

# Generation Z's interpretation of influencer content in Indonesia: Exploring lifestyle narratives on social media



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**Abstract** The proliferation of social media in Indonesia has elevated the number of influential cultural actors, including for Generation Z (Gen Z), among young people. In digitally mediated environments, influencer-generated narratives increasingly function as symbolic benchmarks that redefine aspirational norms and social recognition. This study aimed to investigate how Indonesian Generation Z interprets lifestyle narratives constructed by social media influencers and how these interpretations inform their understanding of success and well-being. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth semistructured interviews with 25 Generation Z participants who actively engaged with influencer content on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. The data were analyzed via interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to capture participants' lived experiences and interpretive processes. Four main themes emerged: (1) influencers as symbols of modern success, (2) content such as entertainment and inspiration, (3) ambivalence between reality and illusion, and (4) lifestyle as a new standard of well-being. Generation Z engages with influencer narratives reflexively rather than passively; however, critical awareness does not fully mitigate emotional effects such as social comparison and pressure to perform an idealized lifestyle. The findings expand the concept of performative well-being, which defines well-being as a socially acknowledged, visually mediated, platform-shaped state influenced by platform logic, symbolic capital, and audience validation. Moreover, these findings underscore the need for improved digital literacy, emotional resilience training, and ethical regulation of influencer conduct to mitigate psychological vulnerability among the youth generation. The strength of this study resides in its interpretive focus on the building of experience-based well-being, which broadens existing research beyond behavioral and consumption-oriented views. This research is limited by its qualitative design and specific cultural context, so future studies need to incorporate cross-cultural comparisons, digital ethnography, or longitudinal approaches to deepen the understanding of influencer dynamics and youth identity formation in evolving digital ecosystems.

**Keywords:** performative well-being, social constructionism, digital literacy, youth identity, influencer

## 1. Introduction

The development of digital technology and social media has fundamentally changed the way young people interact, communicate, and form their social identities. Among various digital platforms, social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have become the dominant spaces for Generation Z (Gen Z) to express themselves while consuming lifestyle representations constructed by influencers. This phenomenon shows a shift from traditional mass communication models to a participation-based networked society, where individuals are not only recipients of messages but also producers and curators of meaning (Castells, 2010; Jenkins, 2006).

In this context, influencers play an important role as cultural actors who mediate how Gen Z understands lifestyle, success, and identity. Through visual strategies, personal narratives, and algorithmic interactions, they shape audience perceptions of what is considered "normal," "ideal," and "aspirational." The fact that Gen Z grew up in a digital environment makes them highly exposed to performative and visual identity constructions (Arhipova & Janssen, 2024). Recent studies have shown that Gen Z's engagement with influencer content is not only consumptive but also reflective and critical—it negotiates personal values, social norms, and cultural aspirations through its interpretation of the content (van Eldik et al., 2019; Mahon & Hevey, 2021).

In addition to identify aspects, this dynamic is related to ethical, technological, and cultural factors. Artificial intelligence algorithms (AI recommendation systems) play a role in filtering and prioritizing certain types of content, which in turn influences Gen Z's information consumption patterns and lifestyle narratives (Arhipova & Janssen, 2024). On the other hand, issues of authenticity and social responsibility are important dimensions in how Gen Z assesses the credibility of influencers



(Leban et al., 2020). They not only seek entertainment but are also are honestly and morally relevant in every representation they consume. This situation creates a complex relationship between the desire to be part of global trends and the effort to maintain local values, as seen in the influence of global popular culture, including the Korean Wave (Karim & Fariyah, 2025).

This phenomenon has broad social and economic implications. From a digital economy perspective, influencers have become agents of the creative economy who drive the content industry, brand promotion, and new consumption patterns among young people (Bhattacharya & Gaikwad, 2024). However, behind these economic opportunities lies challenges such as social pressure, digital conformity, and psychological risks such as a distorted self-image and excessive social comparison (Mahon & Hevey, 2021). Therefore, understanding how Gen Z interprets influencer lifestyle content is not only theoretically important but also strategically significant for digital literacy policies, media ethics, and sustainable marketing.

Although a number of studies have examined the influence of influencers on consumption behavior and identity formation, most studies still focus on quantitative impacts such as purchase intent or brand loyalty. Relatively few studies have explored in depth how Gen Z interprets the lifestyle narratives constructed in influencer content, especially from an interpretive and cultural perspective. Therefore, this study attempts to fill this gap by exploring how Gen Z interprets, negotiates, and makes sense of the lifestyle representations they encounter on social media.

