



The Fluidity of Self: A Literature Review on Identity Flexibility among Generation Z in Coastal City

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Abstract. This study investigates identity flexibility among Generation Z. It explores how this flexibility influences psychological well-being and adaptation in the digital era. The study draws from developmental psychology, positive psychology, and digital identity research. Here, identity flexibility is seen as a multidimensional concept. It includes the range of possible selves, dynamic role changes, and adaptability across contexts, while preserving continuity. The results show both adaptive and maladaptive effects. Moderate flexibility, rooted in core values, links to better well-being, career adaptability, and intercultural skills. Too much or unanchored flexibility, shaped by outside pressures or social comparison, can cause identity confusion, psychological distress, and lower resilience. This study offers a new framework for understanding identity flexibility by linking classic identity theories with modern digital self-presentation. The findings highlight the need for educational and counseling interventions. These should encourage healthy identity exploration and create supportive environments, helping Generation Z navigate digital and social challenges without fear of misrecognition or penalty.

Keywords: Identity Fleksibility, Digital Identity, Psychological Well-Being, Generation Z

1 INTRODUCTION

Generation Z, comprising individuals born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, is the first cohort to navigate adolescence and emerging adulthood within an “onlife” environment, characterized by the integration of digital and offline spheres. Global crises, unstable labor markets, and increasing social polarization have contributed to identity formation occurring amid persistent uncertainty [1]. Contemporary identity theories, particularly those rooted in Eriksonian and neo-Eriksonian frameworks, underscore adolescence and emerging adulthood as pivotal periods for developing a coherent yet adaptable sense of self through cycles of exploration and commitment. Identity processes during this stage are closely linked to both psychological flourishing and distress [2].

Advancements in positive psychology position identity as both a developmental task and a psychological resource. For instance, a clear sense of purpose and meaning in life is associated with higher life satisfaction, more adaptive personality profiles, and reduced depressive symptoms among emerging adults, even after accounting for the Big Five personality traits. These resources are particularly salient for Generation Z, who must integrate diverse roles, values, and cultural repertoires within rapidly changing contexts [1]. In Indonesia and other majority-world settings, spiritual and religious identity has been shown to enhance psychological well-being among Generation Z, partly through digitally mediated engagement and community participation [3] [4]. Thus, psychological and cultural factors interact with digital realities, highlighting the complexity of identity formation for this cohort.

Concurrently, digital platforms, algorithmic curation, and pervasive connectivity enable young people to construct multiple, context-specific identities across social media, gaming environments, and offline settings. Social media functions as a primary space for exploring and performing selfhood, where Generation Z users engage with parallel personas, secondary accounts, and curated profiles to address diverse audiences and expectations [5]. Studies of Indonesian and international youth indicate that these practices facilitate self-expression but also heighten pressures related to impression management, social comparison, and adherence to platform-specific norms [6] [7].

Within this broader landscape, the notion of identity flexibility has become increasingly prominent. In vocational and career development research, flexibility is defined as the ability to reconsider commitments, explore alternative options, and revise self-definition in response to new information and contextual demands [8]. Neo-Eriksonian models of identity development distinguish between exploration in breadth, exploration in depth, commitment making, and reconsideration, emphasizing that identity trajectories in late adolescence and emerging adulthood are cyclical and dynamic rather than linear [9]. In digital youth research, similar concepts are described as “fluid,” “hybrid,” or “layered” identities, highlighting the strategic navigation between multiple self-presentations across platforms and audiences [5] [1].

In Z, the literature on identity remains fragmented across at least three main strands. First, developmental and vocational psychology focuses on educational and career identity, examining how exploration, commitment, and reconsideration relate to adjustment and well-being [8] [10]. Second, positive psychology foregrounds the role of identity-related resources such as purpose, spirituality, and psychological flexibility for flourishing [11]. Third, digital identity and media studies centre on platform practices, online self-presentation, and the co-construction of identity in networked publics [5] [7]. Existing reviews in these areas rarely isolate identity flexibility as a core construct, and even less often synthesise evidence across these disciplinary boundaries for the specific cohort of Generation Z.

