

Beyond Screen Time: Relationships between Psychological Well-being and Self-
Perceptions in Social Media versus Offline Contexts across Generations

by

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ABSTRACT

People express themselves differently on social media than in physical life. Some seem as if they were a different person on social media than offline. However, little research has tested whether the perceived similarity between offline and social media contexts is linked to psychological well-being. Whether people perceive themselves as similar between offline and social media contexts may contribute to understanding the links between social media use and psychological well-being. This dissertation addresses whether people perceive themselves as the same on social media as offline (Studies 1 and 2), whether this perceived similarity is linked to psychological well-being (Study 2), and the potential role of generation (Study 2)—focusing on comparisons between digital “natives” (Generation Z) and “immigrants” (Baby Boomers) who show different patterns of social media use. Across two studies of college student and online samples, participants completed measures of the Big Five personality traits specified for offline and social media contexts. Study 2 participants further completed measures of psychological well-being (e.g., depression, life satisfaction, self-esteem) and submitted records of their logged mobile phone use.

Findings showed that across generations, people tend to view themselves as similar between offline and social media contexts but not the same in terms of their personality traits. Boomers actually perceived themselves as more similar between offline and social media than Gen Z, even when controlling for logged mobile phone use. Perceived similarity between offline and social media selves was not linked positively to psychological well-being (and there were small generation differences whereby the link appeared to be more negative in Gen Z relative to Boomers). The expectation that

perceived similarity between offline and social media should be linked to positive outcomes in terms of psychological well-being may not apply to the context of social media, particularly for Gen Z. Studying psychology in offline and social media contexts separately and jointly will be important to understand the social well-being of the emerging digital world.

DEDICATION

To Mom.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Are people the same on social media as they are offline? People spend a lot of time on social media. Global reports estimate that almost 2/3 of the world's population averages around three hours daily on social media platforms (Chaffey, 2022). What is notable is not just the time people spend on social media but what social media allows people to do. Mediated platforms have long been noted for letting people control how they present themselves (Postmes et al., 1998). The difference is that today's social media let people do so whenever they choose and to vast audiences of millions of users and networks across the globe (Carr & Hayes, 2015). Mobile devices essentially let people carry around a self in their pockets which may be quite different from who they are in physical life. Some people act almost as if they are a different person on social media than offline.

However, little research has examined how people are different between offline and social media contexts. Most research focuses on the relationships between social media use in terms of frequency, screen time, active vs. passive use, and type of platform to explain various psychological and behavioral phenomena (e.g., see Cheng et al., 2021; Valkenburg et al., 2022 for meta-reviews). An assumption is that the patterns behind these phenomena regarding the ways people think, feel, and behave are consistent between offline and social media life. This is an understandable assumption. Many models of psychological and behavioral phenomena assume that people are consistent across contexts (e.g., Allport & Odbert, 1936; Costa & McCrae, 1992; Digman, 1990; Goldberg, 1990). However, people often think, feel, and behave differently depending on

the context (Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Sheldon et al., 1997). The self-presentational features of social media pose a unique environment from the offline world (McFarland & Ployhart, 2015). The relationships between a person's use (e.g., how much time they spend on social media) and their behavior and experience (e.g., personality, psychological well-being) may be quite different depending on how they use media in reference to their offline environment (e.g., to explore new identities vs. behave in ways consistent with who they are offline). Not surprisingly, the focus on explaining psychological and behavioral phenomena based on how people use social media in terms of frequency, screen time, etc. rather than the specific ways they use social media often shows mixed results (e.g., see links between social media use and psychological well-being or personality traits; Huang, 2019; Liu & Campbell, 2017; Valkenburg et al., 2022). The impact of this issue is underscored by public concerns and policy decisions regarding media based on findings that rely purely on measures of use such as screen time (Orben, 2020a; 2020b).

The present research examines whether people perceive themselves as the same between offline and social media contexts. The range of social contexts in a person's life involves unique roles and identities that result in a distinct sense of self for each context (Brewer & Chen, 2007; Cooley, 1902; James, 1890; McConnell, 2011; Mead, 1934; Turner & Onorato, 1999). Some people perceive themselves as more similar across contexts than others. For example, some see themselves as more similar across daily contexts such as their workplace or educational settings (Schmidt et al., 1995) or to possible selves such as who they might become (e.g., Bixter et al., 2020; Hershfield,

2011; Markus & Nurius, 1986). The question then is whether the selves emerging from offline experiences overlap with selves emerging from social media experiences.

The perceived similarity between offline and social media selves may also help to clarify whether social media use is linked positively or negatively to *psychological well-being* (e.g., depression, life satisfaction). A core hypothesis in the literature on self-continuity and authenticity is that, at least in individualistic cultures, the more similar a person perceives themselves across contexts, the more they will experience positive psychological well-being outcomes (Bixter et al., 2020; Donahue et al., 1993; English & John, 2013; Korchin, 1976; Leary, 2003; Sedikides et al., 2023; Sokol & Serper, 2017; 2019; Slabu et al., 2014; Swann et al., 2007). Individualistic cultural systems value maintaining a stable, consistent self across time and context (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 2018). A person who internalizes this individualistic value and perceived themselves as consistent across different aspects of their life is likely to successfully navigate an individualistic cultural environment (Caldwell-Harris & Ayçiçeği, 2006; Triandis, 2001; Triandis & Gelfand, 1998)—and, as a result, experience positive psychological well-being given the match between their characteristics and their broader cultural environment (Fulmer et al., 2010; Gebauer et al., 2020; Diener et al., 2018).

Will the hypothesis on the positive link between perceived similarity across contexts and psychological well-being apply to social media? People may report positive outcomes in terms of psychological well-being if they perceive themselves as similar between offline and social media contexts. However, social media allow people to explore new identities, overcome constraints in their offline environment, and extend their existing social resources in ways not possible in many offline or other mediated

contexts (e.g., Behm-Morwitz, 2013; Cheng et al., 2021; McFarland & Ployhart, 2015). Individuals who view themselves as different on social media may experience positive psychological well-being outcomes. The relationships between indicators of social media use like screen time and psychological well-being have drawn widespread public concern yet show unclear relationships empirically (Orben, 2020a; 2020b; Valkenburg et al., 2022). The perceived similarity between offline and social media contexts may thus offer an opportunity to explain an identity process of theoretical relevance in today's digital age and help clarify a practical issue in the eyes of the public.

Much of the research on social media use has examined generations like Generation Z who use social media heavily while they are still forming critical aspects of the self. This focus is understandable given that most of the concern between media use and psychological well-being regards young people. However, there is a neglect of examining generations like Baby Boomers who are adjusting to digital technology long after the development of the self. Boomers undergo challenges such as cognitive decline, decreased mobility, and feelings of loneliness. How they use social media may mitigate or exacerbate these challenges. Boomers who become acclimated to digital communities that serve their need to connect with others or who obtain resources they would not be able to offline may mitigate the psychological and social consequences of aging. On the other hand, Boomers who fail to adjust to new media technologies may prevent themselves from online resources and forms of self-expression that are increasingly required to function in an increasingly digital world. In either case, comparing perceived similarity between offline and social media life across generations and its links to psychological well-being shows whether these links are unique to young people or

represent the broader context of a heavily mediated environment. This dissertation addresses the extent that people perceive overlap between the offline and social media self, the links between this overlap and psychological well-being, and the potential role of generation.

Perceived Similarity between Offline & Social Media Contexts

People's perceptions of themselves are not fixed but vary by social environment (Higgins, 1987; Kihlstrom & Cantor, 1984; Linville, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986). There are also substantial individual differences in self-perception across different contexts (Block, 1961; English & Chen, 2007; Donahue et al., 1993; Sheldon et al., 1997)—individual differences that may extend to the online world. On the one hand, some people may view their social media self as an authentic extension or complement to who they are offline (e.g., Back et al., 2010; Cheng et al., 2019). Others may use social media to present a different persona on social media (e.g., Behm-Morawitz, 2013). Many people probably show some degree of overlap in which they are similar in some ways between offline and social media contexts but not in others.

Potential individual differences in perceived similarity between the offline and social media self beg the question: Perceived similarity in terms of what? The present research focuses on perceived similarity in terms of personality traits and self-continuity. Personality traits are the most fundamental approach to understanding who a person is across contexts (McAdams, 1995; McAdams & Pals, 2006) and make up an important aspect of how people view themselves (John et al., 2010). People even report personality traits as more important for psychological perceived similarity than memories, desires, and perceptual abilities (Strohlinger & Nichols, 2014). An assumption of trait theory is

that people are the same across contexts (Allport & Odbert, 1936; Costa & McCrae, 1992; Digman, 1990; Goldberg, 1990). An alternative perspective is to consider how each context in a person's life may show unique patterns of their thought, feeling, and behavior (Fleeson, 2004; Mischel & Peake, 1982; Mischel et al., 2002; Mischel & Shoda, 1997). An empirical question is whether people perceive the personality traits of their offline self as the same as those of their social media self. The present research contextualizes measures of personality to assess people's offline and social media traits by specifying the context at the item level (see Robie et al., 2017; Schulze et al., 2021).

The present research focuses on people's perceptions of their *Big Five* personality traits. The Big Five represent five broad dimensions: *Openness* consists of how intellectually imaginative, aesthetically sensitive, or creative an individual is; *conscientiousness* consists of an individual's levels of responsibility, productiveness, and organization; *extraversion* consists of an individual's levels of sociability, energy, and assertiveness; *agreeableness* consists of an individual's levels of compassion, respect, and trust of others; and *neuroticism* consists of an individual's levels of depression, anxiety, and emotional volatility (Soto & John, 2017a). A recent review even suggests that most commonly assessed psychological constructs are essentially facets within the Big Five taxonomy (Bainbridge et al., 2022).

