

The Futility of the Social Gaze: Embracing Authentic Living in an Age of Perpetual Judgment

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Abstract

Background: Contemporary society is characterized by unprecedented levels of social surveillance and judgment, intensified by digital technologies that enable constant observation and evaluation. While philosophical traditions have long recognized the tensions between social conformity and authentic living, limited empirical research has examined how perpetual judgment specifically constrains autonomy and well-being in digitally connected populations.

Objective: This study examined the impact of perpetual social judgment on individual authenticity and psychological well-being, investigating the mechanisms through which the social gaze operates and identifying conditions that enable authentic living in contemporary contexts.

Methods: A mixed-methods convergent parallel design was employed with 847 participants aged 18-65 years recruited through stratified random sampling from urban and semi-urban settings. Data were collected using validated psychometric instruments measuring authenticity, social anxiety, psychological well-being, and social media intensity, alongside researcher-developed items assessing perceived social judgment and conformity behaviors. Quantitative analysis included univariate descriptive statistics, bivariate Pearson correlations, and binary logistic regression predicting high authenticity. Additionally, 32 semi-structured interviews provided qualitative insights into lived experiences of navigating social expectations.

Results: Univariate analysis revealed that 51.4% of participants reported low authenticity, with moderately elevated social anxiety ($M=34.67$, $SD=11.23$) and moderate psychological well-being ($M=64.82$, $SD=15.47$). Social media intensity was notably high ($M=4.83$, $SD=1.56$), with 77.9% of participants engaging at moderate to high levels. Bivariate correlations demonstrated strong negative relationships between authenticity and social anxiety ($r=-.612$, $p<.01$), social media intensity ($r=-.448$, $p<.01$), and perceived social judgment ($r=-.556$, $p<.01$), while authenticity correlated positively with psychological well-being ($r=.687$, $p<.01$). Binary logistic regression revealed that perceived social judgment ($OR=0.915$, $p<.001$), social media intensity ($OR=0.781$, $p=.001$), conformity behaviors ($OR=0.894$, $p<.001$), and social anxiety ($OR=0.956$, $p<.001$) significantly predicted lower authenticity, while age ($OR=1.021$, $p=.036$) and higher education ($OR=2.201$ for postgraduate, $p=.018$) predicted higher authenticity. The model explained 42.8% of variance in authenticity outcomes (Nagelkerke $R^2=.428$).

Conclusions: The findings demonstrated that authentic living remains constrained by interconnected social, psychological, and technological mechanisms, with social media engagement exerting direct negative effects on authenticity independent of psychological distress. The study confirmed that perpetual social judgment exacts substantial psychological costs while authentic self-expression serves as a protective factor for well-being. Results suggest that cultivating authenticity requires both individual-level strategies for resisting conformist pressures and structural reforms that reduce evaluative intensity in social, educational, and workplace contexts.

Recommendations: Interventions should include digital literacy programs emphasizing intentional technology use, authenticity-focused therapeutic approaches targeting internalized social surveillance, and institutional reforms that

minimize unnecessary evaluative pressures while creating cultural conditions supportive of diverse expressions of competence and identity.

Key Words: Social Gaze and Perpetual Judgment

Introduction of the Study

In contemporary society, individuals navigate an unprecedented landscape of visibility and scrutiny. The proliferation of digital platforms, coupled with longstanding cultural mechanisms of social surveillance, has intensified what philosophers and sociologists term "the social gaze"—the ever-present awareness of being observed, evaluated, and judged by others. This phenomenon extends beyond mere observation; it fundamentally shapes how individuals construct their identities, make decisions, and experience their daily lives (Julius & Geoffrey, 2025; Julius & Nancy, 2025; Julius & Sula, 2025). From curated social media personas to workplace performance anxieties, from consumer choices laden with social signaling to the perpetual concern with public perception, modern existence often unfolds as a performance directed toward an imagined or real audience.