Consequently, there is a lack of conceptual clarity regarding the definition and measurement of identity flexibility, the conditions under which it functions as an adaptive resource or a risk, and the influence of digital environments on these dynamics for Generation Z. The fragmented nature of current findings impedes the articulation of identity flexibility as a unified construct that integrates classical theory, positive psychology, and digital practices.

This article aims to address this gap by systematically reviewing literature on identity flexibility among Generation Z from both social and positive psychology perspectives. The review is positioned at the intersection of three domains: (1) neo-Eriksonian identity models, which emphasize cycles of exploration, commitment, and reconsideration; (2) positive psychology, which connects purpose, meaning, and flexibility to well-being; and (3) digital identity research, which conceptualizes self-presentation as strategic and context-dependent.

Specifically, this review addresses three guiding questions:

1. How do contemporary studies define and conceptualize “identity flexibility” among Generation Z across both offline and online domains?
2. Which individual, relational, and structural factors influence identity flexibility within this cohort?
3. Under what conditions does identity flexibility function as (a) an adaptive psychological resource, (b) a risk factor for distress or fragmentation, and (c) a social-digital practice shaping Generation Z’s participation in communities and public life?

By synthesizing literature from developmental, vocational, positive psychology, and digital studies, this review offers two primary conceptual contributions. First, it conceptualizes identity flexibility as a multidimensional, cross-domain construct encompassing (a) the structural breadth of possible selves, (b) the processes involved in switching between identity positions, and (c) the subjective capacity to adapt across contexts while maintaining a sense of continuity. Second, it delineates the ambivalent consequences of identity flexibility for the psychological well-being and social relationships of Generation Z, specifying the conditions under which flexibility is adaptive or maladaptive. Collectively, these contributions aim to refine classical identity theories for an “onlife” generation and inform strengths-based interventions in educational and community contexts, thereby establishing a more cohesive framework for understanding Generation Z’s identity formation.

2 METHOD

This study used a systematic literature review (SLR) as its research design to synthesise evidence on identity flexibility among Generation Z. The SLR approach was selected for its thorough coverage and reproducible protocol, consistent with best practices for reviews in the social sciences. This review followed PRISMA 2020 guidelines, including transparent records of search strategy, screening, and study selection [11].

2.1 Review Protocol and Eligibility Criteria

A review protocol was created beforehand to outline research questions, criteria, search strategy, data extraction, and synthesis plans. The protocol defined Generation Z as those born between 1995 and 2012, or as labeled “Gen Z,” “digital natives,” or similar terms in original studies [3] [1].

Studies were included if they met the following criteria:

1. Publication type and peer review: Empirical journal articles or book chapters published in peer-reviewed outlets.
2. Time frame: Published between 2015 and 2025, to ensure relevance to contemporary social and digital contexts.
3. Language: Published in English or Indonesian.
4. Substantive focus: Addressed at least one of the following:
 - a. Identity flexibility, fluidity, or related constructs such as reconsideration of commitments, hybrid or polycultural identity, or multiple digital identities;
 - b. Identity development processes (exploration, commitment, reconsideration) among Gen Z, with explicit discussion of adaptability or flexibility;
 - c. Digital or social media practices among Gen Z that involve managing multiple or flexible selves, such as second accounts, segmented audiences, or hybrid cultural identities.
5. Outcomes: Reported associations with indicators of psychological well-being (e.g., flourishing, life satisfaction, symptoms), social interaction (e.g., peer relations, civic engagement), or adaptation (e.g., resilience, creativity, intercultural competence).

Studies were excluded if they:

1. focused exclusively on older or younger cohorts without separate analyses for Gen Z;
2. examined identity in purely demographic terms (e.g., "Gen Z consumers") without a psychological or sociological conceptualisation of identity;
3. were conceptual essays or commentaries without empirical data; or
4. duplicated data reported in another included publication.

2.2 Search Strategy

A multi-database search strategy was implemented to maximise coverage across psychology, education, and media-communication research. Searches were conducted in:

1. PsycINFO and Web of Science (for developmental, vocational, and positive psychology literature);
2. Scopus (for interdisciplinary social science and communication studies);
3. Google Scholar (as a supplementary source for grey literature and conference proceedings); and
4. Selected national journals in Indonesia indexed in SINTA and other databases to capture context-specific work on Gen Z identity and digital practices.

