theory views society as a stage, and each individual as an actor presenting themselves.

In 1959, Erving Goffman introduced the theory of dramaturgy, which depicts human social life as a theatrical performance. In this view, social interaction is likened to a stage where individuals play roles according to a predetermined storyline, much like actors in a play or film. This means that each individual displays certain behaviors in front of others, much like an actor performing before an audience in a play. Erving Goffman argued that in every social interaction, individuals tend to form and project a certain self-image that they hope will be accepted or approved by others. Erving Goffman called this effort impression management, which is the effort made by actors to cultivate a certain impression or image in certain situations to achieve certain goals.

In this discussion, Instagram is described as a "stage" where Gen Z plays their roles. Using the concept of dramaturgy, the author highlights how Instagram has become a medium where Gen Z presents various versions of themselves, as if they were acting on stage. Instagram is used to manage and control the self-image presented to the audience, both on their first and second accounts. The division between front stage and back stage occurs not only in real life or online worlds like Instagram, but can also be found in various accounts belonging to the same user. The difference between first and second accounts differs in the stage of interaction where Indonesian children, the majority of them are more insecure about expressing themselves on their first account, so many use a second account (Salma M, Noor Rakhmad, and Bayu Widagdo 2024).

The backstage process undertaken by actors involves self-disclosure. Self-disclosure is an individual's ability to react and respond to feelings, attitudes, behaviors, desires, or information they possess regarding the situation they are facing, for the purpose of greater intimacy (Amelia 2024).

Furthermore, research conducted by Kamilah and Lestari (2020) examined how Instagram users manage their privacy on the social media platform. The results showed that the respondents, members of Gen Z, aged 18 to 22, used both Instagram accounts differently. The information they shared on the two accounts differed. The first account was used to showcase their best self-image, while the second account was used to show their true self-expression.

This phenomenon makes Instagram a viable medium for dramaturgy. Informants report that Instagram is used to project a positive image or self-image within society. This is evident when sharing posts on Instagram. Users tend to edit and select photos with the appearance and manner they find most appealing. The goal is to project a positive image in the eyes of the public who access their social media accounts. With this background, researchers will explore how Gen Z builds personal branding through Instagram, specifically by comparing self-presentation on first and second accounts among Gen Z.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The dramaturgy theory serves as the primary theoretical foundation for understanding how Gen Z constructs their self-image on social media, particularly Instagram. According to Goffman, social life is like a theatrical stage, where individuals act as actors presenting a particular version of themselves to the audience with the aim of creating a desired impression. Goffman divides this social world into two main spaces: the front stage and the back stage. The front stage is the area where individuals present themselves according to public norms and expectations, while the back stage is a space where individuals are free from social pressure and can demonstrate their authenticity. In the context of social media, this concept is highly relevant because platforms like Instagram allow users to showcase two sides of themselves: one curated and one more authentic. The first account, or primary account, represents the front stage—where Gen Z builds their personal brand with visual aesthetics, controlled captions, and an idealized self-image. Conversely, the second account represents the back stage, where they express a more honest, spontaneous, and even emotional side, as a form of outlet and self-expression that cannot be shown in the public sphere.

The phenomenon of using two accounts demonstrates strategic impression management in shaping self-presentation according to the characteristics of each account's audience. Research by Kamilah and Lestari (2020) revealed that Gen Z tends to separate content intended for the wider public (first account) from more personal and limited content (second account). This suggests that personal branding is not simply about a positive image on a single account, but rather a complex and dynamic construction, dependent on the user's social and psychological context. In other words, Instagram is not just a digital social space but also an actual stage where Gen Z forms, manages, and displays their identity. Therefore, this study aims to understand how the construction of personal branding is formed in Gen Z's self-presentation practices through the distinction between first and second accounts, based on Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective.