Specifically, this article aims to analyze how lifestyle narratives constructed by influencers are understood by Gen Z in sociocultural and psychological contexts. This study is expected to contribute to the development of the digital economy and consumer behavior literature while expanding our understanding of digital cultural dynamics among the younger generation.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Generation Z and digital culture

Generation Z (Gen Z), defined as individuals born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, embodies a generation deeply immersed in the convergence of physical and digital spaces. Their cultural engagement is shaped by digital fluency, personalized interaction, and value-oriented consumption patterns. Petrus and Hussain (2024) highlight Gen Z's responsiveness to digital marketing and social media campaigns that reflect authenticity and alignment with personal values—an insight relevant for designing culturally resonant engagement strategies. Similarly, Arkhipova and Janssen (2024) demonstrated how AI-driven recommendations on social media mediate Gen Z's identity formation, emphasizing technology's transformative role in redefining cultural norms and social interaction.

From a philosophical perspective, Mamina and Toistikova (2020) argue that Gen Z's digital worldview prioritizes autonomy and self-expression, reflecting the evolution of value orientations in a hyperconnected society. Similarly, Pysarevskyi et al. (2022) noted that Gen Z's moral reasoning tends toward justice and care, in contrast to the idealism of millennials, which informs how digital and cultural industries might tailor content to this demographic's ethical sensitivity. In the domain of digital etiquette, Mamina and Pochebut (2021) and Pochebut (2022) emphasize the rise of personalized digital behavior and educational strategies to cultivate online civility—skills critical to Gen Z's navigation of social media environments.

The literature further situates Gen Z within the dynamics of digital labor and cultural consumption. Zhang (2025) examines the case of Chinese gamers in the “Eggy Party” phenomenon, framing Gen Z as both consumers and producers in user-generated content ecosystems. This dual role exposes tensions between creative freedom and digital exploitation, illustrating the blurred boundaries between leisure and labor in the digital economy. Similarly, Kettapan and Suphattanakul (2024) revealed that status and prestige drive cultural tourism among Thai Gen Z travelers, underscoring how digital representations shape their consumption of culture and identity. Philosophical inquiries into homo digitalis (Kultaieva, 2020) extend this discussion by exploring how digital culture reshapes self-recognition and communication in postindustrial societies, suggesting the need for moral frameworks to mitigate alienation in virtual interactions.

In Indonesia, social media has become an integral element of young people's lives, particularly among Generation Z, influencing communication habits, self-expression, and identity creation in digitally mediated spaces. Youths' high levels of social media use reflect a larger global shift toward networked and platform-based communication (Nafisah & Jannah, 2024). Prior research has emphasized the ambivalent character of social media use. While social media promotes creativity, social connectivity, and civic participation by increasing access to information and collective engagement (Nugroho, 2025), it also exposes young users to psychosocial risks such as cyberbullying, excessive social comparison, identity pressure, and problematic use associated with curated online self-presentations (Dawa & Katoda, 2025.; Nugraha et al., 2024).

In addition to identify and behavioral results, social media use affects young people's mental health, interpersonal connections, and sociopolitical awareness. According to empirical research, heavy social media use is associated with greater anxiety and worse-quality face-to-face interaction; however, it may also provide perceived social support and a sense of closeness (Tanjung & Ginting, 2025.; Desyantoro & Ngongo, 2025).

Overall, existing scholarship portrays Gen Z as an ethically conscious, digitally skilled, and expressively autonomous generation. Their engagement with digital culture—spanning self-presentation, consumption, and education—reflects the broader transformations in social behavior and identity formation within networked societies (Tulchinskii, 2018). Understanding these intersections is essential for explaining how Gen Z interprets and reproduces cultural narratives in the

digital sphere.

## 2.2. Influencer culture and social media narratives

Influencer culture represents a critical component of digital communication, where individuals curate narratives that shape consumer perceptions, lifestyle aspirations, and cultural identities. Influencers operate within a media ecosystem that blurs the line between personal storytelling and strategic branding. Wang et al. (2025) reported that self-disclosure enhances consumer identification and word-of-mouth intentions, suggesting that authenticity and emotional transparency serve as mechanisms for trust-building in influencer–follower relationships. Similarly, Zahran and Aljuhmani (2025) revealed that sustainability-oriented influencer engagement fosters brand loyalty, reflecting Gen Z's preference for ethical consumption and socially responsible narratives.