The present research considers three questions in which people may perceive similarity in personality traits between their offline and social media selves. First, there is the question of *how much similarity* people perceive. For example, some people may be equally as extraverted on social media as offline whereas others may show little overlap in how extraverted they are between the two contexts. The question concerns the *size* of

the correlation between offline and social media personality. Second, there is the question of *what that similarity means*. For example, one person may show higher levels of extraversion on social media than offline while another person shows the reverse—yet these two individuals may show equal levels of overlap between their offline and social media extraversion. The question concerns the difference in personality between the two contexts. Third, there is the question of individual differences in *rank-order* between offline and social media contexts. Changes in rank-order between two contexts are distinct from changes in means (Block & Robbins, 1993; Specht et al. 2011). A person may show a difference in their mean level of extraversion between offline and social media contexts, for example, while maintaining their rank-order within the population in both contexts. Thus, the present research examines both the level of perceived overlap in personality between offline and social media contexts and the direction and rank order of differences (i.e., offline higher vs. social media higher).

Beyond personality traits, the present research also examines self-continuity between offline and social media contexts. Traditionally, research on self-continuity focused on the perceived connection between temporal selves (Ersner-Hershfield et al., 2009; Parfit, 1971, 1984; Sedikides et al., 2023; Sokol & Serper, 2017; 2019). Some people perceive strong connections between the past, present, and future; others view the future or past selves as if they were different persons (Pronin & Ross, 2006). Like future or past selves, thinking about the social media self requires people to imagine themselves outside of the present, physical world they inhabit. There is a sense in which one may feel “continuous” with their social media self. Measurable components of self-continuity capture how connected a person feels to their future self, how positively they view it, and

whether it is easy for them to imagine (Bixter et al., 2020; Hershfield, 2011) offer a global assessment of overlap in perceptions between the offline and social media self that complements the specific traits in the Big Five taxonomy. Taken together, the Big Five and self-continuity capture aspects of the person that encompass the main quantifiable levels of the person (i.e., dispositional traits and process-level constructs; McAdams & Pals, 2006).

Defining the Self Offline versus on Social Media

If there are substantial individual differences in the perceived similarity between offline and social media contexts, which context is more self-defining? People have a general concept of themselves across contexts to organize their varied behavior and experiences (Cervone & Shoda, 1999). However, from the frame-of-reference approach (see Robie et al., 2017; Schulze et al., 2021), people's perceptions of themselves may involve contexts they inhabit even when no context is explicitly specified. An example in personality assessment is when people think of specific contexts when reporting their personality even when no context is specified. People report different levels of extraversion when thinking about themselves at work versus with friends (Sheldon et al., 1997) and on social media versus offline (Bunker & Kwan, 2021). When reporting extraversion without a specified context, some people may consider who they are with friends or offline but not who they are at work or on social media. A consequence is that the report may not reflect the actual level of extraversion across all contexts a person spends time in. Thus, the present research compares perceptions of the offline and social media selves in comparison to their "general self," which represents who they are when no context is specified. A key question is whether who people believe they are on social

media will reveal something unique about their general self independently from their offline self.

It is also important to consider what “offline” and “social media” contexts entail. One common approach is to examine psychological and behavioral phenomena in relation to individual platform use (e.g., Facebook and Snapchat). This approach has merit but there are three reasons why it is inappropriate for the aims of the present research. First, when the concern is how psychological and behavioral phenomena compare to offline contexts, one may argue that the offline world should be divided into separate contexts as well (e.g., the ways people think, feel, and behave in the workplace may vary from recreational or educational spaces just as they vary between social media platforms). Identifying *specific* contexts of the overall social media landscape to compare to *all* contexts in the offline world is an unbalanced comparison. It is also unclear which specific social media and offline contexts are appropriate comparisons. Second, social media constantly change. Focusing on individual platforms runs the risk of the “moving target” problem in which findings can become obsolete if the relevant feature is no longer part of the platform or the platform has changed altogether (Bayer et al., 2020). Third, perceived similarity between the offline and social media self relies on people’s varied experiences. Even a small sample of social media users may use a wide variety of social media platforms and inhabit a range of offline spaces. This range presents difficulties in comparing the offline and social media self across individual physical spaces or online platforms that represent everyone’s unique experiences. Thus, this dissertation considers the commonalities that all social media platforms share in contrast to those shared by all offline contexts to examine the perceived similarity between the offline and social media

selves. This approach is consistent with recent calls to consider social media as a broader environment that shares common elements that are distinct from the offline world (Bayer et al., 2020; McFarland & Ployhart, 2015).

Psychological Well-being

Will links between perceived similarity across contexts and psychological well-being (see Bixter et al., 2020; Donahue et al., 1993; English & John, 2013; Korchin, 1976; Leary, 2003; Sedikides et al., 2023; Sokol & Serper, 2017; 2019; Slabu et al., 2014; Swann et al., 2007) apply to social media contexts? A person who uses social media to complement their offline life and views themselves as the same between offline and social media life may be able to integrate their mediated experiences in adaptive ways—suggesting a positive link between the perceived similarity between offline and social media selves and psychological well-being. However, the ways people use social media to explore new identities and overcome constraints in their offline environment may be liberating. Another possibility is that individuals who experience positive psychological well-being may be more comfortable in using social media in ways that deviate from their offline life—an example of seeking rather than conserving psychological resources that exemplifies those who are less depressed, more satisfied with life, etc. (Allen et al., 2018; DeYoung, 2006). These possibilities suggest that less perceived similarity between offline and social media selves may be positively linked to psychological well-being. Given the long hours spent by billions of people in digital communities, the stakes of these possibilities are high in terms of the psychological and social well-being of the digital world. The present research considers both positive (e.g., life satisfaction) and negative (e.g., depression) indicators of psychological well-being,

which represent correlated but distinct aspects of mental health (Keyes, 2007; Suldo & Shaffer, 2008).

Role of Generation

The present research considers how perceived similarity between offline and social media contexts and its links to psychological well-being may vary by generation. Digital “native” generations are those believed to be fluent in the digital language of computers, video games, and social media (Evans & Robertson, 2020; Prensky, 2001, Twenge, 2017). Millennials (born 1981-1996)¹, Generation Z (born 1997-2012), and to some extent, Generation X (born 1965-1980) are digital natives. Digital “immigrants” on the other hand are believed to maintain their offline “accent”: the language of older communication technologies and preference for offline interaction. Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964) and the Silent Generation (born 1928-45) are digital immigrants. Digital natives spend more time on social media than digital immigrants (Bolton et al., 2013). More time spent in a context is associated with a higher connection to that context (i.e., more likely to perceive the self in that context as representative of who one is; Ryder et al., 2000; Sheldon et al., 1997). Thus, a hypothesis based on generation differences in screen time is that digital natives may perceive more similarity between their offline and social media selves than digital immigrants.

Overview of the Dissertation Studies

This dissertation addresses three research questions across two studies. The first research question is: *Do people view themselves as the same between offline and social media?* Perceived similarity was assessed in terms of personality traits (Studies 1 and 2)

¹ Generation categories based on reports from the Pew Research Center (Dimock, 2019).

and social media self-continuity (Study 2). The dissertation tests whether there will be moderate to strong (vs. less than moderate) correlations between the offline and social media personality traits. Research on the consistency in the Big Five showed most *rs* to be around .5 to .7 between personality reports for important social contexts of a person's life (e.g., interacting with friends vs. family vs. strangers; Church et al., 2012). If the correlations between offline and social media traits reach these levels, then this would suggest that people perceive themselves as similar between offline and social media contexts as other contexts of daily life. I further explored whether the personality traits of the social media self could predict the traits of the general self independently of the offline self.

Study 2 addressed the second and third research questions. The second research question is: *Is the perceived similarity between the offline and social media selves linked to psychological well-being?* The present research tests whether perceived similarity in perceptions between the offline and social media traits will be positively (vs. negatively) related to psychological well-being. The third research question is: *Does this perceived similarity and its links to psychological well-being vary by generation?* The present research tests whether self-perceived similarity and links between this perceived similarity and psychological well-being vary between Generation Z and Baby Boomers. Specifically, the dissertation tests whether Gen Z perceives more similarity between their offline and social media selves than Boomers given generation differences in screen time.

CHAPTER 2

STUDY 1

Study 1 included two samples of participants. Sample 1 was comprised of college students. College students spend a considerable amount of time on social media (Bolton et al., 2012) and they comprise a relatively homogenous sample in terms of education level, age, and digital experiences (Bodford et al., 2021; Kim, 2019; Peterson, 2001). Thus, this sample serves to lay the ground for replication in other populations that may not be as immersed in social media. Sample 2 sought to replicate the findings in a non-college student sample. Participants in all samples completed measures of personality specified for offline and social media contexts and the general self. Table 1 overviews the methods used for each sample, which I describe in more detail below.