## **Materials and Methodology**

This study uses a qualitative method with a fe study approach. This approach was chosen because it aims to deeply understand the experiences and perceptions of individuals, in this case Gen Z, regarding the construction of personal branding on Instagram. Phenomenology helps reveal how Gen Z interprets and practices self-presentation in the two types of Instagram accounts they manage, namely the first account (main account) and the second account (alternative account or personal account). Sumilih et al. (2025) stated that qualitative methods allow researchers to obtain rich, in-depth, and detailed data from informants, so they can explore the nuances of differences in self-presentation that cannot be measured only with quantitative data.

This study used a purposive sampling technique, selecting informants based on specific criteria that were relevant and aligned with the research focus. The informant criteria in this study included:

- 1.Gen Z age (aged 18 22 years).
- 2. Actively use Instagram with at least two accounts, namely the first account and the second account.
  - 3. Willing and able to openly share their personal branding experiences and strategies.
  - 4. Have quite significant posting and interaction activity on both accounts.

The number of sources selected was 4 people, who were considered representative to provide indepth and varied data related to the phenomenon being studied.

This study involved four informants who all came from Generation Z (Gen Z), namely individuals born in different years. The four informants were selected purposively because they met the predetermined inclusion criteria, namely actively using Instagram social media and having two accounts that were used differently: the first account as a personal branding medium, and the second account as a more private and personal space for self-expression.

All the informants involved were in the age range of 18 to 22 years, indicating that they are included in the early Gen Z category, a generation that grew up alongside the development of digital technology. In terms of gender, all informants were female. This indirectly reflects the tendency of female groups within Gen Z who are more open in managing digital identities and active in shaping their self-image on social media. Gen Z Behavior on Social Media. B. Educational and Work Background

The four informants have varied educational and professional backgrounds, ranging from students to individuals who have worked professionally as freelancers and private employees. This diversity enriches the perspective on how experience, social status, and life position influence personal branding strategies and the use of two separate Instagram accounts.

In general, informants in this study can be classified into several theories, this is based on the category of active Instagram users, carrying out digital personal branding, representative subjects of Gen Z, the following is a complete list of informant categories:

- 1. Active Instagram users who can consciously differentiate between the functions of public accounts (first account) and private accounts (second account)
- 2. Personal branding a primary digital account, which means that an individual uses the primary account for personal branding, which tends to be neat, ideal, and professional. A secondary account for self-expression, which tends to be more authentic.
- 3.Representative subjects from Gen Z interpret social media as a space to organize personal identity narratives while maintaining social image boundaries in public spaces.

Informants were selected based on several inclusion criteria, and several important things in the informant's limitations, namely:

- 1. Aged 18-22 years and classified as Gen Z.
- 2.Own and manage two active Instagram accounts.
- 3. Consciously use the first account for personal branding and the second account for personal expression.

In addition, the exclusion criteria in this study play a very important role in seeing how to cover:

- 1. Individuals who only have one active Instagram account.
- 2. Nohave a special awareness or reason for managing two Instagram accounts.
- 3. Individuals who do not belong to Gen Z.

Based on the results of the presentation of some information and the general description above regarding the general description of informants, the following is table 4.1 of informant data.

**Table 1 Informant Data** 

No.	Informant Code	Age (Years)	Work
1.	A1	21	Freelance
2.	A2	18	Students
3.	A3	21	Student
4.	A4	22	Private sector employee

Source: Processed by Researchers 2025

Data collection in this study was conducted using a descriptive qualitative method, with the primary technique being in-depth interviews. Interviews were chosen as the primary technique because they align with the phenomenological approach used in this study, namely to explore the subjective meaning of informants' experiences in building personal branding on Instagram. The interviews were conducted in a non-structured and semi-open manner, with pre-formulated question guides but still allowing flexible space for exploration of answers. The number of informants in this study was four people, all of whom were women from Generation Z with an age range of 18–22 years. All informants had two active Instagram accounts (a first account and a second account) and met other inclusion criteria, such as active social media use and awareness of building self-image online.

