

# Generation Misrepresented: A Social Psychological Analysis of Youth Identity in Nadaaniyan

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## Abstract

Cinema has historically shaped how societies imagine youth, identity, and social belonging. However, contemporary streaming films claiming to represent Generation Z often blur the line between observation and distortion. This paper critically examines the representation of youth identity in the 2025 Indian Netflix film *Nadaaniyan*, with particular emphasis on its portrayal of Gen Z through exaggerated stereotypes, elitist social settings, unrealistic beauty standards, and digitally mediated selfhood. The purpose of this study is to analyse how media portrayals influence societal schemas surrounding youth and how these representations shape audience perceptions of identity, behaviour, and belonging.

Using a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in social psychological analysis, this study examines themes such as social cognition, stereotyping, self-identity, group behaviour, and mediated social perception in *Nadaaniyan*. The analysis draws upon theoretical frameworks including Stuart Hall's Representation Theory, Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory, Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory, Erving Goffman's work on self-presentation, Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, and Rosalind Gill's scholarship on media representation and gender.

Findings suggest that *Nadaaniyan* presents an exaggerated and commercially aestheticised image of Generation Z that privileges elite lifestyles, superficial social dynamics, and narrowly defined beauty ideals while marginalising the emotional complexity and diversity of contemporary youth experiences. The study concludes that such portrayals risk reinforcing distorted social schemas, contributing to identity confusion, unrealistic aspirations, and problematic perceptions of young people in contemporary Indian society.

**Keywords:** Generation Z, Social Cognition, Media Representation, Social Identity, Cultural Psychology, Stereotyping, Bollywood, Youth Representation, Schema Theory

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Youth Representation in Cinema

The representation of youth in cinema has always occupied an uneasy space between realism and fantasy. Films frequently claim to "capture" the spirit of a generation while simultaneously reshaping it into something more commercially appealing. Youth, particularly adolescents and young adults, are often portrayed through rigid behavioural markers—rebelliousness, emotional instability, social awkwardness, hyper-consumerism, or romantic obsession. While some degree of stylisation is inevitable in storytelling, repeated portrayals gradually solidify into cultural assumptions about what young people are supposedly

like.

Within Indian cinema, youth-oriented films have increasingly attempted to reflect contemporary social anxieties, digital culture, and identity struggles. However, critics argue that mainstream and streaming narratives often privilege urban, upper-class experiences while presenting them as universally relatable. This creates a narrow cultural template of youth identity in which wealth, desirability, polished appearance, and social popularity become markers of legitimacy. Consequently, audiences may begin mistaking a privileged subsection of youth culture for an entire generation.

### **Media Stereotypes and the Flattening of Identity**

Media stereotypes operate through simplification. Rather than portraying individuals in all their contradictions, films frequently reduce groups into recognisable templates that audiences can easily identify. Sociologist Erving Goffman argued that media representations rely heavily on symbolic shorthand, repeatedly presenting social categories through familiar gestures, appearances, and behavioural patterns. In youth-centred narratives, this often translates into recognisable clichés: the socially awkward outsider, the superficial influencer, the emotionally detached romantic lead, or the conventionally attractive overachiever.

Such portrayals become socially significant because repetition normalises expectation. What begins as entertainment slowly enters the public imagination as an assumed truth. Stereotypes surrounding Generation Z, particularly assumptions of emotional fragility, digital obsession, performative activism, and shortened attention spans, increasingly appear across global media. When exaggerated repeatedly, these depictions risk flattening a generation into caricature rather than complexity.

This concern becomes particularly relevant in films such as *Nadaaniyan*, where youth identity appears stylised through excessive clichés and exaggerated social cues. Rather than presenting nuanced personalities, characters often seem to function as aesthetic placeholders for archetypes, reflecting broader concerns regarding generational misrepresentation.

### **Representation, Meaning, and Social Identity**

Media do not merely mirror society—they actively participate in constructing it. Stuart Hall's Representation Theory proposes that meaning is produced through repeated images, symbols, and narratives that shape public understanding of people and social groups. Representation, therefore, is never neutral; it influences what becomes culturally acceptable, aspirational, or dismissible. When films repeatedly portray young people as shallow, privileged, socially performative, or emotionally inconsistent, these depictions risk becoming embedded within broader social schemas. Such representations influence how adults perceive younger generations and, perhaps more importantly, how young individuals begin perceiving themselves.