Table 1
Overview of Methods in the Dissertation Studies

Study	1		2	
Sample	1	2	3	4
Participants	Student ($n = 1081$; $M_{\text{age}} = 19.17$)	Prolific ($n = 260$; $M_{\text{age}} = 42.48$)	Prolific ($n = 199$; $M_{\text{age}} = 22.12$)	Prolific ($n = 201$; $M_{\text{age}} = 63.78$)
Personality Measure(s)	BFI-2	BFI-2-S	BFI-2-S SMSC	BFI-2-S SMSC
Psychological well-being Measure(s)	-	-	CES-D RLSS SE	CES-D RLSS SE

Note. BFI-2 = 60 item Big Five Inventory 2 (Soto & John 2017a). BFI-2-S = 30 item Big Five Inventory 2 (Soto & John, 2017b). SMSC = Social Media Self Continuity (adapted from Aron et al., 1992; Bixter et al., 2020). CES-D = Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977; Eaton et al., 2004). RLSS = Riverside Life Satisfaction Scale (Diener et al., 1985). SE = Single Item Self Esteem Scale (Robins et al., 2001).

Method

Participants

Sample 1 included 1125 college students who completed the study for course credit. After removing participants that did not correctly answer an attention check question, the final sample consisted of 1081 participants. Participants identified as 55.2% women; 43.7% men; 1.1% non-binary; $M_{age} = 19.17$; $SD_{age} = 1.89$; 54.9% White/Caucasian, 18.8% Latino/Latina, 11.1% Asian/Asian American, 5.1% Black/African America, 3.9% South Asian/Indian, 2.3% Middle Eastern/Middle Eastern American, .9% American Indian, 3.0% multiple ethnic or racial backgrounds or specified a background not listed. Socioeconomic breakdown showed the samples to be 6.9% working class, 11.7% lower-middle class, 36.7% middle class, 38.0% upper middle class, 6.0% upper class, and .6% did not specify one of the five listed categories.

Sample 2 included 261 participants recruited via Prolific Academic and received 2.17 USD for their participation. Only 1 participant did not correctly answer an attention check question, yielding a final sample of 260. Participants identified as 77.7% women; 21.9% men; 0.4% non-binary; $M_{age} = 42.48$; $SD_{age} = 11.74$; 90.0% White/Caucasian, 1.2% Latino/Latina, 2.3% Asian/Asian American, 2.3% Black/African America, 1.2% South Asian/Indian, 3.1% multiple ethnic or racial backgrounds or specified a background not listed. Socioeconomic breakdown showed the samples to be 35.8% working class, 30.8% lower-middle class, 31.9% middle class, 1.5% upper middle class, and 0% Upper class. All participants completed the study online via Qualtrics survey software.

Design

Participants reported perceptions of their personality of offline, social media, and general selves across all samples. The presentation order of all personality reports across samples was counterbalanced to address potential order effects.

Measures

Big Five. The samples completed versions of the Big Five Inventory-2 (BFI-2; Soto & John, 2017a). The Big Five Inventory-2 built on and extended the most widely used measure of personality (Big Five Inventory; John et al., 1991). The BFI-2 captures the broad bandwidth of each trait dimension while also capturing the secondary facets within each dimension and preserving the predictive power of various life outcomes. Sample 1 completed the 60-item version (BFI-2, Soto & John, 2017a) and Sample 2 completed the 30-item version (BFI-2-S, Soto & John, 2017b).

The Big Five Inventory-2 contains items in which participants report their agreement (1 = disagree strongly to 5 = agree strongly) to statements capturing their level of openness (e.g., “I am someone who is complex, a deep thinker”), conscientiousness (e.g., “I am someone who is reliable, can always be counted on), extraversion (e.g., I am someone who is talkative), agreeableness (e.g., “I am someone who is compassionate, has a soft heart”), and emotional stability (e.g., “I am someone who worries a lot”).

Following the frame of reference approach (Robie et al., 2017; Schulze et al., 2021), participants completed the BFI-2 versions specifying offline contexts (e.g., “I am someone who is compassionate, has a soft heart *offline*”), social media contexts (e.g., “I am someone who is compassionate, has a soft heart *on social media*”), and in general (e.g., I am someone who is compassionate, has a soft heart”). Cronbach’s alphas showed

acceptable reliability for the Big Five trait scales in all three contexts ($\alpha > .70$; Table 2), which is comparable to those shown in the scale's validation (i.e., $\alpha > .73$; Soto & John 2017a; 2017b). There was one exception where reliability where conscientiousness on social media showed $\alpha = .53$ for Sample 2. This is consistent with prior research showing that some items assessing conscientious may not apply to social media (see Bunker & Kwan, 2021).

Table 2
Descriptives for the Contextualized Big Five (Study 1)

Trait	Offline				Social Media				General			
	Student		Prolific		Student		Prolific		Student		Prolific	
	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	α	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	α	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	α	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	α	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	α	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	α
O	3.65 (.63)	.80	3.55 (.76)	.77	3.37 (.59)	.74	3.17 (.76)	.74	3.68 (.63)	.82	3.56 (.76)	.80
C	3.55 (.66)	.84	3.71 (.76)	.78	3.39 (.59)	.77	3.48 (.56)	.53	3.53 (.66)	.85	3.68 (.78)	.80
E	3.33 (.73)	.85	2.84 (.87)	.79	2.87 (.76)	.86	2.21 (.82)	.82	3.33 (.72)	.85	2.78 (.85)	.79
A	3.77 (.56)	.77	3.83 (.61)	.73	3.57 (.60)	.77	3.49 (.62)	.71	3.74 (.58)	.78	3.77 (.63)	.76
ES	3.18 (.80)	.89	3.26 (.97)	.87	3.47 (.72)	.85	3.64 (.82)	.83	3.10 (.81)	.89	3.18 (.97)	.88
<i>M</i> across traits	3.49 (.44)	.83	3.43 (.52)	.79	3.34 (.42)	.80	3.20 (.43)	.73	3.48 (.44)	.84	3.40 (.51)	.80

Note. *N*s = 1079 (Student) and 260 (Prolific). O = Openness. C = Conscientiousness, E = Extraversion, A = Agreeableness, ES = Emotional Stability.

Results and Discussion

Do People View Themselves as the Same Between Offline and Social Media?

Across Traits. I first examined the correlations in personality averaged across traits between contexts. Across samples (Sample 1/Sample 2), social media personality traits strongly correlated with offline traits ($r(1080/260) = .562/.561$; 95% CI [.520/.471,

.602/.639]) and general traits ($r(1081/260) = .581/.591$; 95% CI [.540/.506, .619/.665]).

The strong correlations suggest that people perceive their offline and social media personality as similar. Yet almost half of the variance was still unaccounted for, suggesting that people do not perceive their offline and social media personality as the same. Moreover, offline and general traits were almost identical ($r(1080/260) = .909/.932$; 95% CI [.898/.913, .919/.946]), and the correlation between general and offline traits was considerably stronger than the correlation between social media and general traits ($Z = 19.91/11.27$, $ps < .001$, $Q = .86/.99$). These findings suggest that offline contexts are the primary context when people think about who they are.

By Trait. I next examined the correlations in personality traits between the contexts for each of the Big Five (see Table 3). Social media traits moderately to strongly correlated with the offline and general traits (r s ranged from .384 to .764). Offline and general traits strongly correlated for each trait (r s ranged from .825 to .929). Extraversion showed correlations below $r = .5$ between social media and offline/general contexts while the other four traits showed correlations above $r = .5$. The correlations between offline and social media extraversion ($r = .384/.374$) were significantly weaker than the average correlations of the other four traits between offline and social media ($r = .600/.605$; $Z = -6.70/-3.49$, $ps < .001$, $Q = -.29/-.31$). These findings suggest that people may view some aspects of their social media and offline selves as more similar than other aspects.

Table 3*Correlations of the Big Five Traits between Contexts (Study 1)*

	O		C		E		A		ES	
	G	Off	G	Off	G	Off	G	Off	G	Off
G	-		-		-		-		-	
Off	.865/ .908	-	.887/ .909	-	.884/ .902	-	.825/ .878	-	.899/ .929	-
SM	.648/ .764	.629/ .728	.524/ .510	.505/ .500	.413/ .393	.384/ .374	.632/ .670	.646/ .623	.622/ .598	.618/ .570

Note. $N = (1081/260)$. G = general self. Off = offline self. SM = social media self.

Defining the Self Offline vs. on Social Media. Do the traits of the social media self reveal something about the general self independent from the traits of the offline self? To this end, I conducted a series of multiple regressions to test whether the social media personality traits could predict the general traits independently from the offline traits (see Table 4). I first checked for multicollinearity. Tolerances were above .468 and VIFs were less than 2.131, suggesting that multicollinearity was not present in the analyses. Across traits and for each of the Big Five, the social media traits independently predicted the general traits independently of the offline traits.

Table 4
Predicting the Personality Traits of the General Self (Study 1)

Variable	Model			
	B	95% CI	β	Partial r
	Overall ($r^2_{adj} = .913/.935$)			
Offline Trait(s)	.850/.851	.820/.800, .879/.902	.856/.875	.866/.899
Social Media Trait(s)	.100/.117	.069/.056, .130/.179	.095/.100	.190/.229
	Openness ($r^2_{adj} = .765/.845$)			
Offline Trait(s)	.764/.753	.726/.,683, .801/.824	.756/.749	.772/.794
Social Media Trait(s)	.187/.220	.146/.149, .227/.291	.172/.218	.267/.356
	Conscientiousness ($r^2_{adj} = .794/.828$)			
Offline Trait(s)	.835/.887	.804/.827, .867/.946	.837/.871	.847/.877
Social Media Trait(s)	.111/.103	.076/.022, .147/.184	.099/.074	.186/.154
	Extraversion ($r^2_{adj} = .787/.816$)			
Offline Trait(s)	.837/.864	.808/.809, .866/.920	.852/.878	.863/.886
Social Media Trait(s)	.080/.067	.052/.008, .108/.126	.084/.064	.166/.138
	Agreeableness ($r^2_{adj} = .695/.795$)			
Offline Trait(s)	.743/.775	.690/.702, .787/.848	.721/.753	.706/.794
Social Media Trait(s)	.156/.204	.114/.132, .198/.275	.161/.202	.217/.330
	Emotional stability ($r^2_{adj} = .815/.868$)			
Offline Trait(s)	.841/.869	.808/.815, .874/.923	.834/.871	.836/.892
Social Media Trait(s)	.119/.120	.082/.056, .156/.183	.105/.102	.189/.225

Note. $N = (1080/260)$. All values significant at $p < .05$. Values left of the dash are for Gen Z. Values right of the dash are for Baby Boomers.