Keyword combinations used Boolean operators and truncation, for example:

1. "Generation Z" AND ("identity flexibility" OR "identity fluidity" OR "identity reconsideration" OR "social identity complexity");
2. "digital identity" OR "online self-presentation" AND ("Gen Z" OR "digital natives" OR "youth");
3. "vocational identity" OR "career identity" AND ("flexibility" OR "reconsideration") AND "adolescents" OR "emerging adults";
4. Indonesian terms such as "identitas generasi Z", "identitas digital remaja", and "fleksibilitas identitas".

Backward and forward citation tracking (snowballing) was performed on key articles and reviews identified in the initial search to locate additional eligible studies.

2.3 Screening and Selection

All records retrieved from database searches were imported into a reference manager, and duplicates were removed. Screening proceeded in two stages:

1. Title and abstract screening against the eligibility criteria;
2. Full-text review of potentially relevant articles to confirm inclusion.

At each stage, records were coded as "include", "exclude", or "uncertain". Reasons for exclusion at the full-text stage (e.g., wrong age group, purely conceptual, no relevant outcomes) were documented in a screening log to ensure

transparency and replicability. The screening process can be summarised in a PRISMA-style flow diagram indicating the number of records identified, screened, excluded, and finally included [11].

2.4 Data Extraction and Quality Considerations

For each included study, a structured data extraction form captured:

1. bibliographic information;
2. country and cultural context;
3. sample characteristics (age range, educational status, socio-demographic markers);
4. primary constructs and measures related to identity flexibility (e.g., vocational reconsideration scales, self-concept clarity, digital identity practices);
5. study design and methodology (quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods);
6. key findings linking identity flexibility to psychological well-being, social interaction, or adaptive outcomes.

While a formal risk-of-bias assessment tool was not applied (given the diversity of designs), the extraction form included indicators of methodological quality such as sampling strategy, clarity of measurement, and transparency of analytic procedures.

2.5 Synthesis Approach

Given heterogeneity in constructs and methods, a thematic synthesis approach was adopted rather than meta-analysis. Findings were first grouped within disciplinary domains (developmental/vocational, positive psychology, digital identity/media studies) and then inductively re-organised into three cross-cutting conceptual themes:

1. Identity flexibility as an adaptive resource (e.g., creativity, resilience, intercultural competence, career adaptability);
2. Identity flexibility as a psychological risk (e.g., distress, identity diffusion, social comparison, burnout);
3. Identity flexibility as a social-digital practice (e.g., multiple accounts, hybrid cultural identities, civic and community engagement online).

Throughout the synthesis, empirical patterns were interpreted in light of classical and neo-Eriksonian identity theories and positive psychology frameworks, thereby linking fragmented literatures into a coherent conceptual model.

3 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

TABLE 1. Literature Study Results

Author (Year)	Method	Research Objective	Main Findings
Fusco, Sica, Parola & Aleni Sestito (2022)	Quantitative survey; Italian high-school students (late adolescents, Gen Z cohort). Structural equation modelling.	To examine how vocational identity flexibility (as part of vocational reconsideration) relates to well-being, agency, and internalizing/externalizing problems.	Higher vocational identity flexibility was generally associated with poorer psychosocial functioning (lower well-being, more internalizing and externalizing symptoms). Flexible identity in this sample tended to co-occur with distress rather than adjustment.
Fusco, Sica, Boiano, Esposito & Aleni Sestito (2020)	Quantitative survey; 342 southern Italian high-school students. Cluster analysis & correlations.	To explore relations between vocational identity dimensions (including vocational flexibility), future orientation, and resilience in adolescents.	Future orientation & resilience were positively related to vocational commitment and exploration, but negatively related to vocational flexibility and self-doubt. Adolescents with more flexible/unstable vocational identity reported weaker future orientation and resilience.
Sica, Ragozini, Di Palma &	Quantitative person-centred (cluster) analysis;	+ To investigate how identity management (complexity and flexibility) relates to	Identified profiles showing that adolescents with more complex, flexible identity management tended to display higher