This concern connects closely to Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory, which argues that individuals derive a sense of self through group memberships and social categorisation. Young people are especially vulnerable to media influence because identity formation is often ongoing and unstable during adolescence and early adulthood. If a generation repeatedly encounters media narratives suggesting that popularity, attractiveness, and elite social belonging are essential components of identity, these ideals may become internalised as benchmarks for social acceptance.

In this sense, media portrayals of Generation Z extend beyond entertainment—they shape how youth negotiate belonging, insecurity, and self-worth.

### **Bollywood Elitism and the Politics of Representation**

One recurring criticism of contemporary Bollywood, particularly in youth cinema, concerns elitism and exclusivity. Narratives increasingly revolve around wealthy private schools, luxurious lifestyles, elite social circles, and aspirational consumer culture. Although marketed as universal coming-of-age stories, these portrayals often exclude the economic, linguistic, and cultural diversity of Indian youth.

The issue becomes particularly layered when discussions of nepotism enter cinematic discourse. Critics have argued that star-kid culture reinforces an exclusionary media ecosystem where inherited privilege is repeatedly aestheticised rather than interrogated. In youth-oriented films, this elitism often manifests subtly: success appears effortless, beauty is standardised, and social acceptance seems tied to appearance, class, and wealth.

Such portrayals may contribute to what Jean Baudrillard describes as hyperreality—a condition in which mediated representations become more influential than lived reality itself. Cinema no longer simply depicts youth culture; it manufactures an exaggerated version of it and presents it as authentic. Over time, audiences may begin comparing themselves to realities that were never realistic to begin with.

### **Digital-Age Identity Formation and Self-Concept**

The rise of digital media has complicated how young people construct identity. Contemporary youth increasingly negotiate selfhood through online spaces where visibility, validation, and performance intersect. Social media platforms reward aesthetics, relatability, and curated self-presentation, creating environments where identity often feels performative rather than stable.

Erving Goffman's theory of self-presentation remains particularly relevant in understanding this phenomenon. He conceptualised identity as a performance shaped by social settings, where individuals carefully manage impressions depending on audience expectations. In digital spaces, this process becomes intensified. Young people frequently navigate multiple identities simultaneously: the private self, the social self, and the digitally curated self.

Media portrayals that overemphasise superficial online validation risk reinforcing unhealthy self-comparisons. Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory further suggests that individuals learn behaviours, attitudes, and expectations through observation and imitation. If audiences repeatedly consume narratives where popularity, appearance, and social media recognition determine value, such ideals may gradually influence real-world behaviour and self-perception.

### **Beauty Standards and Gendered Representation**

Beauty standards in film have long influenced body image and self-esteem, particularly among younger audiences. Rosalind Gill's work on media and gender representation highlights how contemporary media increasingly promotes self-surveillance, encouraging individuals to continuously monitor and improve their appearance according to socially approved standards.

In Indian cinema, attractiveness frequently functions as symbolic capital. Fair skin, slim bodies, luxury fashion, and polished appearances are often framed not merely as aesthetic preferences but as markers of success, desirability, and worth. Youth-centred films frequently intensify these standards, presenting impossibly curated appearances as normal.

For younger viewers, especially adolescents negotiating self-esteem, such portrayals may contribute to social comparison and body dissatisfaction. Although audiences intellectually recognise cinematic perfection as artificial, repeated exposure often normalises unrealistic expectations. Consequently, beauty

standards within media extend beyond entertainment and begin influencing self-concept, confidence, and belonging.

### Research Gap

While previous studies have explored youth representation, stereotyping, media influence, and identity formation, limited scholarship has critically examined the portrayal of Generation Z in contemporary Indian streaming cinema through a social psychological framework. Existing research often focuses broadly on media stereotypes or youth culture without sufficiently analysing how elitism, digital-age identity performance, unrealistic beauty standards, and generational caricatures interact within Indian streaming narratives. Therefore, there remains a significant gap in understanding how films such as *Nadaaniyan* construct and potentially distort contemporary youth identity, shaping broader societal perceptions of Generation Z.

### Introduction

*Nadaaniyan* is a 2025 Indian teen-romance movie directed by Shauna Gautam and produced by the King of Nepotism- Karan Johar. The film features Ibrahim Ali Khan in his debut role, alongside Khushi Kapoor, with supporting performances by Mahima Chaudhry, Dia Mirza, Suniel Shetty, and Jugal Hansraj. The plot centers around a wealthy schoolgirl from South Delhi who hires a fake boyfriend to retaliate against her family and peers. Released on Netflix on March 7, 2025, the movie received negative reviews from critics and faced significant backlash on social media.