The data collection process was conducted directly (face-to-face) at a location mutually agreed upon by the researcher and informant. The following is a chronology of data collection activities:

**Table 2 Research Informant Interview Schedule and Location** 

Code	Date		Location
Informant	Interview	Time	Interview
A1	May 19, 2025	3:00 PM WIB	Coffee Bento-
	Way 19, 2023	3.00 TW WIB	Cimahi
	May 19, 2025	2:00 PM WIB	Coffee Bento-
A2			Cimahi

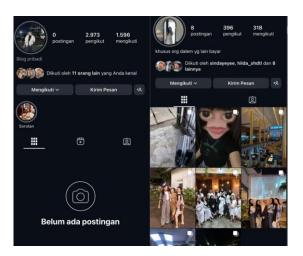
A3	May 19, 2025	4:00 PM WIB	Coffee Bento-
			Cilitatii
			Coffee Bento-
A4	May 19, 2025	10.00 WIB	
	-		Cimahi

Source: Data Processed by Researchers 2025

During the interviews, the researcher used an audio recorder to document the entire conversation. Furthermore, the researcher took manual field notes to capture non-verbal expressions, the interview atmosphere, and initial reflections on the information provided by the informant. These notes were then used to strengthen understanding during the data transcription and analysis process. The interview data was then transcribed verbatim, meaning they were rewritten word for word according to the original recording. The transcription was performed by the researcher to maintain the integrity of the meaning and accuracy of the information. All transcripts were arranged in a question-and-answer format between the researcher and the informant, as can be seen in the research appendix. After the transcription process was completed, the content was verified by replaying the interview recording while checking the transcript content. This step was carried out to ensure that no parts were missed or misinterpreted. Some parts that were deemed ambiguous or unclear were clarified through light follow-up (direct confirmation with the informant via message), especially if there were terms that could be interpreted in multiple ways.

## **Results and Discussion**

The results of the study indicate that Gen Z has a high awareness in forming self-image on social media, especially through the strategy of using two Instagram accounts that have different functions. The first account is used as a space to build a more structured and curated personal branding, while the second account is used as a personal space to express oneself more freely. This finding was obtained from the results of interviews with four informants who represent the characteristics of active Instagram users among Gen Z. Most informants admitted that their first account was designed to display a positive, professional, and aesthetic self-image. Informant A1 stated that he used his main account to show who he was professionally: "I want to maintain a professional self-image on the first account, so that people can see me as a competent person in my field." (A1). This was reinforced by A4 who stated that the main account was used to look good in front of others: "Because it looks free on the second account and looks good on the first account." (A4). From this, it appears that the use of the first account is closely related to the desire to build a positive and socially acceptable public impression. Meanwhile, the second account became a personal medium, where the informant felt freer to show his authentic side without the pressure of image. A2 revealed that he used the second account as a more honest space and less full of social demands: "I feel like on the first account it's like I'm the public, while on the second account it's the real me, without censorship." (A2). Even A3 explicitly mentioned that the second account is a safe place to share emotionally without having to think about public perception: "The second account is my safe place." (A3).



**Figure 1.**Difference between First Account and Second Account Source: Instagram @lidaputrii\_ and @minjjxan

Beyond functionality, the findings also suggest that the differences between the two accounts lie in communication style and aesthetic considerations. The content on the first account tends to be carefully curated, paying attention to color tone, feed layout, and the use of polite captions. As A2 expressed it: "I want it to look clean, organized, and aesthetic... I can rewrite captions until I feel like, 'Okay, this is so me, but it's still polite." (A2). In contrast, the second account pays less attention to aesthetics and focuses more on honesty in expression. A1 confirmed this by stating: "On the second account, I can be more relaxed and show a different side of myself." (A1). Furthermore, the findings reveal that the informants understand who their audience is on each account, and this becomes the primary basis for shaping their content and communication style. A3 explained that the first account is usually followed by people with formal interests, such as work colleagues or acquaintances who are not close personally, while the second account is only accessed by close friends: "The first account has more formal people or connections... the second account is more for close friends." (A3).