The construction of social narratives extends beyond marketing, influencing collective perceptions of identity, place, and belonging. Plichta and Pecela (2025) demonstrate how tourist-generated narratives on Tripadvisor shape interpretations of Vilnius's religious heritage, exemplifying user-generated storytelling as a cultural mediation process. In a similar vein, Santaolalla-Rueda and Fernández-Muñoz (2024) show how TikTok subcultures such as Potaxie and Fifes employ creative aesthetics to express inclusivity and resistance to mainstream norms—evidence of how social media fosters both identity experimentation and cultural resistance.

Media narratives also operate as tools of social influence and ideological framing. Studies by Kitsa (2025) and Vorvornator (2025) reveal that representations in traditional and digital media significantly affect societal attitudes toward marginalized groups and migration, respectively. These findings underscore the parallel between institutional media framing and influencer discourse, both of which mold audience perceptions and social awareness. Similarly, Geslin (2025) introduced the Non-Anthropocentric Media Evaluation Questionnaire (NAMEQ) to assess ecological narratives in digital media, emphasizing influencers' potential role in promoting environmental consciousness through content creation.

Broader sociocultural shifts in gender and national identity are also reflected in digital narratives. Velasco Molpeceres et al. (2024) trace the transformation of men's magazines in Spain, illustrating the media's role in redefining masculinity amid democratization and cultural change. Kang (2024) extends this analysis to national identity, documenting how social media narratives in Korea contribute to evolving civic identities. Similarly, Kim and Kokuryo (2024) demonstrated how algorithmic curation on YouTube can either amplify or reduce prejudice, revealing social media's dual potential for polarization and empathy-building.

Taken together, the reviewed literature positions influencer culture and social media narratives as pivotal in shaping Gen Z's interpretation of self, society, and consumption. The convergence of authenticity, identity performance, and digital ethics in influencer discourse mirrors broader transformations in how Gen Z negotiates meaning and belonging in a hypermediated environment. Understanding these processes is essential to contextualizing how this generation constructs and internalizes lifestyle narratives on social media.

## 3. Materials and methods

### 3.1. Research design

The research used a qualitative phenomenological approach to investigate how Generation Z individuals interpret and comprehend lifestyle narratives produced by social media influencers. Phenomenology was selected because of the study's emphasis on lived experiences (lived meanings) that inform participants' interactions with digital content. Following Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenology, this study sought to elucidate the essence of participants' interpretive processes by illustrating their subjective consciousness, reflection, and sense-making.

### 3.2. Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 25 Generation Z individuals (aged between 18 and 25) who actively consumed social media influencer content. A purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure that the participants had rich and relevant experiences that were in line with the phenomenological focus of the study. The inclusion criteria required participants to (1) actively use Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube for at least two hours per day; (2) follow at least five influencers in lifestyle-related domains such as fashion, travel, motivation, entertainment, or entrepreneurship; and (3) have prior engagement with influencer content (liked, commented, shared, or saved posts).

Participants were recruited through university networks, Instagram announcements, and peer referrals. The sample reflects diversity in gender, educational background, socioeconomic status, and geographic origin in several regions of Indonesia, including urban and semiurban areas. Educational backgrounds ranged from undergraduates to early-career graduates, whereas socioeconomic conditions varied from lower-middle to upper-middle household backgrounds, as self-reported by participants during interviews. This diversity allowed the study to capture a broad spectrum of life experiences and interpretive positions regarding influencer lifestyle narratives. Table 1 shows the demographic profiles of the participants.

Although this study did not aim for demographic representativeness, the heterogeneity of participants provided a rich contextual foundation for understanding how interpretations of influencer content are shaped by different social locations.

