

Digital Media and Career Imagination Among Gen Z Students: The Role of YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, Influencers, And Online Trends

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Abstract—The rapid growth of digital media has significantly transformed how young people perceive careers, success, employability, and professional identity. Gen Z students increasingly rely on social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, and other online spaces to explore career opportunities, acquire information, and construct aspirations regarding their future professions. Digital influencers, online entrepreneurship trends, freelancing culture, and algorithm-driven content recommendations have emerged as powerful forces shaping students' career imagination. This qualitative study explores how digital media platforms influence career perceptions and aspirations among Gen Z students.

Using an exploratory qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with undergraduate and postgraduate students to understand their experiences, motivations, and concerns regarding digital-media-driven career aspirations. Thematic analysis revealed major themes including digital aspiration, career comparison culture, attraction toward non-traditional careers, online professional identity formation, and anxiety regarding career success.

The findings suggest that digital media functions not only as a source of information but also as a symbolic environment where students negotiate identity, ambition, and future possibilities. While digital platforms create awareness regarding diverse career opportunities and entrepreneurial pathways, they also contribute to unrealistic expectations, social comparison, and career uncertainty. The study highlights the importance of digital literacy, career counselling, and critical engagement with online content in helping students make informed career decisions.

Index Terms—Digital Media, Career Imagination, Gen Z, Social Media Influencers, Career Choice, YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, Digital Culture.

I. INTRODUCTION

Career choice has traditionally been influenced by family expectations, educational background, peer networks, economic conditions, and societal values. However, the emergence of digital media has significantly altered how young people understand and imagine their future careers. In the contemporary digital age, social media platforms have become important spaces where students encounter ideas regarding success, lifestyle, employability, entrepreneurship, and professional identity.

Generation Z, commonly referred to as Gen Z, represents individuals born into a highly digitized and internet-driven environment. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z students are continuously exposed to digital content through YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok, podcasts, and online communities. These platforms do not merely entertain users; they shape aspirations, influence identity formation, and create perceptions regarding desirable career pathways.

Digital media has expanded awareness regarding emerging careers such as content creation, digital marketing, freelancing, social media influencing, e-commerce entrepreneurship, gaming, and online consulting. Students increasingly perceive non-traditional digital careers as attractive due to their visibility, flexibility, financial possibilities, and social recognition.

At the same time, digital platforms often portray highly curated images of success that may create unrealistic expectations and psychological pressure among students. Exposure to influencers, productivity culture, luxury lifestyles, and entrepreneurial

narratives can generate feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and confusion regarding career planning.

This study seeks to explore how digital media influences career imagination among Gen Z students. It examines the role of online platforms, influencers, and digital trends in shaping aspirations, motivations, fears, and professional identity.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Digital Media and Youth Identity

Digital media has transformed youth culture and identity formation. Boyd (2014) argued that social media platforms create networked publics where young individuals construct and negotiate social identity. Online environments allow students to observe lifestyles, professions, and success narratives beyond their immediate surroundings.

Turkle (2011) emphasized that digital communication technologies shape how individuals perceive themselves and relate to society. Students increasingly use online spaces not only for interaction but also for self-expression and career exploration.

Career Choice and Social Influence

Career choice is influenced by social, psychological, and environmental factors. According to Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994), self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and environmental exposure influence career aspirations. Digital media acts as an environmental factor that exposes students to new career possibilities. Online influencers and creators often function as role models influencing students' beliefs regarding success and professional achievement.

Influencer Culture and Aspirational Careers

Abidin (2018) explained that influencers shape consumer attitudes, social behavior, and lifestyle aspirations. Influencer culture promotes visibility, branding, and monetization as indicators of success. Students increasingly admire creators who demonstrate financial success through content creation, affiliate marketing, online business, and digital entrepreneurship. Such visibility encourages career imagination beyond traditional professions.

LinkedIn and Professional Identity

LinkedIn has emerged as a professional networking platform where students construct professional

identity, showcase achievements, and engage with industry trends. Van Dijk (2013) noted that social platforms encourage individuals to perform professionalism through digital representation.