Thus, it can be concluded that Gen Z actively employs self-management strategies through social media. They recognize the importance of differentiating public and private spaces in building a digital identity. The choice of two accounts is not simply a technical separation, but a reflection of the need to manage impressions, maintain reputations, and maintain a safe space for emotional expression. These findings also demonstrate that personal branding is shaped not only through the content they create but also through conscious and systematic identity management strategies when engaging with diverse audiences.

## **Data Analysis Results**

- a. Personal Branding Builder on Instagram (First account)
- b. Reasons for Sharing Instagram Accounts (First account & Second account)
- c. Gen Z's Awareness of Personal Branding on Social Media
- d. Differences in Self-Image in Different Accounts
- e. Self-Image and Aesthetics on First Account

The results of this study indicate that Gen Z uses two Instagram accounts strategically to manage their social identity. The first account functions as a front stage, where they construct a professional, polished, and public-friendly image. Conversely, the second account serves as a backstage space, where they feel safe presenting their authentic selves, without the pressure to appear perfect. This finding aligns closely with Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory, which states that each individual acts as a social actor, presenting different versions of themselves depending on the social context and their audience. As informant A3 expressed: "The first account is just for image, the second account is more for close friends." (A3) This statement reinforces the separation of roles between the two Instagram accounts, with Gen Z displaying a consciously constructed persona on the public account and a candid

persona on the private account. This supports Goffman's view that individuals in modern society continually construct and adapt their appearance to social norms and expectations.

Furthermore, the findings of this study are also consistent with a previous study by Marwick & Boyd (2011) which stated that social media users, especially teenagers and young adults, engage in "audience management" and develop "context collapse" strategies—dealing with diverse audiences by differentiating content based on context. This is reinforced by A2's quote, which states: "Because the audience is different. On the first account there could be lecturers, recruiters, friends' parents... So I want to appear as good as possible." (A2) Thus, personal branding carried out by Gen Z is not just self-reflection, but also a form of digital social control. They realize that digital identity is now closely related to professional reputation and social networks. A1 emphasized that a professional image is very important to build a good impression: "I want to maintain a professional image on my first account so that people can see me as competent in my field." (A1)

On the other hand, a second account provides a safe space to release emotions, feelings, and thoughts that they cannot express on their main account. A4 expressed this sense of security with the sentence: "On the second account, it's like someone is accompanying you, so you're freer. Because you already know everyone." (A4) This finding also supports the findings of Toma & Hancock (2010) who stated that social media is not only a medium of expression, but also a tool for managing social relationships based on audience selectivity.

#### **Conclusions**

This study concludes that Gen Z consciously implements personal branding strategies on social media, particularly through the use of two Instagram accounts with distinct functions. The first account is used as a public space to build a professional and structured image, while the second account is utilized as a private space to express themselves honestly and emotionally. These findings indicate that Gen Z practices digital identity management by considering different audiences and social contexts, in line with Erving Goffman's dramaturgy theory. This strategy not only reflects an awareness of self-image formation but also indicates a strong sense of control over self-representation in the digital space.

The implications of these findings are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, this study broadens understanding of Gen Z's digital communication behavior in the context of online self-presentation and impression management. Practically, these findings provide important insights for communication practitioners, educators, and policymakers to develop digital literacy that is not only technological but also reflective and ethical. This study also demonstrates that social media has become a complex space, where young users not only interact but also construct social identities strategically and adaptively.

While the research findings provide in-depth insights, several limitations warrant consideration. The limited and homogenous number of informants (all female) may impact the diversity of perspectives. Furthermore, the data collected was reflective in nature, lacking direct observation of the content of the accounts discussed. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve informants with more diverse backgrounds and combine interview methods with digital observation or content analysis. Areas requiring further exploration include the relationship between personal branding and mental health, the dynamics of digital identity across platforms, and the influence of social media algorithms on self-representation strategies, all of which could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the digital identities of the younger generation.

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