CHAPTER 3

STUDY 2

Findings in Study 1 suggest that people view themselves as similar but not the same between social media and offline. Study 2 built on and extended the findings of Study 1 with three major aims. First, Study 2 examined whether perceived similarity between the offline and social media traits was linked to psychological well-being (positively vs. negatively). Second, Study 2 examined whether members of Generation Z will show more perceived similarity between offline and social media contexts than members of the Baby Boomer generation. These two generations represent key generations of respectively digital natives and immigrants. Third, Study 2 included a more comprehensive test of perceived similarity between offline and social media contexts by examining continuity with the social media self.

Method

Participants

The two samples consisted of 401 participants. All but 1 participant passed the attention check, yielding a final sample of 400 participants. Generation Z participants ($n = 199$) identified as 48.2% women; 49.7% men; 2.0% non-binary; $M_{\text{age}} = 22.13$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.09$; 70.4% White/Caucasian, 1.5% Latino/Latina, 7% Asian/Asian American, 6% Black/African American, 1.5% Middle Eastern/Middle Eastern American, 10.6% South Asian/Indian, 3% multiple ethnic or racial backgrounds or specified a background not listed. Socioeconomic breakdown showed the samples to be 31.7% working class, 30.2% lower-middle class, 30.7% middle class, 6.5% upper middle class, .5% Upper class, and .5% did not specify one of the five listed categories.

Baby Boomer participants ($n = 201$) identified as 49.8% women; 50.2% men; 0% non-binary; $M_{\text{age}} = 63.78$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 4.98$; 95.5% White/Caucasian, .5% Asian/Asian American, 1% South Asian/Indian, 1% Black/African America, and 2% multiple ethnic or racial backgrounds or specified a background not listed. Socioeconomic breakdown showed the samples to be 31.8% working class, 22.9% lower-middle class, 41.3% middle class, 4.0% upper middle class, 0% upper class. All participants were recruited via Prolific Academic, received 2.00 USD for their participation, and completed the study online via Qualtrics survey software. Relative to other platforms, Prolific Academic participants are more likely to pass attention checks, read instructions, and work slowly enough to read item content (Douglas et al., 2023).

Design

The study design was the same as Study 1: Participants complete measurements of their personality traits specified for offline, social media, and general contexts. The presentation order of the contextualized measures was randomized.

Measures

Perceived Similarity in terms of Personality. Participants completed the 30-item version of the BFI-2 (Soto & John, 2017b) as used in Study 1, Sample 2. Reliabilities across traits were $\alpha > .70$ with few exceptions (e.g., offline and social media openness and social media conscientiousness in the Gen Z sample; Table 5).

Table 5
Descriptives for Contextualized Big Five (Study 2)

Trait	Offline				<i>d</i>	Social Media				<i>d</i>	General				<i>d</i>
	Gen Z (younger adults)		Boomers (older adults)			Gen Z (younger adults)		Boomers (older adults)			Gen Z (younger adults)		Boomers (older adults)		
	<i>M</i> (SD)	α	<i>M</i> (SD)	α		<i>M</i> (SD)	α	<i>M</i> (SD)	α		<i>M</i> (SD)	α	<i>M</i> (SD)	α	
O	3.59 (.70)	.69	3.70 (.88)	.85	-.14	3.38 (.71)	.67	3.24 (.89)	.82	.17	3.59 (.72)	.76	3.71 (.87)	.85	-.14
C	3.30 (.78)	.75	3.89 (.82)	.85	-.73	3.30 (.65)	.60	3.65 (.67)	.74	-.54	3.32 (.76)	.77	3.88 (.83)	.86	-.71
E	2.82 (.86)	.78	2.97 (.84)	.76	-.18	2.44 (.81)	.77	2.37 (.83)	.81	.09	2.82 (.86)	.79	2.93 (.87)	.79	-.13
A	3.70 (.68)	.69	4.08 (.71)	.81	-.55	3.40 (.76)	.76	3.80 (.69)	.73	-.55	3.65 (.72)	.76	4.05 (.74)	.82	-.56
ES	2.92 (.96)	.86	3.77 (.86)	.87	-.92	3.33 (.85)	.79	3.87 (.76)	.82	-.68	2.88 (.97)	.87	3.73 (.88)	.89	-.91
<i>M</i> across traits	3.27 (.49)	.76	3.68 (.53)	.83	-.81	3.17 (.43)	.72	3.39 (.53)	.78	-.45	3.25 (.49)	.79	3.66 (.52)	.84	-.81

Note. *N* = 199 (Gen Z), 201 (Boomers). O = Openness. C = Conscientiousness, E =

Extraversion, A = Agreeableness, ES = Emotional Stability. *ds* bolded indicates $p < .05$.

I further calculated three indices of perceived similarity between offline and social media contexts to assess individual differences that may be linked to psychological well-being: 1) Within-person correlations, 2) difference scores, and 3) rank-order change between the offline and social media Big Five.

1) I calculated the within-person correlation between offline and social media personality perceptions. That is, each participant receives a score reflecting the correlation between their scores on their offline and social media items for a given trait. For example, participants receive a score reflecting the correlation between their scores on the items assessing offline and social media extraversion—after the items were scored to be in the same direction (i.e., after scores on negatively worded items were reversed). I keyed scores on the relevant neuroticism items to be in the same positive direction as the

scores on the other Big Five traits. This approach is consistent with research on self-enhancement suggesting that higher scores on Big Five items indicate more positive self-perceptions (Kwan et al., 2004). In sum, scores (i.e., perceived similarity between offline and social media Big Five) reflect the direct level of overlap between the offline and social media personality. A participant with a score of $r = -1$ suggests they perceive their offline and social media self as complete opposites while a participant with a score of $r = 1$ suggests they perceive the two selves as identical.

2) I calculated the difference between the offline and social media trait scores for each trait. This index addresses the possibility that participants may share levels of perceived similarity between offline and social media contexts but show differences in the direction of the perceived similarity. To illustrate, one person may perceive themselves as more extraverted on social media than offline while another person perceives themselves as more extraverted offline than on social media—however, these two people may have identical levels of overlap between the offline and social media selves as shown by within-person correlations between offline and social media extraversion. Importantly, these two individuals may further show different relationships between perceived similarity offline vs. social media and psychological well-being—suggesting that the relationship may depend not just on *how much* similarity but what that similarity *means*.

3) I calculated rank-order change between the offline and social media personality traits. Given that changes in rank-order between two contexts are distinct from changes in means (Block & Robbins, 1993; Specht et al. 2011), it is important to consider how a person may show a difference in their mean levels of personality between offline and

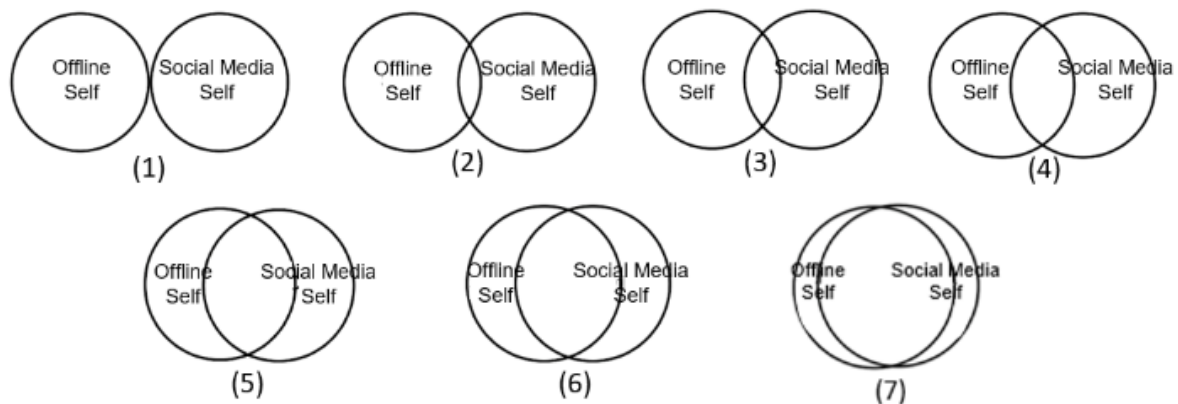
social media contexts while maintaining their rank-order within the population across the two contexts.

Social Media Self-continuity. Participants completed a measure of continuity with the social media self. I used a modified version of items from the Future Self-Identification Scale (Bixter et al., 2020) and the Inclusion of the Self into the Other Scale (Aron et al., 1992). Participants are shown a series of overlapping circles representing the level of perceived overlap between any two selves. As shown in Figure 1, for example, seven pairs of circles represent varying degrees of overlap between the offline and social media selves. Participants indicate which pair of circles represent how similar (item 1) and connected (item 2) they feel between the two versions of themselves. Participants also completed these two items regarding the overlap between their offline and general self and between their social media and general self.