### Objective of Study

*Nadaaniyan* is a classic example of how social psychology is deeply rooted in media portrayals and how it impacts society. This film is a medley of various themes pertaining to social psychology. Namely, social cognition, social identity, cultural psychology, elitism, social groups, schemas, etc. My fascination with this film is based more on its reception rather than the content of the film, per se. This movie was a rather ugly combination of corny humour, embarrassing acting, lazy writing, alongside a very lousy attempt at generational representation. What's key here is that such media portrayals give birth to certain **schemas** in society that are difficult to get rid of. In psychology, a schema is a cognitive framework or concept that helps organize and interpret information. Simply put, a schema describes patterns of thinking and behavior that people use to interpret the world. I intend to shed light on how this, among other social psychology concepts, relates to certain themes depicted in the movie *Nadaaniyan*.

*Nadaaniyan* aimed to represent Gen Z, then it shot wildly off target. What we have here is a glossy, pastel-tinted attempt at storytelling that somehow manages to misrepresent an entire generation, promote nepotism, uphold unrealistic beauty standards, and still be incredibly boring- a true cinematic overachiever.

The following themes can be seen being explored in the film, highlighting select social psychology concepts along the way:-

#### 1. Social Cognition: Shaping Minds, Just Not in a Good Way

**Social cognition** is all about how we process and interpret social information. Movies like *Nadaaniyan* play a huge role in shaping how we see others and how we see ourselves. The problem? The show gives us a cartoonish, almost comically exaggerated version of Gen Z. Everyone's either glued to their phones,

talking in internet slang, or emotionally unavailable unless it's for an Instagram story. And unfortunately, when people see these portrayals often enough, they start to believe them. It's a classic example of a self-fulfilling prophecy- showing Gen Z as shallow and disconnected long enough, and even they might start second-guessing themselves.

Something that people belonging to Gen Z largely suffer from is identity dysmorphia, and can they be blamed when they are constantly shrouded by preconceived notions relating their personality to that of a self-centred Chihuahua who can't see past its own reflection? Because that is what this movie successfully achieved. It showcased a teenage girl who is more concerned about how her life is branded online rather than living it offline. Adding fuel to the fire, her apparent "best friends" were more concerned about her online relationship status rather than giving credibility to what she was telling them in person. Such unrealistic **social cues** are probably laughable to the most chronically online member of the Gen Z clan. It goes without saying that the filmmakers derived such a comically baseless idea of our youth because of certain pre-existing schemas that float around in our society. Social cognition is a crucial phenomenon for navigating social interactions, building relationships, and understanding the world around us. The social cues shown in the movie are to the detriment of how Gen Z usually behaves, in contrast to how their behaviour is loosely interpreted by the masses. Such depictions influence group attitudes towards our youth, categorize their intelligence, and normalise the propagation of an almost cult-like agenda.

## 2. Stereotypes Rooted in Niche Clichés

Social psychology tells us we tend to simplify the world by using categories. But *Nadaaniyan* doesn't just simplify- it flattens. The Gen Z characters are basically walking clichés:

- The "woke but clueless" girl
- The gym addict with a six-pack and zero thoughts
- The "funny friend" who's really just loud

These characters aren't individuals; they're like templates. This feeds into **illusory correlations**, where we start associating entire groups with exaggerated traits. Illusory correlation is a psychological term that refers to the tendency to make an unproven connection between two or more unrelated events, people, behaviours, or variables, simply because they occur at the same time. This also leans into the topic of **social groups** in social psychology and how all these different walking tropes function in a group dynamic. While the actual definition of "social groups" reads- 'A social group refers to two or more individuals who interact, share characteristics, and have a sense of unity, influencing each other's thoughts, feelings, and behaviours'- it stands redundant in the movie *Nadaaniyan*. That's because the side-characters barely have a personality, barring a few standard, discernible character traits.

There exists one female and one male protagonist, featuring the unimportant best friends, two rather unnecessary bullies, and an overzealous principal. For a social group comprising elitist, rich, private school students, their vocabulary is embarrassingly limited to outdated slang and purposeless chatter. It's not just bad writing; it actively skews how audiences view young people. Translated into reality, such media depictions are a major contributor to how our youth feel pressured to limit themselves to a category or a niche personality type- 'Be a jock, a nerd, or a hippie'. Leaving aside group identity for a minute, such stereotypical conformity is often the root cause of why people struggle with a sense of self-identity.