**Table 1** Demographic Profile of the Participants (N=25).

Characteristic	Category	Number of Participants
Gender	Male	12
	Female	13
Age Range	18–20 years	9
	21–23 years	11
	24–25 years	5
Educational Status	Undergraduate students	19
	Recent graduates/early-career workers	6
Socioeconomic Background	Lower-middle	9
	Middle	10
	Upper-middle	6
Geographical Origin	Urban areas	15
	Semiurban areas	10
Primary Social Media Platforms Used	Instagram	25
	TikTok	21
	YouTube	18

**3.3. Data collection procedures**

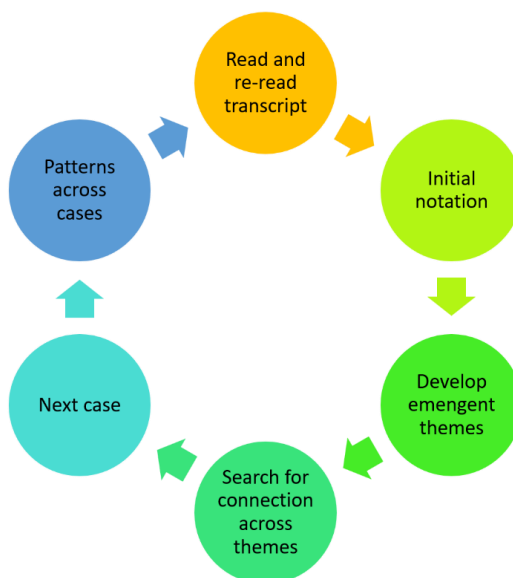
Data were collected through in depth, semistructured interviews conducted face-to-face. Each interview is guided by an interview guideline focusing on (1) perceptions of the role and identity of influencers; (2) interpretations of lifestyle narratives presented in social media content; (3) emotional, social, and behavioral responses to the content; and (4) the process of meaning-making related to lifestyle aspirations and well-being.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were also taken to capture nonverbal cues, context, and reflective insights. To ensure ethical compliance, participants were briefed on confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Pseudonyms are given to all the informants.

**3.4. Data analysis techniques**

Data were analyzed via interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), following the guidelines proposed by Smith et al. (2021), which emphasize an in-depth examination of lived experiences through a process of double hermeneutics, where participants make sense of their experiences and researchers interpret this meaning-making process.

This analysis follows six iterative stages (Figure 1). First, each interview transcript was read and reread to gain a deeper understanding of the data. Second, exploratory notes were created, focusing on the descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual aspects of the participants' stories. Third, the emerging themes are developed by condensing these notes into concise statements that capture the psychologically meaningful elements of the experience.



**Figure 1** Process of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.   
Source: Adapted from Smith et al. (2021).



In the fourth stage, the relationships between the emerging themes were examined in each case to construct higher-level themes through the processes of abstraction and contextualization, which is consistent with the idiographic orientation of IPA. Fifth, the analysis was then moved to the next case, with each transcript treated on its own terms to preserve experiential nuance before cross-case comparisons were made. Finally, patterns across cases were identified, resulting in a thematic structure that reflected shared meanings while retaining individual variation.

NVivo 12 Plus software is used to support data management, coding organization, and the retrieval of illustrative quotes. To increase the accuracy and reliability of the analysis, preliminary coding and theme development were executed independently by two researchers. Differences in interpretation are discussed in routine analytical meetings, where themes are refined through reflective dialog. In line with the epistemological foundations of science, this process emphasizes interpretive coherence and transparency rather than statistical intercoder reliability.

Thematic saturation is determined when no new themes emerge substantively and when the existing themes are already rich and theoretically meaningful. Saturation was reached after the 22nd interview; however, all remaining interviews were analyzed to confirm the stability and depth of the thematic structure. Throughout the analysis process, reflective notes were created to document analysis decisions, emerging assumptions, and the researcher's position to strengthen methodological transparency and trustworthiness.

#### 4. Results

Through interviews, four main themes were identified that explain how Gen Z interprets influencer lifestyle content: (1) influencers as representatives of modern success, (2) content as entertainment and inspiration, (3) ambivalence between reality and illusion, and (4) lifestyle as a new standard of well-being. The theme has a number of subthemes that describe the diversity of informants' perceptions and experiences in interacting with influencer content. Table 2 shows the mapping of the themes and subthemes.

