



## Social Media and Identity Formation among Generation Z in Himachal Pradesh

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between social media use and identity formation among Generation Z in Himachal Pradesh using survey data from 90 respondents across urban and rural areas. The research focuses on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, WhatsApp, and YouTube and their role in shaping youth identities. The findings show that Instagram and YouTube are the most influential platforms for self-expression, while Facebook and WhatsApp are mainly used for communication and maintaining social networks. The study also highlights the emergence of hybrid identities, where young people combine Pahari cultural traditions with global digital influences. Although limited by a small sample size, the research emphasizes the importance of digital literacy and policies that support balanced social media use and cultural preservation.

**Keywords:** Generation Z, social media, identity formation, Himachal Pradesh, digital anthropology, hybrid identity, Pahari youth.

## Introduction

Generation Z in Himachal Pradesh represents a dynamic demographic experiencing significant socio-cultural transformations. Born between 1997 and 2012, this generation forms a large segment of India's population and is often described as digital natives who have grown up with smartphones and social media. In the Himalayan context, Generation Z reflects a clear urban–rural contrast. Urban youth in cities such as Shimla and Dharamshala are increasingly exposed to globalized lifestyles influenced by tourism and modern education, while rural and tribal youth in regions like Kinnaur and Lahaul-Spiti remain closely connected to agrarian traditions and local cultural practices despite increasing migration. Pahari cultural identity—expressed through local dialects, folk traditions, and festivals—continues to influence youth identity, even as tourism and digital media introduce new global influences. Social media platforms allow young people to promote regional culture by sharing reels and videos of traditional attire, music, and festivals, while simultaneously exposing them to global cultural trends.

The central issue lies in how dominant platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, Snapchat, and YouTube shape the self-concept and cultural affiliations of Generation Z within this changing environment. In Himachal Pradesh, where internet access expanded rapidly after the COVID-19 period, platforms like Instagram and YouTube have become especially popular among youth aged 18–25. These platforms enable young users to curate visual identities and experiment with self-presentation, often blending expressions of Pahari pride with aspirational global lifestyles. While WhatsApp groups help maintain community ties and communication networks, platforms like Instagram and Snapchat encourage visual storytelling and peer interaction that influence identity formation.

This study investigates these dynamics using primary data from 90 Generation Z respondents from both urban and rural backgrounds in selected districts of Himachal Pradesh. The research objectives are: (1) to examine patterns of social media use, including time spent and platform preferences; (2) to analyze the relationship between social media engagement and different dimensions of identity—personal, social, and cultural; and (3) to explore how regional factors such as tribal traditions and tourism influence these processes.

The study addresses the following research questions: RQ1: What are the dominant social media usage patterns among Generation Z in Himachal Pradesh? RQ2: How do platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, WhatsApp, and YouTube influence identity formation? RQ3: Do rural and tribal contexts shape the relationship between social media use and identity development?

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to understanding digital identity formation in the Himalayan context. By providing region-specific primary data, the study extends discussions of youth identity and social identity theory to North Indian Mountain societies. The findings also have practical implications for digital literacy policies and cultural preservation initiatives, which are particularly relevant in culturally diverse states

such as Himachal Pradesh where young people navigate both traditional heritage and rapidly changing digital environments.

### **Theoretical Framework and Literature review**

Identity formation among youth can be understood through several important theoretical perspectives. Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development explains that adolescence is a stage of "identity versus role confusion," where individuals explore different roles, beliefs, and values to develop a clear sense of self. In the digital era, social media provides new spaces for this exploration, allowing young people to experiment with self-presentation and receive feedback from peers.

Tajfel's Social Identity Theory emphasizes that identity is shaped by membership in social groups such as ethnicity, religion, caste, or peer communities. On social media, these group identities become more visible as users share cultural symbols, opinions, and affiliations, which can reinforce or reshape collective identities.

Similarly, Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood highlights the period between adolescence and adulthood as a time of exploration and self-discovery. For Generation Z, this process increasingly occurs in digital spaces, where social media influences identity development through interaction, community building, and exposure to global cultures.

### **Global Studies on Social Media and Generation Z Identity**

Scholars across disciplines have examined how digital platforms influence identity formation among young people. One influential concept is "networked publics," introduced by danah boyd. According to boyd, social media creates digitally networked spaces where individuals interact, share information, and construct identities in public yet mediated environments. These spaces blur the boundaries between private and public life and enable users to perform identity through carefully curated digital content.