Figure 1

Measure of Perceived Overlap between the Offline and Social Media Selves

The following pair of circles represent varying degrees of overlap between who you are offline and who you are on social media (offline self vs. social media self).



Participants also indicated how much positivity they felt toward their social media self (i.e., “how much do you like your social media self”; 1 = not at all to 7 = like as

much as possible; item 3) and vividness of their social media self (“how easy is it for you to visualize a mental image of your social media self”; 1 = very difficult to 7 = very easy; item 4). An aggregate score of the four items was created (i.e., continuity with the social media self, $\alpha = .67/.75$). Participants also reported how much positivity they felt toward their offline self and the vividness of their offline self.

Psychological Well-being

Participants completed three indicators of psychological well-being: 1) Depression was assessed with the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D-R; Radloff, 1977; Eaton et al., 2004). 2) Life satisfaction as assessed with the Riverside Life Satisfaction Scale (Margolis et al., 2019), which is a revision of the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985). Six items (e.g., “I am content with my life”; 1 = strongly disagree to 7 strongly agree). 3) Self-esteem was assessed with the single-item self-esteem scale (“I have high self-esteem”; 1 = strongly disagree to 7 strongly agree; Robins et al., 2001). Participants in Generation Z were more depressed, less satisfied with life, and had lower self-esteem than Boomers (Table 6).

Table 6
Descriptives for Psychological Well-Being and Mobile Phone Use

Variable	α		$M (SD)$		d
	Gen Z (younger adults)	Boomers (older adults)	Gen Z (younger adults)	Boomers (older adults)	
Depression	.94	.91	21.64 (13.14)	11.04 (8.88)	.95
Life satisfaction	.89	.90	3.95 (1.36)	4.63 (1.40)	-.50
Self-esteem	-	-	3.92 (1.68)	4.72 (1.66)	-.48
Mobile phone use	-	-	5.12 (1.02)	3.69 (1.44)	1.16

Note. $N = 199$ (Gen Z), 201 (Boomers). Bold indicates $p < .001$.

Mobile Phone Use

As a control variable, I included how much time participants typically spent daily on their mobile device obtained from their logged smartphone records (i.e., “Screen Time” in iOS and “Digital Well-Being and Parental Controls” in Android). Logged mobile phone use are more accurate predictors of social media use than self-reports (Parry et al., 2021). Further, the majority of social media use takes place on smartphones and most social media platforms are integrated with other digital applications on mobile devices (Chaffey, 2022). How much time a person spends on their mobile device is likely to reflect the extent that they are engaged with social media. As one might expect, Gen Z participants spent more time on their phone than Boomers (Table 6). Of note, Boomers tended to spend a several hours a day on their phone, suggesting that they are not lacking in digital engagement. Also, consistent with prior literature (Valkenburg et al., 2022), mobile phone use did not show strong links to psychological well-being in Generation Z (Table 7). Indeed, mobile phone use only significantly linked to psychological well-being in the case of greater depression for Boomers. I examined whether comparisons between

perceived similarity between offline and social media and its links to psychological well-being across generations held with and without holding for mobile phone use.

Table 7

Correlations between Psychological Well-being and Mobile Phone Use

	Depression	Life satisfaction	Self-esteem	Mobile phone use
Depression	-	-.719	-.586	.187
Life satisfaction	-.714	-	.595	-.125
Self-esteem	-.611	.617	-	-.134
Mobile phone use	.013	-.007	-.082	-

Note. $N = 199$ (Gen Z), 201 (Boomers). Top diagonal indicates values for Boomers. Lower diagonal indicates values Gen Z. Bold values significant at $p < .05$.

Primary Social Media Platform

Participants also indicated the social media platform they primarily used/is their favorite (i.e., “Which of the following social media do you primarily use/is your favorite? Please select only one.”). Gen Z and Boomers preferred different platforms (Table 8). I thus used platform preference as an additional control for effects between generations in terms of perceived similarity between offline and social media and its links to psychological well-being held across platform preferences.

Table 8
Primary Social Media Platform by Generation

Platform	Gen Z (younger adults)	Boomers (older adults)
Facebook	15 (7.5%)	110 (54.7%)
Instagram	64 (23.2%)	19 (9.5%)
Twitter	28 (14.1%)	32 (15.9%)
Snapchat	15 (7.5%)	1 (0.5%)
WeChat	3 (1.5%)	1 (0.5%)
TikTok	52 (26.1%)	6 (3.0%)
Other	22 (11.1%)	32 (15.9%)

Note. $N = 199$ (Gen Z), 201 (Boomers).

Results and Discussion

Does Perceived Similarity between the Offline and Social Media Selves Vary by Generation?

Across Traits. I first examined the correlations in personality averaged across traits between contexts. Across generations (Gen Z/Boomers), social media personality traits strongly correlated with offline traits ($r(199/201) = .522/.643$; 95% CI [.412/.554, .616/.717]) and general traits ($r(199/201) = .563/.693$; 95% CI [.459/.613, .651/.758]). Consistent with Study 1, the findings suggest that people view themselves as similar but not the same between offline and social media contexts. Moreover, offline and general personality traits were almost identical across generations ($r(199/201) = .918/.955$; 95% CI [.893/.941, .937/.966]). The correlation between general and offline traits was considerably stronger than the correlation between social media and general traits ($Z = 9.30/10.27$, $ps < .001$, $Q = .96/.89$). Like Study 1, these findings suggest that offline contexts are the primary context when people think about who they are.

Boomers perceived themselves as somewhat more similar between social media and offline ($Z = -1.83, p = .067, Q = .18$) or in general ($Z = -2.15, p = .032, Q = .22$) than Gen Z. These findings held controlling for mobile phone use (r between social media and offline = $.536/.669, Z = -2.09, p = .037, Q = .21$; r between social media and general = $.576/.717, Z = -2.43, p = .015, Q = .24$). Gen Z perceived less similarity between their offline and general selves ($Z = -3.07, p = .002, Q = .17$). Taken together, while people may perceive strong overlap between their offline and social media personality, Gen Z perceive less overlap than Boomers—which contrasts from the digital native and immigrant hypothesis based on generational differences in time spent online.

By Trait. I next examined the correlations in personality traits between the contexts for each of the Big Five (see Table 9). Across generations and consistent with findings from Study 1, social media traits moderately to strongly correlated with the offline and general traits (r s ranged from $.329$ to $.790$) and offline and general traits strongly correlated for each trait (r s ranged from $.846$ to $.963$). Like Study 1 extraversion showed the weaker relationships ($r = .329/.361$) between offline and social media contexts relative to the other four traits ($r = .595/.684; Z = -3.40/-4.85, ps < .001; Q = -.34/-.46$). Of note, correlations between offline and social media conscientiousness ($Z = -2.76, p = .006, Q = .28$) were weaker for Gen Z than Boomers.

Table 9*Correlations of the Big Five Traits between Contexts (Study 2)*

	O		C		E		A		ES	
	G	Off	G	Off	G	Off	G	Off	G	Off
G	-		-		-		-		-	
Off	.864/ .963	-	.875/ .942	-	.890/ .901	-	.846/ .922	-	.922/ .924	-
SM	.790/ .786	.761/ .786	.512/ .722	.507/ .684	.427/ .435	.329/ .361	.557/ .646	.489/ .615	.632/ .647	.623/ .654

Note. $N = 199$ (Gen Z)/201(Boomers). G = general self. Off = offline self. SM = social media self. Values left of the dash are for Gen Z. Values right of the dash are for Boomers.

Defining the Self Offline vs. on Social Media. Multiple regression analyses to predict the traits of the general self from the social media traits independently of the offline traits showed similar findings as in Study 1. Tolerances were above .728, and VIFs were less than 1.374, suggesting that multicollinearity was not an issue. Across traits and generation, the social media traits independently predicted the general traits independently of the offline traits (Table 10).

Table 10*Predicting the Personality Traits of the General Self (Study 2)*

Variable	Model			
	B	95% CI	β	Partial <i>r</i>
	Overall ($r^2_{adj} = .851/.922$)			
Offline Trait(s)	.853/ .863	.790, .916/ .813, .914	.858/ .869	.886/ .923
Social Media Trait(s)	.130/ .133	.058, .202/ .083, .184	.115/ .134	.247/ .346
	Openness ($r^2_{adj} = .786/.929$)			
Offline Trait(s)	.650/ .892	.547, .754/ .832, .951	.625/ .903	.662/ .904
Social Media Trait(s)	.320/ .074	.219, .422/ .016, .133	.314/ .076	.405/ .175
	Conscientiousness ($r^2_{adj} = .770/.898$)			
Offline Trait(s)	.815/ .851	.738, .892/ .790, .913	.828/ .843	.831/ .888
Social Media Trait(s)	.109/ .179	.017, .202/ .103, .254	.092/ .145	.164/ .316
	Extraversion ($r^2_{adj} = .811/.825$)			
Offline Trait(s)	.837/ .890	.773, .901/ .825, .955	.840/ .856	.878/ .886
Social Media Trait(s)	.160/ .133	.091, .228/ .067, .199	.151/ .126	.313/ .272
	Agreeableness ($r^2_{adj} = .739/.858$)			
Offline Trait(s)	.796/ .879	.710, .883/ .810, .948	.754/ .844	.791/ .872
Social Media Trait(s)	.177/ .135	.100, .254/ .064, .206	.188/ .126	.307/ .257
	Emotional stability ($r^2_{adj} = .854/.855$)			
Offline Trait(s)	.871/.892	.802, .941/ .821, .964	.863/ .875	.871/ .868
Social Media Trait(s)	.108/.087	.030, .187/ .006, .168	.095/ .075	.191/ .149

Note. $N = 199$ (Gen Z)/ 201 (Boomers). All values significant at $p < .05$. Values left of the dash are for Gen Z. Values right of the dash are for Baby Boomers.