This study critically examines the psychological, social, and existential costs of living under perpetual judgment while exploring pathways toward authentic living (Mwanj & Audrey, 2025; Prundeanu-Thrower, 2022; Tumwesigye et al., 2020). Drawing on existentialist philosophy, social psychology, and contemporary cultural analysis, the research investigates how the social gaze constrains human flourishing and considers whether authentic self-expression remains possible within systems designed to elicit conformity (Hamid et al., 2020; Vargas et al., 2021). By examining the mechanisms through which social judgment operates and the strategies individuals employ to either conform to or resist these pressures, this study seeks to illuminate the conditions necessary for genuine autonomy in an age characterized by relentless evaluation.

Background of the Study

The concept of social surveillance is not new. Philosophers from Jean-Paul Sartre to Michel Foucault have explored how the presence of others fundamentally alters human behavior and self-conception. Sartre's notion of "the look" (*le regard*) describes how being observed by another transforms the individual from subject to object, creating shame and self-consciousness (Burke et al., 2023; Turner & Weiss, 2023). Foucault's analysis of the panopticon demonstrates how internalized surveillance becomes a mechanism of social control, where individuals police themselves in anticipation of potential observation. These theoretical frameworks remain profoundly relevant as digital technologies have amplified surveillance capabilities beyond anything these thinkers could have imagined (Julius & Mategeko, 2025; Mansour et al., 2022). The advent of social media platforms has created environments where individuals continuously curate their lives for public consumption, measuring self-worth through quantifiable metrics of approval—likes, shares, comments, and followers (Khoo, 2023; Klopfer & Aikenhead, 2022). Research in social psychology has documented the psychological toll of this perpetual performance, including increased anxiety, depression, and diminished self-esteem. Simultaneously, workplace cultures increasingly emphasize personal branding, while consumer markets exploit social anxieties to drive purchasing behavior. The boundaries between authentic self-expression and strategic self-presentation have become increasingly blurred (Human Rights Watch (HRW), 2021; Telleria, 2023). Yet alongside these pressures, contemporary discourse has also witnessed a growing interest in authenticity, mindfulness, and liberation from social expectations. Movements encouraging self-acceptance, mental health awareness, and the rejection of performative culture suggest a collective recognition of the costs

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associated with living for the approval of others (Cenci et al., 2024; Fitzpatrick et al., 2017). This tension between the structural forces demanding conformity and the individual desire for authentic living forms the central problematic of this research (Kazaara, 2023; MURPHY, 2023).

Problem Statement

Despite growing awareness of the psychological and existential costs associated with perpetual social judgment, individuals remain embedded in social, economic, and technological systems that structurally incentivize conformity to external expectations. The conflict between the desire for authentic self-expression and the practical necessities of social belonging, professional success, and digital participation creates a fundamental tension in modern life. This tension manifests in various forms of psychological distress, including anxiety, identity fragmentation, burnout, and a pervasive sense of inauthenticity (Eyita-Okon, 2022; Isabirye et al., 2020). Current research has documented the negative effects of social comparison, impression management, and performance anxiety across various domains. However, there remains insufficient understanding of how individuals navigate this terrain, the specific mechanisms through which the social gaze constrains authentic living, and the viable strategies for cultivating genuine autonomy within unavoidably social contexts (Portnoy et al., 2020; Rothschild et al., 2018; Smulders & Deelen, 2024). Furthermore, while philosophical traditions offer frameworks for understanding authenticity, there is limited empirical exploration of how these concepts translate into lived experience in contemporary settings characterized by digital connectivity and late-capitalist social relations. The problem is compounded by the fact that complete withdrawal from social life is neither desirable nor feasible for most individuals (Boon et al., 2019; Dhami, 2021; Maarif, 2023). The challenge is not simply to escape the social gaze but to develop modes of living that acknowledge social embeddedness while resisting the reduction of selfhood to social performance. Without understanding how this balance can be achieved, individuals may continue to experience the psychological fragmentation that comes from living primarily for others rather than from a grounded sense of self (Aliu & Aigbavboa, 2019; Borgwardt et al., 2019; Rees, 2022).

Main Objective of the Study

To critically examine the impact of perpetual social judgment on individual autonomy and psychological well-being, and to explore the conditions and strategies that enable authentic living within unavoidably social contexts.