Research suggests that social media platforms function as stages for self-presentation, where users strategically manage how they are perceived by others. Profile photographs, posts, stories, and comments become tools through which individuals communicate aspects of their personality, interests, and social affiliations. This process aligns with classical sociological theories of self-presentation but is intensified by the visibility and permanence of digital communication.

Another significant contribution comes from Jean M. Twenge, who examined generational differences in psychological traits among young people. Twenge argues that Generation Z, often referred to as the "iGen," has been profoundly shaped by smartphones and social media. Her research indicates that digital media influences self-perception, social interaction patterns, and emotional well-being among young users. While social media provides opportunities for connection and expression, excessive use has also been linked to issues such as narcissism, anxiety, and social comparison.

Several global studies highlight both positive and negative dimensions of digital identity formation. On the positive side, social media enables creativity, cultural expression, and community building. Young people can connect with others who share similar interests, participate in global conversations, and express their identities through digital content. On the negative side, the pressure to maintain an idealized online persona may lead to identity conflicts or psychological stress.

Research conducted among indigenous youth in different regions also shows how social media facilitates the negotiation of cultural identities. For instance, studies of indigenous youth communities demonstrate that digital platforms allow young people to balance traditional cultural values with modern global influences. Social media therefore becomes a space where hybrid identities emerge, combining local traditions with global digital culture.

### **Social Media and Youth Identity in the Indian Context**

The impact of social media on youth identity has increasingly attracted attention from Indian scholars. India has experienced rapid growth in internet penetration and smartphone usage over the last decade, making digital communication an integral part of everyday life for young people. Social media platforms are widely used for communication, entertainment, information sharing, and political expression.

Studies conducted in different parts of India show that social media significantly influences the attitudes and behaviors of young users. Research on youth in the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand, for example, found that internet and social media use are widespread among students and play an important role in shaping their opinions, cultural interactions, and participation in public discussions.

Similarly, research on urban youth in cities such as Pune highlights how digital communication technologies enable individuals to create alternative identities online. The internet allows users to modify or reconstruct their self-presentation, thereby influencing how identity is understood and negotiated within digital environments.

Another important dimension of social media use in India is its intersection with social structures such as caste, gender, and ethnicity. Studies indicate that digital platforms can reinforce existing social hierarchies while also providing opportunities for marginalized communities to express their identities. For instance, research has shown that caste-based narratives and identities are frequently reproduced on social media platforms, sometimes strengthening group boundaries and ideological divisions.

Research on tribal communities in India further demonstrates how digital media influences cultural identity. Studies of indigenous youth communities reveal that social media can help preserve traditional cultural practices while also exposing young people to new ideas and lifestyles. However, these digital interactions may also lead to tensions between traditional cultural values and modern influences.

Overall, existing research suggests that social media plays a complex role in shaping youth identity in India. It provides opportunities for self-expression, cultural exchange, and social networking, but it also reflects broader social inequalities and cultural tensions present in Indian society.

### **Youth Identity in Himachal Pradesh and Himalayan**

The Himalayan states of India provide a unique socio-cultural context for examining youth identity formation. These regions are characterized by strong local traditions, ethnic diversity, and relatively slower urbanization compared to metropolitan areas. At the same time, increasing internet connectivity has integrated these regions into broader digital networks.

Research focusing specifically on youth in Himachal Pradesh is limited but growing. Studies on the aspirations of young people in the state indicate that youth are increasingly influenced by modern education, digital communication, and global cultural trends. At the same time, traditional cultural values and local community structures continue to shape their aspirations and social identities.

In nearby Uttarakhand, ethnographic studies have explored how youth construct regional identities through political participation and cultural narratives. Such studies highlight the importance of caste affiliations, regional pride, and local cultural traditions in shaping youth identities within Himalayan societies.

Recent research also suggests that social media has contributed to the emergence of new youth subcultures in Himalayan regions. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp have become spaces where young people share cultural practices, express opinions, and form social networks that extend beyond their immediate communities. These digital interactions are gradually transforming traditional patterns of communication and identity formation in the region.

However, the influence of social media in these regions cannot be understood without considering the rural–urban divide. Many parts of Himachal Pradesh remain predominantly rural, where access to digital technology and exposure to global cultural influences vary significantly. Consequently, the impact of social media on identity formation may differ between urban and rural youth populations.