Individual Differences in Perceived Similarity by Generation. I examined whether individual differences in perceived similarity between offline and social media traits varied across generations (see Table 11 for descriptives). Across generations, people reported significantly different within-person correlations and difference scores from zero (Table 12 shows *ds* of one sample t-tests of the indices means from zero by generation). These findings respectively suggest that both generations view themselves as similar but not the same on social media at the individual level. Furthermore, frequencies of the differences between offline and social media contexts (Table 12) suggests that most of Gen Z and Boomers tend to perceive their offline selves as more open, conscientious, extraverted, and agreeableness than their social media self. However, there were a substantial number of individuals in both generations who showed the reverse—suggesting individual differences in perceptions of similarity between offline and social media across generations.

Table 11*Descriptives for Indices of Individual Differences in Perceived Similarity*

Trait	Within-person correlation			Difference score (social media – offline)			Rank-order change	
	Z (younger adults) <i>M (SD)</i>	BB (older adults) <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>d</i>	Z (younger adults) <i>M (SD)</i>	BB (older adults) <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>d</i>	Z (younger adults) <i>M (SD)</i>	BB (older adults) <i>M (SD)</i>
O	.362 (.453)	.511 (.357)	-.37	-.210 (.489)	-.459 (.581)	.47	- (42.35)	- (39.66)
C	.184 (.482)	.157 (.478)	.06	-.004 (.715)	-.235 (.611)	.35	- (58.39)	- (45.18)
E	.270 (.443)	.312 (.419)	-.10	-.384 (.968)	-.603 (.940)	.23	- (66.90)	- (65.50)
A	.308 (.451)	.432 (.410)	-.29	-.297 (.732)	-.282 (.615)	.22	- (55.40)	- (49.69)
ES	.182 (.457)	.223 (.474)	-.09	.403 (.791)	.105 (.681)	.40	- (54.25)	- (50.00)

Note. *N* = 199 (Gen Z)/201 (Boomers). Z = generation Z. Baby Boomers. O = Openness. C = Conscientiousness, E = Extraversion, A = Agreeableness, ES = Emotional Stability. *d* is bolded for generation differences significant at $p < .05$.

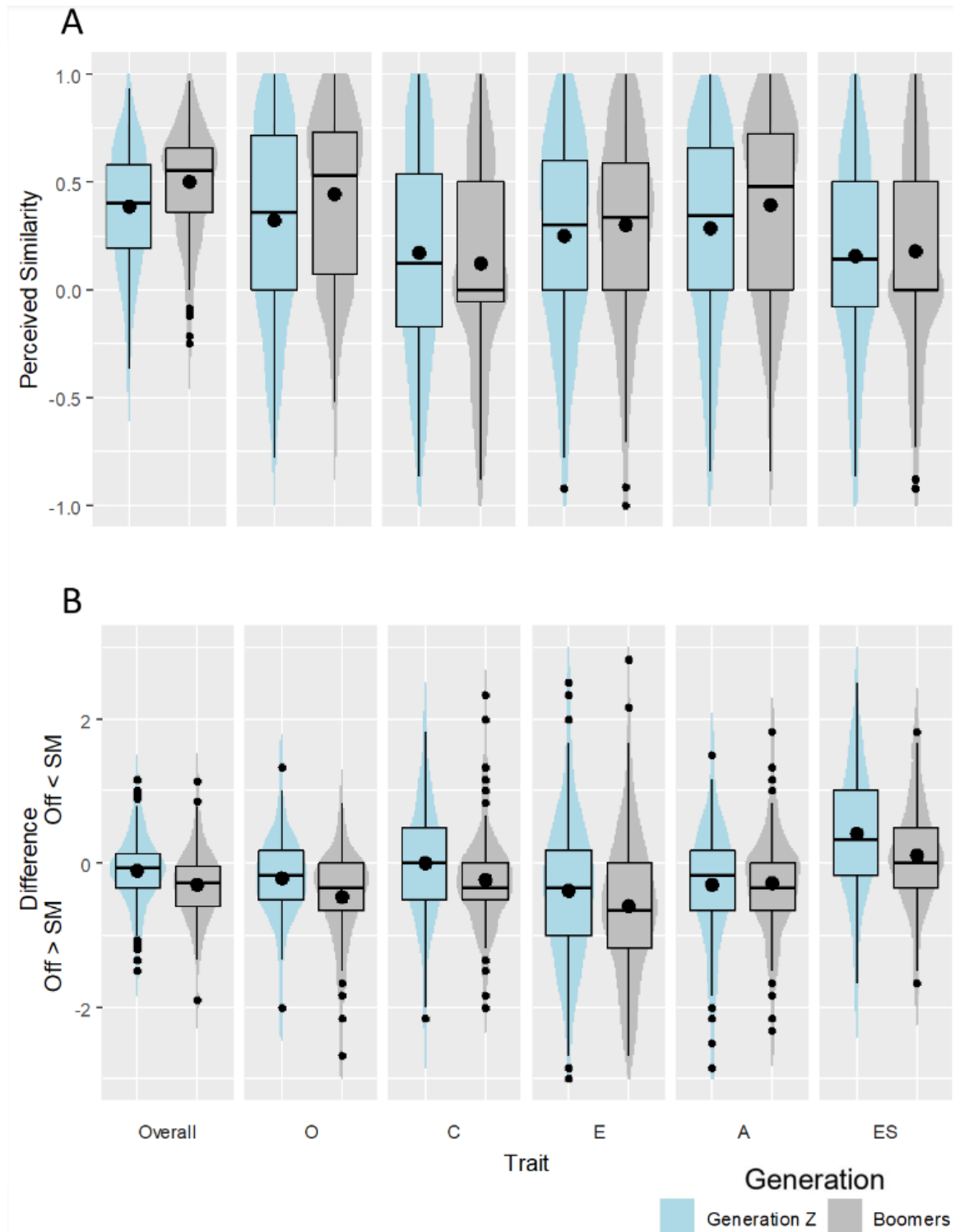
Table 12
Effect Sizes and Frequencies of Differences in Perceived Similarity

Trait	<i>d</i> (from zero)		Frequency of differences							
			Offline < Social Media				No difference			
	Within-person correlation		Difference score							
	Z (younger adults)	BB (older adults)	Z (younger adults)	BB (older adults)	Z (younger adults)	BB (older adults)	Z (younger adults)	BB (older adults)	Z (younger adults)	BB (older adults)
O	.799	1.434	-.433	-.791	119 (59.8%)	149 (74.1%)	29 (14.6%)	30 (14.9%)	51 (25.6%)	22 (10.9%)
C	.383	.329	-.006	-.384	96 (48.2%)	128 (63.7%)	13 (6.5%)	26 (12.9%)	90 (45.2%)	47 (23.4%)
E	.610	.743	-.397	-.642	122 (61.3%)	146 (72.6%)	18 (9.0%)	13 (6.5%)	59 (29.6%)	42 (20.9%)
A	.682	1.054	-.406	-.458	115 (57.8%)	119 (59.2%)	24 (12.1%)	36 (17.9%)	60 (30.2%)	46 (22.9%)
ES	.398	.470	.509	.155	53 (26.6%)	69 (34.3%)	20 (10.1%)	36 (17.9%)	126 (63.3%)	96 (47.8%)

Note. $N = 199$ (Gen Z)/201 (Boomers). Z = Generation Z. BB = Baby Boomers. O = Openness. C = Conscientiousness, E = Extraversion, A = Agreeableness, ES = Emotional Stability. *ds* are bolded at $p < .05$.

I further examined whether generational differences appeared for the indices of individual differences in perceived similarity (See Table 11 for descriptives). On average, Gen Z participants showed lower within-person correlations between their offline and social media traits than Boomers (Table 11; Figure 2). However, generation differences in difference scores suggest that Generation Z are more likely to perceive themselves as higher on most of the Big Five on social media than offline compared to Boomers.

Figure 2
Within-Person Correlations (A) and Difference Scores (B) by Generation



Note. $N = 199$ (Gen Z)/201 (Boomers). O = Openness. C = Conscientiousness, E = Extraversion, A = Agreeableness, ES = Emotional Stability.

Relative to Boomers, Generation Z may have been more likely to report higher levels of the traits on social media because they were less likely to report high levels of the traits offline than Boomers (Table 5). Indeed, reporting higher levels of the offline traits was negatively correlated with the difference index across generations and for each of the Big Five (Table 13). I conducted a series of ANCOVAs that showed, after controlling for offline traits, Gen Z were only more likely to report being more open and agreeable on social media than offline, relative to Boomers (Table 14). Intolerant (low openness) or disrespectful (low agreeableness) behavior on social media may be more likely to apply to older generations. Generation differences in perceived similarity and differences in offline and social media trait levels remained after controlling for mobile phone use and preferred platform with few exceptions (Table 14).