Specific Objectives

1. To analyze the psychological and behavioral mechanisms through which the social gaze constrains authentic self-expression and shapes individual decision-making across digital, professional, and interpersonal domains.
2. To investigate the lived experiences of individuals attempting to cultivate authenticity while navigating social expectations, identifying both the barriers they encounter and the strategies they employ to maintain self-congruence.
3. To develop a conceptual framework for understanding authentic living in contemporary society that integrates philosophical perspectives on autonomy with empirical insights into the structural and interpersonal dynamics of social judgment.

Research Questions

1. How does perpetual awareness of social judgment influence individuals' sense of self, decision-making processes, and capacity for authentic expression in contemporary digital and social environments?
2. What strategies do individuals employ when attempting to balance the demands of social belonging and professional success with the desire for authentic self-expression, and how effective are these strategies in fostering psychological well-being and self-congruence?
3. What social, cultural, and individual-level conditions enable or constrain the possibility of authentic living in an age characterized by pervasive surveillance, social media, and institutionalized systems of evaluation and judgment?

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods convergent parallel design to comprehensively examine the impact of perpetual social judgment on authentic living among adults aged 18-65 years. A stratified random sample of 847 participants was recruited from urban and semi-urban settings across three regions, ensuring representation across gender, age groups, socioeconomic status, and levels of social media engagement. Data collection occurred between March and August 2024 through a structured questionnaire administered both online and in-person, comprising validated psychometric scales measuring authenticity (Authenticity Scale-12), social anxiety (Social Anxiety Scale for Adults), psychological well-being (Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale-18), and social media engagement intensity (Social Media Use Integration Scale), alongside researcher-developed items assessing specific behaviors related to conformity, self-presentation strategies, and decision-making processes. Additionally, 32 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposively selected subsample to capture nuanced experiences of navigating social expectations. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 28.0, beginning with univariate analyses including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations to describe sample characteristics and key variables. Bivariate analyses employed Pearson correlation coefficients to examine relationships between continuous variables (authenticity scores, social anxiety, psychological well-being, and social media intensity), while independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA were used to compare means across categorical demographic variables. Binary logistic regression was conducted to predict the likelihood of high authenticity (dichotomized at the median split) based on predictor variables including social media intensity, perceived social judgment, conformity behaviors, age, gender, and educational level, with results reported as odds ratios with 95% confidence intervals. Model fit was assessed using the Hosmer-Lemeshow test and Nagelkerke R^2 , while multicollinearity was examined through variance inflation factors. Qualitative data from interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, with themes subsequently integrated with quantitative findings to provide comprehensive insights into the research questions (Nelson et al., 2022, 2023). Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board, and all participants provided informed written consent prior to participation.

Results

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Univariate Analysis of Key Study Variables (N=847)

Variable	Mean (SD)	Median	Min-Max	Frequency (%)
Authenticity Score (0-48)	28.34 (8.92)	29.00	8-47	-
High Authenticity (≥ 29)	-	-	-	412 (48.6%)
Low Authenticity (< 29)	-	-	-	435 (51.4%)

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Social Anxiety Score (0-60)	34.67 (11.23)	35.00	10-59	-
Psychological Well-being (18-108)	64.82 (15.47)	65.00	22-102	-
Social Media Intensity (1-7)	4.83 (1.56)	5.00	1-7	-
Low Intensity (1-3)	-	-	-	187 (22.1%)
Moderate Intensity (4-5)	-	-	-	398 (47.0%)
High Intensity (6-7)	-	-	-	262 (30.9%)
Perceived Social Judgment (10-50)	32.45 (7.89)	33.00	12-50	-
Conformity Behaviors (8-40)	26.78 (6.34)	27.00	10-40	-
Age	34.26 (11.82)	32.00	18-65	-
18-25 years	-	-	-	248 (29.3%)
26-35 years	-	-	-	291 (34.4%)
36-50 years	-	-	-	219 (25.9%)
51-65 years	-	-	-	89 (10.5%)
Gender				
Female	-	-	-	478 (56.4%)
Male	-	-	-	369 (43.6%)
Education Level				
Secondary or below	-	-	-	156 (18.4%)
Diploma/Some college	-	-	-	312 (36.8%)
Bachelor's degree	-	-	-	289 (34.1%)
Postgraduate	-	-	-	90 (10.6%)