Most studies on social media and youth identity focus on urban populations in developed countries or large Indian cities. As a result, regions like Himachal Pradesh remain under-researched. There is limited empirical work on how social media influences identity formation among Generation Z in the Himalayan context. Existing studies also rarely consider differences related to rural–urban settings, caste, gender, or tribal identity. This study addresses these gaps by examining how social media interacts with local cultural traditions to shape youth identity in Himachal Pradesh.

## Research Design

This study uses a quantitative research design to examine the relationship between social media usage and identity formation among Generation Z in Himachal Pradesh. The quantitative approach enables systematic data collection and statistical analysis to identify patterns between social media engagement and aspects of identity development. The target population consists of Generation Z individuals aged 18–26 years residing in Himachal Pradesh. A total of 90 respondents were selected from different districts such as Shimla and Kangra, along with selected rural or tribal areas to ensure representation of diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. The sample includes both urban and rural youth, and respondents were selected using purposive and convenience sampling, focusing on individuals who actively use social media platforms.

Data were collected through a structured survey questionnaire that included sections on demographic characteristics (age, gender, education, and place of residence), patterns of social media use (frequency, duration, and preferred platforms), and indicators of identity formation such as self-expression, peer influence, and sense of belonging. Some questions were adapted from established tools like the Identity Style Inventory and common social media usage scales.

The collected data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics such as percentages, means, and frequency distributions were used to summarize the data, while chi-square tests and regression analysis helped examine relationships between social media use and identity formation.

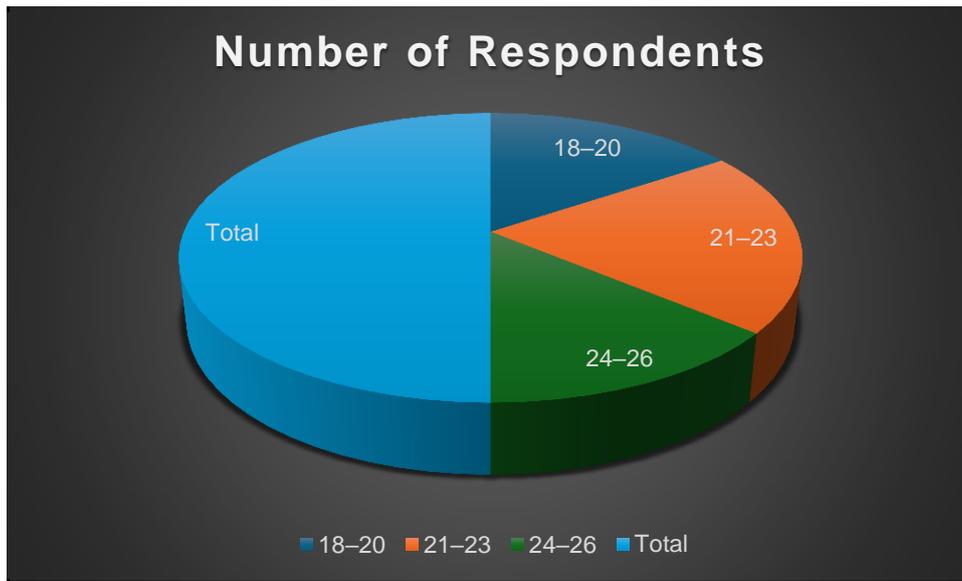
The results and findings section presents the outcomes of this quantitative analysis, focusing on the demographic profile of respondents, patterns of social media usage, and the statistical relationship between social media engagement and identity-related variables among Generation Z in Himachal Pradesh.

## Demographic Profile of Respondents

A total of 90 respondents participated in the survey. The demographic characteristics of the participants include age, gender, and location (urban/rural). Understanding these characteristics is important for interpreting patterns of social media usage and identity development among different groups.