Table 13
Correlations between Offline Personality and Indices of Perceived Similarity

Offline Trait	Index					
	Within-person correlation		Difference score (social media – offline)		Rank-order change	
	Z (younger adults)	BB (older adults)	Z (younger adults)	BB (older adults)	Z (younger adults)	BB (older adults)
O	.070	-.205	-.322	-.311	-.341	-.298
C	-.039	-.161	-.628	-.593	-.490	-.382
E	-.146	-.051	-.613	-.572	-.576	-.552
A	.009	-.041	-.417	-.461	-.477	-.397
ES	-.056	.005	-.546	-.535	-.415	-.391

Note. $N = 199$ (Gen Z)/201 (Boomers). Z = Generation Z. Baby Boomers. O = Openness. C = Conscientiousness, E = Extraversion, A = Agreeableness, ES = Emotional Stability. *d* is bolded for differences significant at $p < .05$. Correlations reflect the relationship between each offline trait and the respective index (e.g., offline extraversion and *extraversion* difference score).

Table 14*ANCOVAS Estimating the Effect of Generation on Perceived Similarity*

Index	Effect of generation (η^2)					
	Within-person correlation			Difference (social media – offline)		
	Use	Platform	Offline trait	Use	Platform	Offline trait
O	.032	.025	.032	.023	.031	.047
C	.000	.000	.000	.028	.030	.003
E	.005	.003	.003	.006	.012	.006
A	.021	.005	.018	.000	.000	.019
ES	.000	.009	.000	.045	.039	.003

Note. O = Openness. C = Conscientiousness, E = Extraversion, A = Agreeableness, ES = Emotional Stability. Bold η^2 s are significant at $p < .05$.

Continuity. Finally, I examined whether generation differences appeared in continuity with the social media self. Overall, Generation Z perceived lower connection and similarity between their offline and social media selves than Boomers (Table 15). These findings are consistent with generation differences in perceptions of similarity between offline and social media personality traits, and suggest these perceptions hold when participants explicitly consider the level of overlap. However, these effects were not significant when controlling for mobile phone use and preferred platform (similarity, $p = .425$; connection, $p = .081$). Gen Z also reported liking their social media self less than Boomers (even after controlling for mobile phone use and preferred platform, $p < .001$), although they also reported liking their offline self less as well. The generation difference between liking the offline and social media selves was small and did not reach significance ($d = .17$, $p = .082$). Taken together with earlier findings, Gen Z they are more likely to report disliking their social media self than Boomers even despite being more likely to perceive their social media self as higher on the Big Five.

Table 15*Differences in Continuity with the Social Media Self across Generations*

Index	Generation and score		<i>d</i>
	Gen Z (younger adults) <i>M (SD)</i>	Boomers (older adults) <i>M (SD)</i>	
Similarity between offline and social media	4.72 (1.51)	5.15 (1.64)	-.27**
Connectedness between offline and social media	4.56 (1.50)	5.02 (1.67)	-.29**
Positivity felt towards the social media self	4.57 (1.41)	5.34 (1.30)	-.57***
Vividness of the social media self	4.08 (1.71)	4.08 (1.99)	-.01
Continuity with the social media self	4.48 (1.09)	4.90 (1.26)	-.34***
Additional			
Positivity felt towards the offline self	4.73 (1.37)	5.71 (1.16)	-.77***
Vividness of the offline self	5.12 (1.48)	5.38 (1.47)	-.18
Difference between positivity felt towards social media and offline selves	-0.17	-0.37 (1.05)	.17
Difference between vividness of the social media and offline selves	-1.05 (1.69)	-1.30 (1.77)	.15

Note. $N = 199$ (Gen Z)/ 201 (Boomers). ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Is Perceived Similarity between the Offline and Social Media Selves Linked to Psychological Well-Being (and Across Generations)?

Across traits, perceiving the offline and social media personality traits as more similar appeared to be linked to depression and lower life satisfaction and self-esteem only in Gen Z (Table 16). However, using multiple regression, I tested and found that the interaction between perceived similarity and generation on psychological well-being was significant only for self-esteem (model 1; Table 17) and, after controlling for mobile phone use, on life satisfaction (model 2; Table 17). Generation differences may be small

in terms of the links between psychological well-being and perceived similarity between offline and social media contexts. It is notable that, across generations, the lack of a positive link contrasts with the expectation that perceiving oneself as more similar between contexts is linked positively to psychological well-being in individualistic contexts.

Table 16*Correlations Between Psychological Well-being and Perceived Similarity*

	Depression		Life Satisfaction		Self-esteem		Mobile phone use	
	Gen Z (young adults)	Boomer (older adults)	Gen Z (young adults)	Boomer (older adults)	Gen Z (young adults)	Boomer (older adults)	Gen Z (young adults)	Boomer (older adults)
	Perceived similarity							
Overall	.180	.012	-.200	.004	-.280	-.039	.140	.059
O	.168	-.008	-.149	-.088	-.096	-.074	.057	-.032
C	.064	.081	-.092	-.075	-.021	-.050	.098	-.014
E	.013	-.134	.013	.157	-.067	.143	.093	-.016
A	.111	.079	-.146	.070	-.269	.011	.075	-.010
ES	.134	.150	-.094	-.188	.066	.038	.013	-.067
	Difference (social media – offline)							
Overall	.361	.319	-.255	-.292	-.303	-.183	.147	-.006
O	.206	.025	-.238	.005	-.145	-.042	.081	.083
C	.181	.198	-.152	-.240	-.151	-.039	.080	-.045
E	.313	.292	-.253	-.233	-.264	-.225	.170	.058
A	.061	.141	.044	-.175	-.037	-.036	.026	-.116
ES	.303	.314	-.176	-.263	-.282	-.183	.060	-.026
	Rank change (social media – offline)							
Overall	.173	.152	-.163	-.149	-.117	-.082	.139	.044
O	.204	.015	-.239	.030	-.153	-.036	.074	.118
C	.132	.134	-.117	-.169	-.120	-.021	.115	-.052
E	.308	.284	-.246	-.233	-.244	-.208	.138	.076
A	.081	.129	.015	-.144	-.053	-.002	.042	-.077
ES	.174	.207	-.077	-.195	-.178	.089	-.048	.008
	Social media self-continuity							
Similarity	-.043	-.144	.141	.116	.060	.080	-.006	-.120
Connected	-.011	-.161	.099	.114	.015	.097	.114	-.160
Positive	-.401	-.363	.443	.256	.442	.398	.072	-.102
Vividness	-.003	-.131	.027	.216	.171	.244	.065	-.032

Note. O = Openness. C = Conscientiousness, E = Extraversion, A = Agreeableness, ES = Emotional Stability. Bold = significant at $p < .05$.

Table 17***Perceived Similarity Interaction with Generation on Psychological Well-Being***

Predictor	Model 1			Model 2		
	β s in predicting			β s in predicting		
	Depression	Life Satisfaction	Self-esteem	Depression	Life Satisfaction	Self-esteem
Perceived similarity	.364	-.379	-.493	.316	-.397	-.375
Generation	-.447	.262	.261	-.424	.255	.222
Mobile Phone Use	-	-	-	.078	-.062	-.107
Perceived similarity*Generation	-.272	.294	.347	-.213	.324	.196
Difference (social media – offline)	.542	-.198	-.418	.443	-.136	-.361
Generation	-.361	.184	.180	-.332	.169	.116
Mobile Phone use	-	-	-	.065	-.064	-.100
Difference (social media – offline) *Generation	-.240	-.078	.185	-.141	-.139	.086

Note. Values in bold are significant at $p < .05$. Generation scored that so Boomers = 1, Gen Z = 0. Perceived similarity and differences scores were centered around mean.

It is notable that differences between the social media and offline traits were linked to psychological well-being across generations, even when controlling for mobile phone use and without the interaction terms present (Table 18), and when additionally controlling for primary platform (β s ranged from .255 - .310, $ps < .001$). These findings suggest that perceiving the social media self as higher on the Big Five than the offline self is linked to greater depression and lower life satisfaction and self-esteem.

Table 18
Predicting Psychological Well-Being

Predictor	Model 1			Model 2		
	β s in predicting			β s in predicting		
	Depression	Life Satisfaction	Self-esteem	Depression	Life Satisfaction	Self-esteem
Perceived similarity	.106	-.100	-.165	.115	-.092	-.190
Generation	-.450	.264	.265	-.427	.261	.225
Mobile Phone Use	-	-	-	.079	-.064	-.108
Difference (social media – offline)	.313	-.272	-.242	.309	-.268	-.280
Generation	-.361	.184	.180	-.328	.172	.114
Mobile Phone use	-	-	-	.068	-.061	-.102

Note. Values in bold are significant at $p < .05$. Generation scored that so Boomers = 1, Gen Z = 0.

CHAPTER 4

GENERAL DISCUSSION

This dissertation is first to examine the perceived similarity between offline and social media selves across personality traits and self-continuity and links between this perceived similarity and psychological well-being across generations (Table 19 summarizes the main conclusions).

Table 19

Summary of the Dissertation Studies

Research question	Main conclusions
1) Do people view themselves as the same between offline and social media?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• People perceive themselves as similar but not the same between offline and social media contexts• Social media personality reveals something unique about who people think they are independently from who they are offline
2) Is the perceived similarity between the offline and social media selves linked to psychological well-being?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Perceiving oneself as similar between offline and social media contexts in terms of personality traits is not positively linked to psychological well-being• Perceiving oneself as higher on the Big Five on social media than offline and disliking the social media self is linked to poor psychological well-being
3) Does this perceived similarity and its links to psychological well-being vary by generation?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Boomers actually perceive themselves as more similar between offline and social media than Gen Z• Perceiving oneself as similar between offline and social media contexts in terms of personality traits may actually be linked to negative psychological well-being in Gen Z

Do People View Themselves as the Same between Offline and Social Media (and Across Generations)?