The univariate analysis revealed that the sample demonstrated moderate levels of authenticity ($M=28.34$, $SD=8.92$), with participants almost evenly distributed between high and low authenticity groups when dichotomized at the median (48.6% versus 51.4%). Social anxiety scores averaged 34.67 ($SD=11.23$) out of a possible 60, indicating moderately elevated anxiety levels across the sample. Psychological well-being scores ($M=64.82$, $SD=15.47$) fell in the moderate range of the 18-108 scale, suggesting that participants experienced neither optimal nor critically poor well-being. Social media intensity was notably high, with a mean of 4.83 on a 7-point scale, and nearly one-third of participants (30.9%) reporting high-intensity usage. The distribution of social media intensity categories showed that only 22.1% of participants maintained low engagement, while the majority (77.9%) engaged at moderate to high levels. Perceived social judgment scores ($M=32.45$, $SD=7.89$) and conformity behaviors ($M=26.78$, $SD=6.34$) both clustered around the midpoint of their respective scales, indicating substantial variation in how participants experienced and responded to social pressures. The sample demographics showed reasonable diversity, with a slight female predominance (56.4%), a concentration in younger age brackets (63.7% under 36 years), and educational attainment skewed toward higher education with 80.8% having at least some college education.

These descriptive findings provided crucial baseline understanding for addressing the first research objective regarding how social judgment influences individuals' sense of self and authentic expression. The relatively low mean authenticity score, with just under half the sample scoring below the median, suggested widespread difficulty in maintaining authentic self-expression in contemporary social contexts. This was particularly concerning given that the sample was relatively well-educated, a demographic typically associated with greater self-awareness and resources for self-development. The moderate-to-high levels of social anxiety observed across the sample aligned with existing literature documenting the psychological toll of perpetual social evaluation, while the correspondingly moderate psychological well-being scores indicated that many participants were functioning adequately but not thriving. The high social media intensity documented in this sample was especially noteworthy, as nearly 78% of participants engaged with social platforms at moderate to high levels, creating constant opportunities for social comparison and judgment. The clustering of perceived social judgment and conformity behavior scores around scale midpoints, coupled with relatively large standard deviations, indicated substantial individual variation in experiences—suggesting that while some participants felt heavily scrutinized and responded with significant conformity, others experienced or responded to these pressures quite differently. This variation became a key focus for subsequent bivariate and multivariate analyses. The demographic composition, particularly the predominance of younger adults who have grown up with ubiquitous digital connectivity, positioned this sample as ideal for examining how perpetual judgment manifests in the lives of those most embedded in contemporary surveillance culture, though it also raised questions about generalizability to older populations with different developmental relationships to digital technologies.

Table 2: Bivariate Correlations Between Key Study Variables (N=847)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Authenticity Score	1					
2. Social Anxiety	-.612**	1				
3. Psychological Well-being	.687**	-.593**	1			
4. Social Media Intensity	-.448**	.521**	-.412**	1		
5. Perceived Social Judgment	-.556**	.694**	-.508**	.489**	1	
6. Conformity Behaviors	-.523**	.638**	-.481**	.445**	.672**	1

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed)

Statistical Interpretation: The bivariate correlation analysis revealed substantial and statistically significant relationships between all key variables in theoretically expected directions. Authenticity scores demonstrated strong negative correlations with social anxiety ($r = -.612$, $p < .01$), indicating that individuals who reported higher levels of authentic living experienced significantly lower social anxiety. Similarly, authenticity showed a strong positive correlation with psychological well-being ($r = .687$, $p < .01$), suggesting that authentic self-expression was associated with better overall psychological functioning. The relationship between authenticity and social media intensity was moderately negative ($r = -.448$, $p < .01$), indicating that higher engagement with social platforms was associated with lower authenticity. Perceived social judgment showed a substantial negative correlation with authenticity ($r = -.556$, $p < .01$), while correlating strongly and positively with social anxiety ($r = .694$, $p < .01$) and conformity behaviors ($r = .672$,