Students use LinkedIn to observe corporate success stories, internship opportunities, and employability trends, thereby influencing their perceptions regarding career readiness.

Digital Comparison and Career Anxiety

Research indicates that excessive social media exposure may contribute to social comparison and anxiety. Festinger's Social Comparison Theory suggests that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their achievements with others.

Among Gen Z students, exposure to curated success stories may create pressure regarding productivity, achievement, and financial success. This can influence confidence in career decision-making.

III. RESEARCH GAP

Although existing studies discuss career choice and digital media separately, limited qualitative research explores how digital media shapes career imagination among Gen Z students, particularly within the Indian higher education context. Most previous studies focus on employability skills or technology usage rather than the emotional, psychological, and symbolic dimensions of career imagination.

This study therefore addresses an important gap by exploring students' lived experiences and perceptions regarding digital-media-driven career aspirations.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of the study is based on the interaction between digital media exposure and career imagination among Gen Z students.

Core Components:

Digital Media Platforms

- YouTube
- Instagram
- LinkedIn
- Podcasts
- Online communities
- Influencer content

Mediating Factors

- Social comparison
- Career motivation
- Self-efficacy
- Fear of missing out (FOMO)
- Perceived success
- Digital aspiration

Outcomes

- Career imagination
- Entrepreneurial aspiration
- Preference for non-traditional careers
- Career anxiety
- Professional identity formation

The framework suggests that continuous digital exposure influences how students perceive career success, opportunities, and employability.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative exploratory research design to understand students' perceptions, experiences, and interpretations regarding digital media and career imagination.

Qualitative research is appropriate because the study seeks to explore subjective experiences, meanings, emotions, and social realities rather than numerical relationships.

Research Participants

The participants include undergraduate and postgraduate students belonging to Gen Z age groups (18–25 years).

Participants were selected from management, commerce, humanities, and technology-related disciplines.

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who actively engage with digital media platforms and possess awareness regarding online career trends.

Data Collection Methods

Data was collected using:

- Semi-structured interviews
- Informal conversational interactions
- Reflective participant responses

The interviews focused on:

- Digital media usage
- Career aspirations
- Online role models
- Perceptions of success
- Career-related anxieties

Sample Size

Approximately 15–20 participants were included in the study to ensure depth of understanding.

V. DATA ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring ideas, perceptions, and experiences.

The process included:

1. Data familiarization
2. Coding of interview transcripts
3. Identification of patterns
4. Theme development
5. Interpretation of meanings

Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed regarding the purpose of the study and confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary.

Interview Questions

Section A: Digital Media Usage

1. Which social media platforms do you use most frequently?
2. How much time do you spend daily on digital platforms?
3. What type of career-related content do you usually watch or follow online?

Section B: Career Aspirations

4. Has social media influenced your thoughts about future careers? How?
5. Are there any influencers or creators who inspire your career goals?
6. What kinds of careers appear attractive to you through digital media?
7. Do you think online careers are more appealing than traditional professions? Why?

Section C: Professional Identity and Comparison

8. How does LinkedIn or professional networking influence your career thinking?
9. Have you ever compared your career progress with people online?
10. Does social media create pressure regarding success and achievement?

Section D: Anxiety and Reality

11. Do you think social media presents realistic career expectations?
12. Have digital trends ever confused you regarding career choice?
13. What concerns do you have regarding future careers?

Section E: Reflection

14. What does “career success” mean to you?
15. How do you imagine your future career in the digital age?

VI. CODING FRAMEWORK AND THEMES

Initial Codes

- Online inspiration
- Career pressure
- Digital aspiration
- Influencer motivation
- Fear of failure
- Entrepreneurship interest
- Online comparison
- Visibility and success
- Flexibility preference
- Career confusion
- Self-branding
- Digital identity

Major Themes

Theme 1: Career Aspirations Through Digital Visibility

Students perceived visibility and online recognition as indicators of career success.