**Table 2** Thematic Mapping of Research Findings.

No.	Main theme	Subtheme
1	Influencers as representatives of "modern success"	1.1. Success based on the digital image 1.2. Freedom and flexibility in life 1.3. The appeal of an aspirational lifestyle
2	Content as entertainment and inspiration	2.1. Social media as an escape 2.2. Inspiration for lifestyle and career 2.3. Educational and self-improvement content
3	Ambivalence between reality and illusion	3.1. Awareness of digital construction 3.2. Emotional impact and social comparison 3.3. Strategies for managing content exposure
4	Lifestyle as the new standard of well-being	4.1. Visual-based well-being 4.2. Social performance and digital recognition 4.3. Social pressure to appear "well-off"

##### 4.1. Theme 1: Influencers as representatives of "modern success"

The first theme describes how informants view influencers as a new symbol of success in the digital age. Success is no longer measured by position, social status, or conventional economic stability but rather by a person's ability to build an attractive and publicly recognized image.

###### 4.1.1. Success based on digital images

Some informants said that the success of influencers is seen in how they are able to create a strong personal brand and attract the attention of many people on social media. Several informants stated:

*"In my opinion, influencers are successful because they can live well from social media, travel, use expensive items, and still be considered cool. That has become the standard of success today." (I-03)*

*"In the past, success meant becoming a civil servant or working in a large office, but now many young people see success as becoming an influencer. Their lives are more recognized by society." (I-01)*

For Gen Z, the success of building an attractive digital image is a new form of symbolic capital that replaces conventional measures of success.

###### 4.1.2 Freedom and flexibility in life

The next subtheme shows that Gen Z defines influencer success through the freedom of time and flexibility of work that influencers display.

*"I see that they can work from anywhere, have time for themselves, it is like a dream for many young people." (I-16)*



This freedom is considered a form of life autonomy that is desired by the younger generation—a form of freedom to determine the time, place, and manner of work without the pressure of a formal system.

#### 4.1.3 *The appeal of an aspirational lifestyle*

The informants also reported that the main appeal of influencers lies in the aspirational lifestyle narratives they display. They not only highlight luxury but also depict a life that appears relaxed, productive, and enjoyable.

*“They seem authentic, but still ideal. Therefore, it is like their life is real but truly cool.” (I-09)*

Thus, for Gen Z, influencers have become symbols of modern success that combine elements of creativity, freedom, and social recognition through digital media.

#### 4.2. *Theme 2: Content as entertainment and inspiration*

The second theme shows that for Gen Z, influencer content is not just a promotional medium but also serves as a space for entertainment, inspiration, and learning. They consume this content regularly as part of their daily activities.

##### 4.2.1. *Social media as an escape agent*

Some informants use social media as a means to escape from routine or pressure.

*“When I’m stressed out from college, I open Instagram and look at influencer content, which helps me relax and laugh.” (I-04)*

*“I often look at their content for inspiration, such as outfits or vacation spots. Sometimes I do not have to imitate everything, but it is just for entertainment.” (I-07)*

This finding shows that consuming influencer content is a form of digital leisure and a coping mechanism for stress.

##### 4.2.2. *Inspiration for lifestyle and career*

In addition to entertainment, many informants use influencers as a source of inspiration for lifestyle and career motivation.

*“I am inspired by how they build their personal branding, which motivates me in my small business.” (I-12)*

Influencer content that discusses topics such as entrepreneurship, productivity, or self-improvement is considered to provide practical insights and personal motivation for young audiences.

##### 4.2.3. *Educational and self-development content*

Several informants also appreciated influencers who presented educational content, especially related to mental health issues, financial literacy, and self-development.

*“Some of the content is very educational, for example, about finance or mental health. It truly helps with self-reflection.” (I-17)*

*“I’m not truly fanatic, but from them, I learned how to appear confident and speak in front of the camera.” (I-23)*

These findings show that Gen Z is not passive but rather selective in consuming content—they assess the added value and relevance of each piece of content to their personal needs.

#### 4.3. *Theme 3: ambivalence between reality and illusion*

The third theme reveals emotional contradictions in Gen Z’s relationship with influencers. Although they realize that most content is artificial, there are still psychological effects that arise from social comparison and ideal expectations.

##### 4.3.1. *Awareness of digital construction*

Most informants are critically aware that the lives of influencers on social media have undergone a process of curation and image building.

*“We know that it is often staged or endorsed, but it still makes us jealous sometimes.” (I-11)*

*“Sometimes I realize that it is just an image, but I’m still influenced by it. So it is kind of mixed up.” (I-05)*

They understand that social media is a space that displays the “best parts” of a person’s life, not the whole reality.

##### 4.3.2. *Emotional impact and social comparison*

Despite this awareness, informants still experience envy, insecurity, or anxiety when exposed to idealized lifestyle content.