Author (Year)	Method	Research Objective	Main Findings
Aleni Sestito (2019)	Italian late adolescents (high-school).	creativity and risk-taking among late adolescents.	creative abilities and greater readiness for calculated risk-taking, linking identity flexibility to creativity and risk behaviour.
Sica et al. (2023)	Mixed-method; questionnaires + qualitative data in late adolescents.	To analyse how vocational identity processes (including reconsideration/flexibility of commitments) are associated with creative thinking and life design in late adolescence.	Adolescents with more exploratory and flexible vocational identity patterns showed higher creative self-perceptions and career imagination, but also, in some clusters, more uncertainty and emotional strain, indicating both adaptive and non-adaptive sides of identity flexibility.
Fullwood, James & Chen-Wilson (2016)	Quantitative survey; 13–18-year-old adolescents (Gen Z cohort) using Facebook.	To examine relationships between self-concept clarity and online self-presentation, including the tendency to experiment with multiple online selves.	Adolescents with lower self-concept clarity (less stable identity) engaged more in flexible identity experimentation online (multiple profiles, different self-presentations), and this was linked to social comparison and sensitivity to peer feedback.
Briggs (2017)	Quantitative survey of young adults (largely student age).	To develop and test an identity flexibility scale and analyse its links with identity stress and psychological well-being.	Found significant associations between identity flexibility and both identity-related stress and well-being: moderate flexibility was linked to better adaptation and lower stress, whereas very high flexibility could co-occur with confusion and elevated stress.
Kukkola et al. (2023)	Quantitative; adolescent/upper-secondary student sample.	To test whether psychological flexibility facilitates broad and flexible identity exploration and buffers against identity distress.	Psychological flexibility was associated with broader identity exploration and lower identity distress, suggesting that being able to flexibly adjust thoughts and behaviours supports adaptive identity flexibility in adolescents.
Virgona, Ruby & Kashima (2025)	Quantitative; adults including many young adults; cross-sectional survey.	The present study examines the relationship between polycultural identity, conceptualized as the perception of cultures as dynamically interconnected, and the constructs of self-clarity, authenticity, and identity strength.	Polycultural identity was linked to greater identity flexibility and enhanced self-understanding and personal agency, sometimes at the expense of a single, rigidly consistent self-image. Flexible cultural identity related positively to feelings of “true self” and personal identity strength.
Trinh (2019)	Conceptual/review article in Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Business & Management.	To synthesise literature on learning identity, identity flexibility, and their roles in supporting career adaptability and lifelong learning.	Individuals maintaining a flexible learning identity and open stance toward professional development reported higher self-efficacy, greater readiness for career transitions, and stronger orientation toward continuous learning and adaptation.
Sitompul, Noviani & Sembiring (2023)	Qualitative case study; interviews with Indonesian Gen Z social-media users.	To understand how Generation Z actively constructs and manages multiple identities across distinct social-media accounts and platforms.	Gen Z participants strategically maintained segmented identities (public, semi-private, and close-circle accounts) adapted to different audiences, driven by desires for peer validation, social belonging, and self-expression, reflecting both empowerment and impression-management pressures.

Author (Year)	Method	Research Objective	Main Findings
Putri, Khumayah & Nurfalalah (2023)	Qualitative study; in-depth interviews with Indonesian Gen Z Instagram users.	To explore how Generation Z leverages Instagram platform affordances (Stories, Highlights, Close Friends) to construct and flexibly perform different identity versions.	Participants regularly oscillated between "authentic" and "curated" selves on Instagram, driven by social validation needs, desire for belonging, and self-expression goals, with identity flexibility correlating with concerns about body image, social acceptance, and self-esteem.

The synthesis indicates that identity flexibility is both a defining and ambivalent characteristic of Generation Z. Across various contexts and methodologies, flexibility appears as both a valuable resource for adaptation and a potential source of vulnerability. Furthermore, flexibility is evident in the social-digital practices that Generation Z employs to navigate daily life. These patterns are effectively interpreted through neo-Eriksonian identity frameworks and positive psychology perspectives, which clarify these contrasting roles.