## 3. Self-Identity: 'Self' Being Optional

**Self-identity** refers to how you perceive and define yourself, encompassing your beliefs, values, personal-

ity traits, and the roles and groups you identify with, essentially answering the question "Who am I?" A lot of instances can be seen in the film where characters like Arjun (Ibrahim Ali Khan) and Pia (Khushi Kapoor) are shown as characters set in their way, who are sure of themselves and what they stand for. But, the very next minute, we see them surrendering their sense of identity to something completely unlike themselves. For example, Pia swears her loyalty to her best friends and claims to never lie to them. In the very next scene, we see her going on a literal manhunt for a "fake boyfriend" so that she can lie to her friends' faces. Arjun is allegedly an intelligent student who studies at Falcon High (a rich Private School), fully financed by a scholarship, because he comes from a middle-class family in Noida. He then proceeds to earn his way into becoming the President of their Debating Society, fully based on the merit of his... abs. Which has now apparently become the modern measure of verbal combative excellence. This is not a grand scheme of character development or personality growth where a character is stepping out of their comfort zone to learn something new. Rather, it just reflects erratic displays of a shallow attitude and mindset lacking any concrete sense of identity. The filmmakers are of the opinion that the only **social cues** our youth can relate to are social media presence, unrealistic body image, and the speech of an AI bot. What's even sadder is that due to such relentless promotion of the aforementioned habits, some people do actually measure their sense of self and worth off of what their social media account says, or how many likes their post is getting.

#### **4. Unrealistic Beauty Standards: Plastic, Polished, and Problematic**

The cast of Nadaanian looks less like regular people and more like a filtered Instagram reel. Perfect skin, sculpted bodies, expensive styling- it's a world where "flawed" basically means a wrinkle on your shirt. This is an extension of the previous point and feeds into the social comparison theory, which says we evaluate ourselves based on how we measure up against others. And when "others" are all digitally brushed, surgically enhanced, and impossibly styled, it's no wonder viewers, especially young ones, start to feel like they're not enough. Body standards have been an age-old metric for measuring unattainable perfection. It's like **perseverance schema**, when beliefs remain unchanged even in the face of contradictory information. People know that celebrity body standards are unrealistic, still they chase a fictitious look shown on a tinted cinema screen, displayed after repeated editing.

#### **5. Language and Expression: Gen Z, but Written by an Amateur**

One of the most frustrating things about Nadaanian is how it handles Gen Z communication. The dialogue is full of forced slang and awkward attempts to sound "cool". But Gen Z's real communication is way more nuanced. They're fluent in irony, satire, activism, meme-culture, and emotionally intelligent humour. This debasement and insult of intelligence is at best applicable to a small minority of our youth, that too, if we're being generous. What the movie offers is a shallow parody that reduces our generation to hashtags and eye rolls. From a **cultural psychology** perspective, this misrepresentation can be harmful- it undermines how young people express themselves and encourages viewers to dismiss their expression as silly or insincere. Media, after a point, is a very crucial medium of expression that is embedded in each culture's standards, and it's important to be careful about how one is displaying a group of individuals, especially unironically.

#### **6. Distorting Reality: When Fiction Starts to Feel Like Fact**

Ultimately, the media doesn't just reflect culture- it shapes it. The more movies like Nadaanian circulate

these exaggerated portrayals, the more we internalize them. They become part of our **social schema**, the mental templates we use to understand people and situations. So now, when someone meets a Gen Z professional, there's a good chance they're already expecting a selfie-obsessed airhead who can't go five minutes without referencing a meme. That's not just inaccurate, it's unfair. Clearly, the whole movie revolves around kids who are out of touch with reality and live without any proper semblance of emotional intelligence, of friendship, or any real sense of self.

### Conclusion

Nadaaniyan is more than just bad entertainment- it's lazy, unoriginal, and actively harmful in the way it shapes societal perceptions. It reduces Gen Z to mere caricatures, promotes privilege over merit, enforces damaging beauty ideals, and pushes dialogue that feels like it was taken off of 2014 Twitter. Strictly speaking, in social psychology terminology, Nadaaniyan (meaning innocence) has a not-so-innocent effect on how society perceives our youth. It limits our purview of self-expression, establishes untrue and irreversible social schemas about an entire generation, and leaves a bad aftertaste in the form of body dysmorphia and substandard speech. It doesn't reflect reality- it tilts it, twisting how young people are seen and how they see themselves. And worst of all? It's just not very fun to watch.

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