*“I can tell the difference between what’s real and what’s advertising. However, I still feel insecure when I see it all the time.” (I-16).*

This shows a dissonance between rational knowledge and emotional responses to digital content. Some informants even admitted to experiencing emotional fatigue.

#### 4.3.3. Strategies for managing content exposure

Some informants attempted to manage these emotional impacts by implementing certain strategies, such as limiting their social media usage or unfollowing certain accounts.

*"I unfollowed several accounts because they made me overthink things." (I-22)*

However, others acknowledged that these strategies helped only temporarily and did not completely eliminate the effects of social comparison. Thus, this theme illustrates the ambivalence of Gen Z, who are cognitively rational but remain emotionally affective.

#### 4.4. Theme 4: lifestyle as the new standard of well-being

The final theme shows a paradigm shift in well-being among Gen Z. Well-being is now understood not as a stable economic condition but as the ability to display a lifestyle that is worthy of being shown on social media.

##### 4.4.1. Visual-based well-being

The informants said that well-being is now synonymous with the ability to show visual signs of prosperity.

*"Currently, people are considered prosperous not only if they have a house or a good job but also if their lifestyle is like that of an influencer—using expensive items, hanging out at trendy cafes, traveling abroad." (I-02)*

*"Prosperity currently is like being able to constantly update vacation photos, eating well, even though we do not know their actual financial condition." (I-10)*

##### 4.4.2. Social performance and digital recognition

For some informants, well-being is measured not only materially but also by social recognition in the virtual world.

*"In the past, well-being was measured by owning land or having savings, but now it is measured by what you can show on social media." (I-13)*

*"There is indirect pressure to always update your lifestyle, so you will not be considered outdated." (I-25)*

#### 3.4.3. Social pressure to appear "well off"

Some informants even admitted to feeling social pressure to always appear happy and successful visually, even though reality is not always the case.

*"Currently, if you do not post anything, people will say you have nothing to do. So it is as if you always have to look busy or happy." (I-08)*

These findings illustrate the emergence of performative prosperity, where happiness and success are presented through visual symbols rather than real conditions. Social media creates a new logic of consumption on the basis of display and social recognition (the social display economy).

## 4. Discussion

This research shows that Generation Z is increasingly viewing influencer culture as the key benchmark for measuring success and well-being in today's digital age. Success is no longer defined solely by steady jobs or long-term economic security but also by flexibility, lifestyle liberty, and virtual visibility. Influencers are viewed as individuals who embody these principles through a carefully managed depiction of everyday life that is both inspiring and achievable. These findings confirm prior research demonstrating how influencers shape young people's identity ambitions and lifestyle norms (Leban et al., 2020; Mahon & Hevey, 2021). Most crucially, the findings demonstrate that this type of depiction not only inspires goals but also actively reshapes our perception and evaluation of well-being.

This study, which is based on social constructivism theory, indicates that the meaning of well-being comes from ongoing contact with common symbols and narratives circulating on digital platforms rather than just from individual self-evaluations (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Influencer-generated content acts as a symbolic resource, conveying a widely recognized vision of success, happiness, and self-esteem. In this sense, social media platforms serve as cultural venues in which the idea of well-being is created and maintained by factors such as visibility, aesthetic coherence, and audience involvement. This perspective is consistent with studies on digital culture that stress platforms' normative role in developing societal values and recognition (Bucher, 2021; Vogel et al., 2021).

Furthermore, influencer-generated content also provides a source of enjoyment and informal learning, particularly in terms of lifestyle, consumption patterns, and personal growth. This conclusion supports the notion that social media has evolved into a hybrid realm in which leisure, learning, and consumption coexist (van Eldik et al., 2019; Karim & Farihah, 2025). However, when inspiring stories are coupled with commercial marketing, the distinction between ambition and consumption blurs. As a result, consumer-oriented idealism may be internalized without sufficient consideration for its economic or emotional ramifications, emphasizing the significance of consumer and financial literacy in a digitally mediated environment.

Despite being aware of the edited and manufactured nature of influencer content, participants regularly reported experiencing emotions such as envy, anxiety, and inadequacy. This ambivalence reveals an important paradox in digital engagement: critical understanding does not always reduce emotional effects. These findings are consistent with those of prior studies on social comparison (Mahon & Hevey, 2021; Vogel et al., 2021), indicating that introspection and emotional vulnerability can coexist. In theory, this circumstance results in a type of relational agency in which humans actively interpret content while being tied to symbolic hierarchies reinforced by algorithmic visibility.