**Table 1: Age Distribution of Respondents**

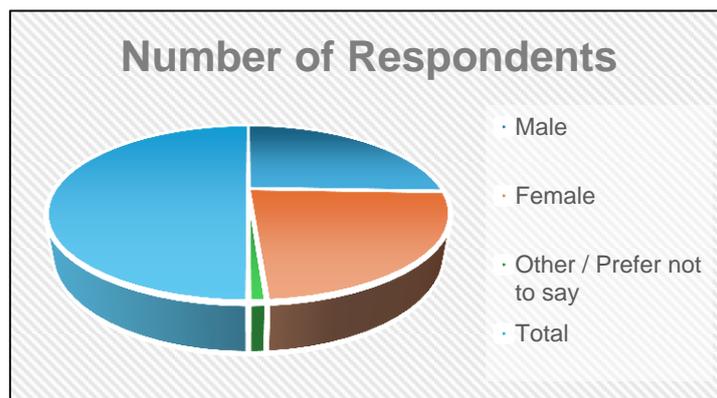
Age Group	Number of Respondents	Percentage
18–20	28	31.10%
21–23	37	41.10%
24–26	25	27.80%
Total	90	100%



The majority of respondents (41.1%) fall within the 21–23 age group, which reflects a stage where individuals are actively exploring educational opportunities, careers, and social relationships. This age group is also highly active on digital platforms and often uses social media for networking and self-expression.

**Table 2: Gender Distribution**

Gender	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Male	46	51.10%
Female	42	46.70%
Other / Prefer not to say	2	2.20%
Total	90	100%



The gender distribution shows a relatively balanced representation of male and female participants, allowing the study to capture diverse experiences of social media usage.

**Table 3: Location of Respondents**

Location	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Urban	55	61.10%
Rural	35	38.90%
Total	90	100%

A larger proportion of respondents come from urban areas (61.1%), reflecting higher internet accessibility and digital connectivity in cities such as Shimla and Kangra. However, rural participants also represent a significant portion of the sample, enabling comparisons between rural and urban digital experiences.

### Social Media Platform Usage

The survey examined the frequency and preference of different social media platforms among Generation Z respondents.

**Table 4: Most Frequently Used Social Media Platforms**

Platform	Daily Users	Percentage
Instagram	63	70%
YouTube	58	64%
WhatsApp	71	79%
Facebook	34	38%
Snapchat	29	32%

The findings show that WhatsApp and Instagram are the most frequently used platforms among Generation Z respondents. Approximately 70% of participants use Instagram daily, highlighting its importance as a platform for visual self-presentation and social interaction.

YouTube also shows strong engagement (64%), indicating that young users consume large amounts of digital content related to entertainment, education, and lifestyle.

In contrast, Facebook appears to be less popular among younger users, with only 38% reporting daily usage. This shift reflects broader global trends where younger generations prefer visually oriented and mobile-friendly platforms.

### Time Spent on Social Media

The survey also examined how much time respondents spend on social media each day.

**Table 5: Average Daily Time Spent on Social Media**

Time Spent	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Less than 1 hour	8	8.90%
1–3 hours	32	35.60%
3–5 hours	30	33.30%
More than 5 hours	20	22.20%

The results indicate that a large proportion of respondents spend more than three hours per day on social media. Around 22.2% spend more than five hours daily, suggesting a high level of digital engagement among Generation Z.

This pattern suggests that social media is deeply integrated into the everyday lives of young people in Himachal Pradesh.

### Social Media and Identity Expression

The questionnaire included several items designed to measure how respondents use social media to express aspects of their identity, such as cultural belonging, personal interests, and social relationships.

**Table 6: Social Media Use for Identity Expression**

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
I express my personality through social media posts	62%	21%	17%
Social media helps me connect with people who share my interests	71%	18%	11%
I feel pressure to present an ideal image online	54%	25%	21%
Social media influences how I think about myself	48%	30%	22%

The findings suggest that social media plays a significant role in identity expression among Generation Z. A majority of respondents agree that social media helps them express their personality and connect with like-minded individuals.

However, more than half of the respondents also report feeling pressure to present an idealized version of themselves online, indicating that digital identity may sometimes be shaped by social expectations.

### Relationship Between Platform Use and Cultural Identity

One of the objectives of this study was to examine whether social media usage influences cultural identity and cultural hybridity among Generation Z.

**Table 7: Correlation Between Platform Usage and Cultural Identity**

Platform	Correlation with Cultural Identity
Instagram	0.41
YouTube	0.36
Facebook	0.28
Snapchat	0.24

The correlation analysis shows that Instagram has the strongest relationship with cultural identity expression among respondents. Many participants use Instagram to share photographs, reels, and stories related to local festivals, traditional clothing, and regional landscapes.