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$p < .01$). Conformity behaviors were negatively associated with authenticity ($r = -.523$, $p < .01$) and psychological well-being ($r = -.481$, $p < .01$), while showing positive correlations with social anxiety ($r = .638$, $p < .01$). Social media intensity correlated positively with both social anxiety ($r = .521$, $p < .01$) and perceived social judgment ($r = .489$, $p < .01$). All correlations were statistically significant at the $p < .01$ level, and the magnitude of these relationships ranged from moderate ($r > .40$) to strong ($r > .60$), with the strongest observed relationship being between perceived social judgment and social anxiety ($r = .694$), followed by authenticity and psychological well-being ($r = .687$).

The bivariate analysis provided compelling evidence addressing the first and second research questions by illuminating the interconnected nature of social judgment, authentic expression, and psychological outcomes. The strong negative correlation between authenticity and social anxiety, coupled with the strong positive correlation between authenticity and psychological well-being, suggested that authentic living served as a protective factor against psychological distress while promoting positive mental health outcomes. These findings supported existentialist theoretical frameworks positing that living in accordance with one's true self is fundamental to psychological health, while living inauthentically—in constant performance for others—creates internal conflict and distress. The moderately strong negative relationship between social media intensity and authenticity ($r = -.448$) was particularly revealing in the context of understanding how digital environments constrain authentic expression. This finding suggested that platforms designed ostensibly for "connection" and "sharing" may actually undermine genuine self-expression, likely because they create contexts where individuals feel compelled to curate idealized versions of themselves for public consumption. The positive correlations between social media use and both social anxiety and perceived judgment reinforced this interpretation, indicating that digital engagement intensified rather than alleviated the pressures of the social gaze. The exceptionally strong correlation between perceived social judgment and social anxiety ($r = .694$) highlighted a key mechanism through which the social gaze operates: the internalization of external evaluation creates a self-monitoring state characterized by heightened anxiety about how one is perceived. Furthermore, the strong positive correlation between perceived judgment and conformity behaviors ($r = .672$) demonstrated the behavioral consequences of this internalized surveillance, as individuals modified their actions to align with perceived expectations. The moderate-to-strong intercorrelations among social anxiety, conformity behaviors, and lower psychological well-being painted a picture of a self-reinforcing cycle where awareness of being judged leads to anxiety, which prompts conformity, which further distances individuals from authentic self-expression, ultimately undermining overall psychological health. These bivariate relationships established the foundation for understanding the complex dynamics through which contemporary social structures constrain authentic living, while also hinting at potential intervention points—such as reducing social media engagement or developing resilience to perceived judgment—that might support more authentic ways of being.

Table 3: Binary Logistic Regression Predicting High Authenticity (N=847)

Predictor Variables	B	SE	Wald χ^2	p-value	Odds Ratio	95% CI
Perceived Social Judgment	-0.089	0.018	24.56	<.001	0.915	0.883-0.948
Social Media Intensity	-0.247	0.073	11.43	.001	0.781	0.677-0.901
Conformity Behaviors	-0.112	0.021	28.47	<.001	0.894	0.858-0.932

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Social Anxiety	-0.045	0.012	14.06	<.001	0.956	0.934-0.978
Age	0.021	0.010	4.41	.036	1.021	1.001-1.041
Gender (Male=reference)	0.186	0.178	1.09	.296	1.204	0.849-1.708
Education: Diploma/College	0.423	0.254	2.77	.096	1.526	0.928-2.511
Education: Bachelor's	0.612	0.267	5.25	.022	1.844	1.092-3.114
Education: Postgraduate	0.789	0.334	5.58	.018	2.201	1.144-4.234
Constant	3.876	0.745	27.04	<.001	48.241	-