This study provides a conceptual contribution by articulating performative well-being. Unlike the traditional framework that associates well-being with material security or subjective life satisfaction, performative well-being refers to socially recognized conditions in which individuals are perceived—and begin to perceive themselves—as "good" through concrete actions that reflect an appealing and consistent lifestyle in the digital world. Within this concept, well-being is based on acknowledgment, aesthetic presentation, and audience response, transforming it into a performance achievement rather than an internal or material condition. This paradigm contributes to existing welfare theory by emphasizing the role of platforms and symbolic evaluation in producing contemporary well-being experiences.

Performative well-being is never passively accepted but rather negotiated. Although participants are aware of the constructive nature of narratives given by influencers, this cognitive comprehension does not reduce their emotional impact. This study points to a fundamental imbalance between cognitive agency and affective experience in platform-mediated contexts. This calls into question the rationalist assumptions common in models of media consumption and supports behavioral perspectives that emphasize bounded rationality and the influence of affect in shaping judgment and aspiration (Orben, 2020; Kross et al., 2021).

From the perspective of the digital economy, performative well-being can be interpreted in terms of the development of symbolic value in platform-based capitalism. Influencers direct exposure and attention to social and economic capital, whereas audiences use these representations to evaluate their lives. Consequently, consumerism, identity development, and emotional regulation are intertwined. This dynamic parallels broader shifts in digital capitalism, in which market logic and the attention economy are increasingly influencing subjective sensations of value and well-being. By exposing this dynamic, this study adds to the ongoing debate about how digital platforms are transforming not only economic behavior but also the criteria used by young people to envision and pursue well-being.

This study is limited by its cultural and contextual scope, as it focuses on Indonesian Gen Z participants within a specific sociocultural environment. The qualitative design with a small sample provides depth but limits generalizability. Future research should adopt mixed or comparative approaches across countries to examine how cultural contexts and digital ecosystems influence the interpretation of influencer content. Moreover, integrating digital ethnography or social media content analysis could enrich understanding beyond self-reported narratives. As influencer culture and algorithmic platforms continue to evolve, longitudinal and interdisciplinary studies are recommended to further conceptualize performative well-being and digital ambivalence within the broader agenda.

## 5. Conclusions

Indonesian Generation Z engages with influencer-generated lifestyle content through a nuanced process characterized by reflection, emotional involvement, and social comparison. In this context, influencers transcend their roles as mere content creators and emerge as symbolic reference points that shape contemporary understandings of success, happiness, and well-being. Participants do not passively absorb these narratives; instead, they engage in an active interpretative process while experiencing the emotional ramifications of the visibility and performative aspects inherent in digital culture.

The findings enrich the literature on digital identity and youth well-being by introducing the notion of performative well-being. This emerging concept illustrates a paradigm shift in how well-being is evaluated, emphasizing the role of visual representation, social acknowledgment, and algorithmic exposure instead of relying solely on material security or subjective feelings of satisfaction. Analyzing this phenomenon through a social constructionist lens reveals that well-being is relationally generated, molded by the dynamics of platform-specific logics, symbolic economies, and standardized social norms perpetuated through media. On a practical level, this study highlights the pressing necessity of improving digital literacy and emotional resilience among young individuals. Educational programs must evolve beyond merely imparting technical skills to encompass critical examinations of social comparison, the authenticity of curated content, and the emotional implications of living in a state of constant visibility.

Simultaneously, ethical frameworks governing influencer practices and platform regulations are essential to alleviate the unrealistic lifestyle expectations and psychological burdens that young audiences frequently encounter. Although the study has limitations, stemming from its qualitative methodology and focus on a specific cultural milieu, it provides a theoretically informed perspective on the reimagining of well-being in societies increasingly shaped by platform mediation.

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## 6. Declarations

### 6.1. Ethical considerations

The author confirms that this manuscript complied with ethical standards during the writing process. Informants provided written and verbal consent after being informed about the purpose, procedures, and rights of the study, including the option to withdraw at any time. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured through the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage with restricted access.

### 6.2. Use of artificial intelligence (AI)

The authors declare that no generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the preparation, analysis, or writing of this manuscript.

### 6.3. Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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