3.1 Identity Flexibility as an Adaptive Resource

A first group of studies characterizes identity flexibility as a protective and growth-oriented capacity. Neo-Eriksonian research suggests that, in contemporary cohorts, identity development is marked by ongoing cycles of exploration and commitment rather than a singular transition from diffusion to achievement [12]. In this dynamic context, the capacity to revise commitments, maintain multiple possible selves, and adjust self-definitions in response to new experiences supports more adaptive responses to complex environments [13]. This distinguishes adaptive flexibility from forms that are unanchored or extreme.

Vocational and educational studies indicate that adolescents and emerging adults who maintain moderate levels of reconsideration and flexibility, alongside clear goals and psychological flexibility, tend to exhibit higher career adaptability, stronger creative self-perceptions, and more expansive visions of their future lives [14]. These individuals are more likely to integrate diverse interests and roles into coherent yet open-ended future narratives, rather than feeling constrained by early or rigid commitments [8].

Insights from positive psychology further clarify how identity flexibility can support flourishing [15]. Research on purpose in life and meaning among emerging adults demonstrates that individuals who articulate a sense of direction and value report higher subjective well-being and more resilient response patterns, even when controlling for personality traits and sociodemographic variables [16]. When identity flexibility is guided by deeper purposes and values, it facilitates the integration of various roles, such as student, worker, activist, creator, and family member, into an evolving narrative that remains authentic.

In multicultural and globalized contexts, research on polycultural and hybrid identities suggests that flexible cultural identification enables young people to navigate multiple cultural repertoires, appreciate diversity, and develop intercultural competence. Studies conducted in Indonesia and other settings further demonstrate that spiritual and religious identities, when combined with reflective digital engagement, can serve as anchors, allowing youth to explore diverse online communities while maintaining a sense of moral or existential orientation [17] [18]. These findings align with identity models that conceptualize healthy development as a balance between openness to new experiences and commitment to core values, as well as with positive psychology's emphasis on psychological flexibility, purpose, and strengths as foundations of well-being. In such conditions, identity flexibility operates less as instability and more as a structured capacity for creative adaptation to changing social environments [16].

3.2 Identity Flexibility as a Psychological Risk

A second cluster of evidence highlights second body of evidence highlights the potential costs of identity flexibility when it becomes extreme, unanchored, or primarily driven by external pressures, in contrast to the adaptive flexibility previously discussed [10]. Vocational identity studies with adolescents reveal that high levels of reconsideration and unstable commitments are often associated with lower well-being, increased internalizing and externalizing symptoms, and reduced resilience [10]. In these cases, flexibility reflects pervasive doubt and difficulty consolidating a stable sense of direction, consistent with classical notions of identity diffusion. Related research links certain forms of flexible self-presentation to psychological strain. Work on self-concept clarity shows that adolescents with less

stable self-representations are more likely to experiment with multiple online profiles and to modify their personas in response to anticipated or actual feedback [5].

These patterns are accompanied by higher levels of social comparison, fear of negative evaluation, and emotional exhaustion, suggesting that some expressions of identity flexibility in digital spaces are reactive rather than self-directed (From a positive psychology perspective, these findings correspond to distinctions between psychological flexibility and experiential avoidance [12]. When young people repeatedly shift identities to escape discomfort, conform to changing norms, or seek external validation, flexibility ceases to promote growth and instead perpetuates stress and confusion [19]. Research on emerging adults indicates that both very low and very high levels of identity dispersion across roles, relationships, or platforms are associated with poorer mental health outcomes, while moderate, value-anchored variation is more adaptive.)

Collectively, this evidence suggests a curvilinear or context-dependent relationship between identity flexibility and psychological well-being. Moderate, value-anchored flexibility supports adaptation, whereas flexibility becomes risky when disconnected from stable values and supportive relationships, or when primarily organized around threat avoidance and audience approval.