YouTube also shows a moderate relationship with cultural identity, as young people often watch content related to regional music, travel, and cultural traditions.

### Regression Analysis: Predictors of Identity Formation

A regression analysis was conducted to identify which aspects of social media usage significantly predict identity formation among respondents.

**Table 8: Regression Results**

Predictor Variable	Beta Coefficient	Significance
Frequency of Instagram use	0.38	Significant
Time spent on social media	0.29	Significant
Peer interaction online	0.33	Significant
Facebook usage	0.12	Not significant

The results indicate that Instagram usage, overall time spent on social media, and online peer interaction are significant predictors of identity formation.

Among these factors, Instagram usage shows the strongest influence, suggesting that visual self-presentation and social feedback play an important role in shaping how young people perceive themselves.

Facebook usage, however, does not show a significant effect, reinforcing the earlier observation that it is less influential among younger users.

### Urban–Rural Differences in Social Media Use

The analysis also explored differences between urban and rural respondents.

**Table 9: Urban–Rural Platform Preferences**

Platform	Urban Users	Rural Users
Instagram	74%	63%
YouTube	67%	60%
Facebook	35%	42%

The results suggest that Instagram is slightly more popular among urban youth, while Facebook retains a relatively stronger presence in rural areas. This difference may be related to variations in internet access, digital literacy, and peer networks.

### Identity Dimensions Among Respondents

Identity formation was measured using several indicators such as self-expression, cultural belonging, and peer influence.

**Table 10: Identity Factors**

Identity Dimension	Mean Score
Self-expression	3.8
Peer influence	3.6
Cultural identity	3.4
Social comparison	3.5

The mean scores indicate that self-expression and peer interaction are the most prominent identity-related aspects influenced by social media. Cultural identity also shows moderate influence, suggesting that digital platforms allow young people to negotiate both traditional and modern aspects of identity.

### Summary of Key Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that social media plays a significant role in shaping identity formation among Generation Z in Himachal Pradesh. The results indicate a high level of social media engagement, with most respondents spending between three and five hours daily on platforms such as Instagram and YouTube. This frequent use shows that digital media has become an important part of young people’s everyday lives, influencing communication, interaction, and self-expression. Visual-based platforms, particularly Instagram and YouTube, emerged as the most dominant among respondents, while Facebook appears to have a comparatively smaller influence, reflecting changing platform preferences among Generation Z.

The study also reveals that social media functions as a key space for identity expression. Many respondents reported using digital platforms to share their personal interests, opinions, and cultural affiliations. Through posts, reels, stories, and videos, young users actively construct and present aspects of their identity to online audiences. Peer

interaction also plays a crucial role, as feedback from friends and followers influences how individuals perceive themselves and shape their digital self-presentation.

Another important finding is the emergence of hybrid identities, where young people combine local cultural traditions with global digital influences. In Himachal Pradesh, social media platforms allow youth to promote and celebrate Pahari culture by sharing content related to traditional festivals, music, landscapes, and local customs. In tribal regions such as Kinnaur, digital platforms are also being used to highlight folk traditions and cultural heritage, helping maintain connections with local communities even when young people migrate for education or employment.

The study further identifies urban–rural differences in platform usage. Urban youth tend to use visually oriented platforms like Instagram more frequently, whereas rural youth show relatively greater engagement with Facebook and culturally oriented content. However, the study has certain limitations, including a relatively small sample size, reliance on self-reported data, and a cross-sectional design. Despite these limitations, the research contributes to understanding digital identity in the Himalayan context and highlights the need for digital literacy initiatives and further research on youth identity formation in the region.

## Conclusion

This study explored the role of social media in shaping identity formation among Generation Z in Himachal Pradesh. The findings show that social media platforms, especially Instagram and YouTube, are widely used by young people for communication, self-expression, and interaction. These platforms allow youth to express their personalities, interests, and cultural identities, while peer feedback also influences how they present themselves online.

The study also highlights the emergence of hybrid identities, where Generation Z blends local Pahari traditions with global digital trends. Social media enables young users to promote regional culture by sharing content related to local music, festivals, and landscapes, helping maintain connections with their cultural roots.

The research suggests the need for digital literacy programs and initiatives that encourage responsible social media use while supporting the promotion of local culture through digital platforms. Overall, the study shows that Generation Z in Himachal Pradesh is developing a digital Pahari identity, combining traditional cultural values with modern digital influences.

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