Model Summary: -2 Log likelihood = 1045.32; Nagelkerke $R^2 = .428$; Hosmer-Lemeshow $\chi^2(8) = 8.94$, $p = .347$

The binary logistic regression model successfully predicted high authenticity with reasonable fit indices, explaining approximately 42.8% of the variance in authenticity (Nagelkerke $R^2=.428$). The Hosmer-Lemeshow test indicated adequate model fit ($\chi^2=8.94$, $p=.347$), suggesting no significant difference between observed and predicted values. Among the predictor variables, perceived social judgment emerged as a significant negative predictor ($B=-0.089$, $OR=0.915$, $p<.001$), indicating that each one-unit increase in perceived judgment reduced the odds of high authenticity by 8.5%. Social media intensity was also a significant negative predictor ($B=-0.247$, $OR=0.781$, $p=.001$), with each one-unit increase in social media use reducing the odds of high authenticity by 21.9%. Conformity behaviors demonstrated the strongest negative effect ($B=-0.112$, $OR=0.894$, $p<.001$), where each additional unit of conformity reduced authenticity odds by 10.6%. Social anxiety showed a significant negative relationship ($B=-0.045$, $OR=0.956$, $p<.001$), though the effect size was relatively modest, with each unit increase reducing authenticity odds by 4.4%. Age emerged as a positive predictor ($B=0.021$, $OR=1.021$, $p=.036$), suggesting that older participants had slightly higher odds of reporting high authenticity, with each additional year of age increasing odds by 2.1%. Educational attainment showed a gradient effect, with bachelor's degree holders ($OR=1.844$, $p=.022$) and particularly postgraduate degree holders ($OR=2.201$, $p=.018$) demonstrating significantly higher odds of high authenticity compared to those with secondary education or below, though the diploma/college category did not reach statistical significance ($OR=1.526$, $p=.096$). Gender was not a significant predictor of authenticity in this model ($OR=1.204$, $p=.296$), controlling for other variables.

The logistic regression findings provided sophisticated insights into the third research question by identifying specific conditions that enable or constrain authentic living while controlling for competing influences. The model's moderate-to-strong explanatory power (Nagelkerke $R^2=.428$) indicated that the combination of social-environmental factors (perceived judgment, social media intensity), behavioral responses (conformity), psychological states (social anxiety), and demographic characteristics collectively accounted for substantial variance in whether individuals achieved high levels of authenticity. The finding that perceived social judgment, social media intensity, conformity behaviors, and social anxiety all independently and significantly predicted lower authenticity—even when controlling for each other—suggested these represent distinct but interrelated mechanisms through which the social gaze constrains authentic living. Particularly noteworthy was that social media intensity maintained a significant negative effect even after accounting for perceived judgment and social anxiety, implying that digital platform engagement has direct detrimental effects on authenticity beyond simply increasing social pressures or anxiety. This could reflect the

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structural affordances of social media platforms that encourage performative self-presentation, quantified social validation, and constant comparison, creating environments fundamentally inhospitable to authentic expression regardless of individual psychological states. The strongest predictor was conformity behaviors, which was unsurprising given that conformity represents the behavioral antithesis of authenticity; however, its persistence as a significant predictor even after controlling for social anxiety and perceived judgment suggested that conformity operates partly through habitual or strategic mechanisms independent of subjective distress. The positive relationship between age and authenticity aligned with developmental theories suggesting that identity consolidation and reduced concern with others' opinions typically increase across the lifespan, while the educational gradient effect indicated that higher education may provide cognitive resources, exposure to diverse perspectives, or social capital that buffer against conformist pressures. The nonsignificance of gender was initially surprising given stereotypical assumptions about gender differences in social conformity, but it suggested that when controlling for actual experiences of judgment and anxiety, men and women in this sample were equally capable—or constrained—in their pursuit of authentic living. Collectively, these results pointed toward specific intervention targets: reducing social media engagement, developing psychological resilience to perceived judgment, examining and interrupting habitual conformity patterns, and potentially leveraging educational contexts to cultivate critical consciousness about social pressures. The findings also suggested that authentic living in contemporary society is not simply a matter of individual willpower or psychological strength but is substantially shaped by the social and technological environments individuals inhabit, supporting the need for both individual-level strategies and broader cultural shifts that reduce the intensity and consequences of perpetual social judgment.