Findings showed that across generations and student and non-student samples, people tend to view themselves as similar but not the same between offline and social media contexts—at least similar as personality reports between different social roles in daily life like “with friends vs. strangers” (Church et al., 2012). Early research in computer-mediated communication discussed the online world as strikingly different than the offline world—particularly in terms of identity and self-presentation (Mckenna & Bargh, 2000; Postmes et al., 2001). Early research in personality showed weak to moderate correlations between expressions of personality across situational contexts (e.g., r s of .2-.3)—particularly when contexts varied in situational features (Bem & Allen, 1974; Bem & Funder, 1978; Hartshorne & May, 1928; Mischel, 1983; Mischel & Peake, 1983; Mischel et al., 2002; Newcomb, 1929). The strong correlations between perceptions of personality of the offline and social media selves in the present research suggest that today’s online world, heavily immersed in social media, may be increasingly intertwined with the offline world. This interpretation is consistent with the idea of “context collapse” (see Marwick & Boyd, 2011) between offline and online contexts (Bodford et al., 2021). Indeed, across generations and college and internet samples, the personality perceptions of the social media and offline selves separately and jointly predicted people’s general notion of themselves. The collapse of boundaries between offline and online worlds may extend to how people define themselves.

However, almost half of the variance in the correlations between offline and social media personality perceptions were still unaccounted for, suggesting that people do

not perceive their offline and social media personality as the same. Extraversion was the least similar between offline and social media contexts and is also the most public trait of the Big Five (Robins & John, 1993). People may be more likely to perceive their internal experiences as similar across offline and social media contexts than their social behavior. A further question is whether people are as likely to perceive themselves as similar between offline and social media contexts as observers would. Future research may accordingly wish to examine similarity in personality beyond perceptions via peer reports or behavioral measures—although a challenge with the latter is what behaviors are comparable between offline and social media contexts on the same dimension.

Generation Z perceived less similarity between their offline and general selves than Baby Boomers, even when controlling for social media use. Digital natives like Gen Z spend more time on social media than digital immigrants like Boomers (Bolton et al., 2013), and spending more time in a context is also linked to a higher connection to that context (Ryder et al., 2000; Sheldon et al., 1997). The present findings thus call into question using screen time to explain relevant generation differences. Of further note, perceived similarity between offline and social media conscientiousness was weaker for Gen Z than Boomers. Boomers who reported higher levels of conscientiousness than Gen Z may be more cautious, an important aspect of conscientiousness (Soto & John, 2017a), while navigating unfamiliar online environments, as reflected in their offline tendencies. Indeed, prior research has shown that those who perceive online environments as threatening also tend to feel that way offline (Bodford et al., 2021).

Generation Z participants were also more likely to perceive themselves as open, conscientious, extraverted, and emotionally stable on social media than offline compared

to Boomers. These traits are typically viewed as positive or socially desirable and linked to positive psychological well-being (Kwan et al., 2004; Musek, 2007; Van der Linden et al., 2023)—suggesting that Gen Z may be more likely to present a socially desirable self on social media relative to Boomers. However, after controlling for offline trait levels, generation differences appeared only for openness and agreeableness. One notable implication is that behaviors indicative of the “dark side” of social media (Baccarella et al., 2018) such as intolerance (indicative of low openness) or disrespect (indicative of low agreeableness) may be more prevalent among older adults.

In terms of continuity with the social media self, Generation Z perceived lower connection and similarity between their offline and social media selves than Boomers. These findings overlap with those concerning personality traits and suggest these perceptions hold when participants explicitly consider the level of global overlap between their offline and social media selves. Gen Z also reported liking their social media self less than Boomers. However, this dislike was only somewhat stronger than their disliking of the offline self relative to Boomers. Still, together with earlier findings, it is notable that Gen Z report disliking their social media self more than Boomers even despite being more likely to perceive some aspects of their social media self as more positive. Gen Z may be more likely to perceive their social media self as an ideal which they may not obtain offline.

Is Perceived Similarity between the Offline And Social Media Selves Linked To Psychological Well-Being (and Across Generations)?

Perceived similarity between offline and social media contexts was not linked to positive psychological well-being. These findings contrast with the extant literature on

authenticity and self-continuity suggesting a positive relationship between consistency in self-perception across contexts and psychological well-being in individualistic cultures (Bixter et al., 2020; Donahue et al., 1993; English & John, 2013; Korchin, 1976; Leary, 2003; Sedikides et al., 2023; Sokol & Serper, 2017; 2019; Slabu et al., 2014; Swann et al., 2007). Aspects of social media to control one's self-presentation and obtain social resources contrast with the offline world (Bayer et al., 2020; McFarland & Ployhart, 2015), which most authenticity and self-continuity literature is based upon. Given the relationship between psychological well-being and the match between perceived similarity across contexts and the values in one's broader cultural environment (see Fulmer et al., 2010; Gebauer et al., 2020; Diener et al., 2018), social media may be an environment that values self-consistency less than the offline world. There were small generation differences suggesting that perceiving the social media and offline selves as similar was actually linked to worse psychological well-being in Gen Z relative to Boomers. Thus, values of social media that are unique from the offline world may be particularly true for young people.

A further finding showed that perceiving the social media self as higher on the Big Five than the offline self was linked to greater depression and lower life satisfaction and self-esteem across generations. Individuals who perceive their social media self in this way may view their social media self as an ideal self they've failed to live up to offline—an example of self-discrepancy between the current and ideal self that is linked to poor psychological well-being (see Higgins, 1987; 1989; Mason et al., 2019). Implications of these findings may particularly apply to Gen Z who reported more depression and less life satisfaction and self-esteem than Boomers. In any case, the

present findings have implications for the duality of social media regarding whether people use it adaptively vs. maladaptively (Kwan & Bodford, 2015; Teske, 2002). The duality may be intertwined with how people view their social media self in reference to their offline self, regardless of whether they are a digital native or immigrant.

Limitations and Future Directions

The present studies were correlational in design and thus cannot address whether there is a causal relationship between perceived similarity and psychological well-being. A question for future research is why perceived similarity between offline and social media contexts is not positively linked to psychological well-being. On the one hand, people, particularly young people, may use social media to escape or as a refuge from their offline circumstances. On the other hand, people who are less depressed and more satisfied with life may be better equipped to take advantage of the opportunities on social media that contrast with offline life. In either case, the findings call for a move beyond screen time to consider the relationships between social media and psychological well-being, especially in young people.

Although the present research incorporated a diverse range of samples (i.e., college and internet samples, samples of Generation Z and Boomers), findings regarding the generation differences in perceived similarity are limited in generalizability due to the sample source. Generation Z and Baby Boomer participants in Study 2 were invited via Prolific Academic, a widely used online participant pool. Prolific Academic is noted for higher data quality, more honest participants, and better representation of population demographics than alternative platforms (Douglas et al., 2023; Peer et al., 2017). However, older adult participants on Prolific tend to be technologically active individuals

(Turner et al., 2020). Small generation differences in the present study may be due to a technologically active Boomer sample. While generation differences in mobile phone use showed a strong effect size in Study 2, Boomers still averaged multiple hours a day on their phones. The present findings did observe generation differences while controlling for mobile phone use and primary social media platform preferences. Yet, future research may seek alternative sources to invite older adults to participate in studies testing generation differences in digital media use.

This research focused on generation similarities and differences in perceived similarity between offline and social media contexts and its links to psychological well-being. It is unknown whether differences are due to cultural differences in the generation (e.g., being digital natives vs. immigrants) or are due to being in different aspects of the developmental life span. Older adults are more sure about their self-concept and less likely to explore different identities than younger adults (Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2010), which has implications for psychological well-being (Diehl & Hay, 2011). Future research may examine whether links between psychological differences in offline and social media life and psychological adjustment are influenced by the stage of life in reference to one's identity. It may be, for example, that generation differences in psychological well-being and perceived similarity between offline and social media contexts are due to young people being more likely to test new identities rather than unique values in the digital communities they partake in.

The present research was conducted with participants in individualistic cultural environments, consistent with literature on the relationship between self-consistency and psychological well-being (Bixter et al., 2020; Donahue et al., 1993; English & John,

2013; Korchin, 1976; Leary, 2003; Sedikides et al., 2023; Sokol & Serper, 2017; 2019; Slabu et al., 2014; Swann et al., 2007). Future research may test whether links between psychological well-being and perceived similarity across offline and social media contexts hold in collectivistic cultural environments. These studies may want to account for cultural differences in social media platforms as well.

Conclusion

People, particularly young people, constantly switching between offline and social media contexts are not unlike bicultural individuals whose thoughts, feelings, and behavior vary as they switch cultural frames (Alter & Kwan, 2009; Chen & Bond, 2010; Hong et al., 2000). The present research suggests that the selves that emerge from offline and social media contexts are similar but not the same, and that they are linked to psychological well-being in ways that contrast with traditional expectations of authenticity and self-continuity. Studying psychology in offline and social media contexts separately and jointly will be important to understand the social well-being of the emerging digital world.

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APPENDIX A
IRB APROVAL

EXEMPTION GRANTED

Sau Kwan
Psychology
-
Virginia.Kwan@asu.edu

Dear Sau Kwan:

On 11/17/2017 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Cyber Self-Perception and Behavior
Investigator:	Sau Kwan
IRB ID:	STUDY00007363
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Materials1.pdf, Category: Recruitment Materials;• CyberSelf_IRB_Nov_17_2017.docx, Category: IRB Protocol;• Consent.pdf, Category: Consent Form;

The IRB determined that the protocol is considered exempt pursuant to Federal Regulations 45CFR46 (2) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation on 11/17/2017.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

cc: Cameron Bunker
Sau Kwan