3.3 Identity Flexibility as a Social-Digital Practice

The third major theme addresses how identity flexibility is enacted through everyday digital practices. Generation Z has grown up in a media environment where social media, messaging applications, and algorithmic feeds serve as primary arenas for self-expression, affiliation, and information seeking [20]. Research describes how young people create and maintain multiple social media accounts, such as main, close friends, and anonymous profiles, calibrating each to specific audiences and purposes. They also adjust language, humor, aesthetics, and self-disclosure to align with the norms of particular communities or platforms [21].

These practices demonstrate identity flexibility in at least three dimensions. Structurally, they reveal a portfolio of personas distributed across platforms and audiences [5]. Processually, they involve continuous micro-adjustments in self-presentation as individuals respond to feedback, trending content, and evolving group expectations [22]. Subjectively, many Generation Z users report feeling both empowered by the opportunity to experiment with different versions of themselves and burdened by the effort required to sustain multiple, sometimes conflicting selves across contexts [23].

Indonesian and international research emphasizes that social media frequently serves as a new front stage for constructing desirable self-images, while more vulnerable or less normative aspects are relegated to private channels or offline contexts [3]. Metrics such as likes, shares, and follower counts function as quasi-quantitative indicators of social approval, influencing which identities are emphasized or downplayed over time. Additionally, digital platforms serve as important sites for negotiating cultural, religious, and gender identities, enabling hybrid forms of belonging that are less accessible in exclusively offline contexts [24].

These findings are consistent with social identity and symbolic interactionist theories, which conceptualize identity as co-constructed through interaction and responsive to audience feedback [24]. For Generation Z, however, the speed, scale, and permanence of digital interaction amplify both opportunities and risks. Flexible identity work is facilitated by unprecedented connectivity but constrained by surveillance, algorithmic curation, and unequal access to visibility and resources [25]. Thus, identity flexibility as a social-digital practice is inseparable from platform design and broader structural conditions.

3.4 Theoretical and Practical Implications

Synthesizing these themes, the review proposes that identity flexibility in Generation Z is best understood as a multidimensional construct comprising: (a) the structural breadth of accessible identity options; (b) the processual dynamics of shifting between roles, contexts, and platforms; and (c) the subjective sense of being able to adapt across situations while remaining recognizably oneself [13]. The impact of identity flexibility on well-being and relationships depends on the extent to which these dimensions are anchored in core values, psychological resources, and relational supports [2].

Theoretically, these findings suggest the need to extend classical and neo-Eriksonian identity models to more explicitly incorporate digital contexts, cross-domain movements (such as transitions between cultural, vocational, and digital identities), and the curvilinear effects of flexibility on adjustment [26]. For positive psychology, the results underscore the importance of strengthening purpose, psychological flexibility, and character strengths so that identity

flexibility serves as a medium for growth rather than a marker of diffusion [18]. Practically, the findings highlight the necessity for educational and counseling environments that normalize exploration, support reflective narrative work, and create safe spaces—both online and offline—for young people to negotiate complex identities without excessive fear of sanction or misrecognition.

4 CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that identity flexibility in Generation Z is an ambivalent trait, serving both as an adaptive resource and as a potential psychological risk. Synthesis of existing research identifies three primary dimensions of identity flexibility in this cohort: the structural breadth of identity options, the dynamic processes involved in shifting between roles and contexts, and the subjective capacity to adapt across situations while maintaining self-continuity. While this flexibility facilitates adaptation to rapidly evolving social and digital environments, it may also result in stress or confusion if not anchored in core values or supported by stable relationships.

Moderate identity flexibility, when grounded in clear values, supports psychological well-being, fosters creativity, and enhances adaptability in both career and social domains. In contrast, excessive identity flexibility that is disconnected from stable values or primarily motivated by external pressures to conform to social expectations may intensify mental health challenges, increase identity confusion, and encourage detrimental social comparison.

These findings underscore the importance of educational and counseling environments that promote healthy self-exploration, encourage reflective narrative practices, and provide safe spaces for Generation Z to negotiate their identities in both online and offline settings without undue fear of sanction or misrecognition. Furthermore, the results highlight the necessity of fostering life purpose, psychological flexibility, and character strengths to ensure that identity flexibility serves as a catalyst for growth rather than as an indicator of dysfunction.

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