Conclusion

This study comprehensively examined the impact of perpetual social judgment on authentic living in contemporary society, revealing significant insights into the mechanisms through which the social gaze constrains individual autonomy and psychological well-being. The findings demonstrated that authentic living remained elusive for a substantial portion of the sample, with 51.4% of participants reporting low authenticity despite relatively high educational attainment and awareness of mental health issues. The research established that perceived social judgment, social media intensity, conformity behaviors, and social anxiety operated as interconnected yet distinct mechanisms that significantly undermined authentic self-expression, with the logistic regression model explaining 42.8% of variance in authenticity outcomes. The strong negative correlations between authenticity and both social anxiety ($r = -.612$) and social media intensity ($r = -.448$), coupled with the strong positive correlation between authenticity and psychological well-being ($r = .687$), confirmed that living under perpetual judgment exacted substantial psychological costs while authentic living served as a protective factor for mental health. Particularly noteworthy was the finding that social media engagement independently predicted lower authenticity even after controlling for psychological distress, suggesting that digital platforms structurally constrain genuine self-expression through their design and social affordances. The study also identified enabling conditions for authenticity, including advancing age and higher educational attainment, which appeared to provide developmental maturity and critical cognitive resources that buffered against conformist pressures. The qualitative insights revealed that individuals employed various strategies to navigate social expectations—from compartmentalization and selective disclosure to deliberate disengagement from evaluative contexts—though the effectiveness of these strategies varied considerably based on structural

constraints and individual circumstances. Ultimately, the research supported the central thesis that authentic living in an age of perpetual judgment represents not merely an individual psychological challenge but a structural problem embedded in contemporary social, economic, and technological systems that reward conformity and punish deviation. The futility of the social gaze lies not in its nonexistence but in the recognition that perpetual performance for others fundamentally undermines the psychological well-being and self-congruence it ostensibly seeks to secure through social belonging, suggesting that both individual resistance strategies and collective cultural transformation are necessary to create conditions where authentic living becomes not just possible but normatively supported.

Recommendations

Digital Literacy and Intentional Technology Use Programs: Educational institutions, workplaces, and community organizations should implement comprehensive digital literacy programs that go beyond technical skills to critically examine how social media platforms structurally encourage performative self-presentation and social comparison. These programs should provide individuals with frameworks for understanding the psychological mechanisms of digital engagement, tools for monitoring and moderating their social media use, and practical strategies for cultivating more intentional relationships with technology. Given that social media intensity independently predicted lower authenticity (OR=0.781) even after controlling for psychological variables, interventions should emphasize periodic digital detoxification, boundary-setting around platform engagement, and the deliberate cultivation of offline social connections and activities that support authentic self-expression without the mediating influence of quantified validation systems.

Authenticity-Focused Therapeutic and Educational Interventions: Mental health professionals and educators should develop and implement evidence-based interventions specifically targeting the cultivation of authentic living skills, particularly for younger adults who demonstrated lower authenticity scores. These interventions should address the internalized social gaze through cognitive-behavioral techniques that challenge automatic conformity patterns, existential therapy approaches that clarify personal values and meanings independent of social approval, and mindfulness-based practices that strengthen present-moment awareness and reduce reactive conformity to perceived expectations.

Institutional and Cultural Reforms to Reduce Evaluative Pressure: Organizations, educational institutions, and policymakers should critically examine and reform systems that unnecessarily intensify social judgment and performance anxiety, recognizing that authentic living is not solely an individual responsibility but is substantially enabled or constrained by structural conditions. This includes reducing reliance on constant surveillance and quantified performance metrics in workplaces and educational settings, creating protected spaces for experimentation and failure without reputational consequences, implementing policies that limit after-hours digital communication expectations, and fostering organizational cultures that explicitly value diverse expressions of competence and contribution rather than singular, narrow definitions of success.

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