

DEFERRED LIFE SYNDROME (DLS) :
A Cross-Cultural Construct of Postponed Authenticity
in Generation Z from Conservative-Collectivist Contexts

A Research Proposal

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Abstract

Generation Z in conservative-collectivist societies experiences a distinctive conflict in which "ideal selves" formed through global digital media clash with "ought selves" imposed by traditional family structures. This study proposes Deferred Life Syndrome (DLS): a chronic state in which individuals postpone authentic self-expression, believing they have no right to live until a perpetually receding ideal self is achieved. DLS is theoretically distinguished from fatalistic resignation: whereas fatalistic individuals abandon future agency through escapist consumption, DLS individuals retain future orientation and goal-directed striving. Building on Higgins' (1987) Self-Discrepancy Theory and Serkin's (1997) Syndrome of Postponed Life, DLS is extended through seven constructs. A 35-item DLS Scale will be developed and validated among Turkish Gen Z (N≈400) via EFA/CFA, reliability testing, latent profile analysis, and correlation with emigration intent, depression, and anxiety.

Introduction

Across Turkey and similar societies, Gen Z youth describe their lives in strikingly similar terms: *"I cannot start living until I leave"; "My real life begins after graduation."* Despite the prevalence of this experience, psychology lacks a unified construct for it. Higgins' (1987) Self-Discrepancy Theory explains emotional consequences of self-gaps but not the existential deferral they produce; Serkin's (1997) Syndrome of Postponed Life predates the digital era and overlooks collectivist pressures. This study introduces DLS, defined as chronic postponement of authentic self-expression arising when digitally-formed ideal selves conflict with culturally-imposed ought selves. Critically, DLS is a *specific* response—agency-preserving deferral—distinct from a parallel fatalistic pathway of escapist collapse. Turkey, with ~83% smartphone penetration, documented youth emigration intent (KONDA, 2023), and persistent collectivist family structures (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2005), provides an ideal empirical context.

Literature Review

Higgins (1987) identifies Actual/Ideal/Ought selves but does not theorize existential deferral. Serkin (1997), studying Magadan workers, described decades lived as preparation for a future "real life" triggered by relocation, yet his work focuses on adult migrants and predates digital identity. Three streams support extending these frameworks. First, Horton and Wohl's (1956) parasocial relationships and Markus and Nurius' (1986) "possible selves," combined with Twenge (2017) and Haidt (2024), explain how digital engagement creates idealized self-guides divorced from local context. Second, Kağıtçıbaşı (2005) shows collectivist societies transmit strong "ought" standards, producing double-binds when youth simultaneously internalize globalized ideals. Third, Crocker and Wolfe's (2001) contingencies of self-worth and Arnett's (2000) emerging adulthood explain why Gen Z ties the "right to live" to perpetually receding achievements.

Crucially, Seligman's (1972) learned helplessness and Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy together suggest exposure to chronic uncontrollable conflict produces *divergent* responses. Those preserving future efficacy channel conflict into goal-directed deferral; those losing efficacy collapse into escapist consumption (binge-watching, gaming, substance use). This bifurcation specifies DLS's boundaries and motivates a new construct: *agency-preserving existential deferral specific to digital-era youth in traditional societies*.

Hypotheses

H1: The DLS Scale will show a seven-factor structure (Self-Guide Conflict, Felt Inauthenticity, Digital Self-Formation, Environmental Entrapment, Conditional Existence, Future Displacement, Present-Life Dissociation), each $\alpha > 0.80$. H2: DLS will correlate positively with emigration intent. H3: DLS will correlate positively with *both* perceived parental imposition *and* digital media engagement, reflecting the double-bind. H4: DLS will predict depression and anxiety beyond conventional self-discrepancy measures (incremental validity). H5: Within the high-risk subsample (conservative family + high digital exposure), latent profile analysis will reveal two profiles: a *high-DLS profile* (high Future Displacement, high emigration intent, moderate depression) and a *high-fatalism profile* (low Future Displacement, low emigration intent, high depression, high escapist consumption). H6: Future efficacy will moderate the self-guide conflict $\rightarrow$ depression pathway, with high-conflict/high-efficacy individuals reporting lower depression than high-conflict/low-efficacy individuals.

Methodology

A 35-item DLS Scale (5 items $\times$ 7 factors, 7-point Likert) will be developed, plus an Escapist Consumption Scale (6 items: dissociative media use, perceived stuckness, substance coping) and a Future Efficacy Scale (adapted from hope-scale items). Content validity will be established through expert review (two psychology instructors) and Brislin (1970) back-translation. A pilot study ($n \approx 40$) will refine items prior to main data collection.

Approximately 400 Turkish Gen Z participants (ages 16–22) will be recruited via stratified sampling across school networks and social media, ensuring variation in urban/rural origin, family religiosity, and digital use to mitigate selection bias. Parental consent will be obtained for minors; ethics approval will precede data collection. Participants will complete the DLS Scale, Escapist Consumption and Future Efficacy subscales, an adapted Higgins Selves Questionnaire, PHQ-9 (Kroenke et al., 2001), GAD-7 (Spitzer et al., 2006), single-item emigration intent, parental imposition scale, and demographics including screen time and parasocial engagement.

Analysis: (1) The sample will be split for EFA (principal axis, oblique rotation) and CFA (H1); (2) Cronbach's α ; (3) Pearson correlations (H2, H3); (4) hierarchical regression for incremental validity (H4) and moderation (H6); (5) latent profile analysis within the high-risk subsample (H5), with k-means as robustness check. A priori power analysis confirms adequate power for moderation and LPA at this sample size. DLS extends Serkin (1997) by adding (a) a cognitive-affective framework grounded in Self-Discrepancy Theory, (b) a digital self-formation mechanism, (c) a conservative-collectivist double-bind, (d) the agency/fatalism bifurcation, and (e) a Gen Z focus.

Conclusion

If supported, DLS names a widely observed but unnamed phenomenon, integrating four parallel literatures — Self-Discrepancy Theory, digital developmental psychology, learned helplessness, and collectivist selfhood. Comparative extensions to Iran, South Korea, Poland, and the Gulf states would establish DLS as a portable framework for the psychological cost of modernization. Cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; self-report invites bias; findings may be culturally bounded. The 8-month protocol requires only a professor partnership and free survey infrastructure.

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