Theme 2: Rise of Non-Traditional Career Preferences

Students showed increasing interest in freelancing, content creation, digital entrepreneurship, and influencer culture.

Theme 3: LinkedIn and Professional Identity Formation

Students used LinkedIn to build professional identity and monitor career expectations.

Theme 4: Social Comparison and Career Anxiety

Continuous exposure to online achievements created pressure and feelings of inadequacy.

Theme 5: Digital Motivation and Skill Development

Students felt motivated to improve digital skills due to exposure to online trends.

Theme 6: Confusion Between Digital Fantasy and Reality

Students struggled to distinguish between curated online success and realistic career pathways.

VII. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Digital Media as a Career Discovery Space

The findings indicate that digital media platforms function as important spaces for career discovery among Gen Z students. Participants reported using YouTube, Instagram, and LinkedIn to explore career options, educational pathways, and entrepreneurial opportunities.

Many participants stated that they first learned about careers such as digital marketing, content creation, affiliate marketing, freelancing, and UI/UX design through social media exposure.

One participant explained:

“I didn’t know freelancing could become a career until I saw creators explaining how they earn online.” The findings suggest that digital media expands awareness regarding emerging professions that are often absent from traditional educational guidance systems.

Influence of Influencers and Online Role Models

Participants frequently mentioned influencers and creators as sources of inspiration. Students admired individuals who appeared financially independent, productive, creative, and socially visible.

Influencers were perceived not merely as entertainers but as symbols of success and self-made achievement.

Several students expressed interest in entrepreneurship after observing creators discussing startups, productivity, and financial independence.

Attraction Toward Flexible and Creative Careers

Students increasingly preferred careers perceived as flexible, remote, and creative. Traditional jobs were often viewed as stressful, repetitive, and less personally fulfilling.

Digital careers appeared attractive because they offered:

- Flexibility,
- Visibility,
- Creativity,
- Independence,
- Income opportunities.

This reflects changing career values among Gen Z students.

Social Comparison and Psychological Pressure

A major finding of the study was the psychological pressure created by digital comparison culture.

Participants admitted comparing themselves with peers, influencers, and successful professionals online. Constant exposure to productivity content and achievement-oriented narratives generated anxiety regarding career progress.

One participant remarked:

“Sometimes it feels like everyone else is doing better and moving ahead faster.”

The findings align with Social Comparison Theory, which explains how individuals evaluate themselves through comparison with others.

Digital Identity and Professional Self-Presentation

LinkedIn emerged as a platform where students actively constructed professional identity. Participants emphasized maintaining professional profiles, networking, and showcasing achievements.

Students increasingly perceived employability as linked to online visibility and digital branding.

Digital Aspirations Versus Reality

Although digital media inspired ambition, participants also recognized that online success stories are often selective and idealized.

Students acknowledged the gap between digital representation and actual career struggles. Despite this awareness, many continued to feel pressure to achieve visible success.

Implications of the Study

The study has several important implications:

Educational Institutions

Universities should provide career counseling addressing digital career realities and online influence.

Career Counselors

Counselors should help students critically evaluate online success narratives and career expectations.

Students

Students must develop digital literacy and emotional resilience while navigating online environments.

Policymakers

Educational policies should integrate digital awareness and employability education.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Digital media has become a powerful influence shaping career imagination among Gen Z students. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and LinkedIn function not only as sources of information but also as symbolic spaces where students negotiate ambition, identity, success, and employability.

The study reveals that digital media creates both opportunity and pressure. While online platforms expose students to diverse careers, entrepreneurial pathways, and skill development opportunities, they also contribute to unrealistic expectations, comparison culture, and career anxiety.

The findings suggest that future career development among young people will increasingly occur within digitally mediated environments. Therefore, educational institutions and policymakers must support students in developing critical digital awareness, balanced career expectations, and adaptive professional identities.

Ultimately, the study emphasizes that career imagination in the digital age is deeply connected to visibility, aspiration, identity, and technological culture.

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