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Instagram and TikTok as Spaces for Self-Meaning: University Students Experiences in Consuming Beauty and Lifestyle Content on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to understand how university students make sense of themselves when consuming beauty and lifestyle content on Instagram and TikTok. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed to explore students' experiences and interpretations of digital representations. Data were collected through face-to-face open-ended interviews and analyzed thematically to identify patterns of meaning across participants, supported by member checking. The findings indicate that Instagram and TikTok function not only as sources of information and entertainment but also as spaces of reference and digital representation. Students encounter representations of beauty, fashion, lifestyle, achievement, productivity, career, and identity that may encourage self-evaluation and social comparison. These experiences generate diverse responses, including insecurity, inspiration, motivation, information seeking, and self-acceptance. Students also demonstrate agency by selecting, adapting, avoiding, limiting, or distancing themselves from representations they perceive as unsuitable or potentially harmful. Personal values and identity further shape how these representations are negotiated. The study concludes that self-meaning in social media is a dynamic, reflective, and negotiated communication process rather than a direct consequence of media exposure. Students actively interpret and negotiate digital representations according to their experiences, needs, identities, and personal values. Instagram and TikTok therefore function as spaces where students encounter representations of others while simultaneously reflecting on and reconstructing meanings about themselves.

Keywords: Digital Representation, Self-Meaning, Social Media, Social Comparison, University Students

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become an integral part of university students' daily lives. Instagram and TikTok are no longer used solely for communication and entertainment; they have also become spaces where users encounter diverse representations of beauty, fashion, lifestyle, productivity, achievement, and identity. Through visual and audiovisual content, students not only observe the lives of others but also confront various images regarding how one ought to look, live, and shape oneself. In this context, social media can serve as a space where students understand, evaluate, and reflect upon themselves.

Hall (1997) explains that representation is the process of producing meaning through language and systems of signs. This perspective is crucial for understanding social media because digital content does not merely present reality; it also constructs meanings regarding beauty, lifestyle, success, and identity. Instagram and TikTok can be viewed as spaces of representation where university students encounter various images of lives deemed ideal, attractive, or valuable. These representations can then be linked to the users' own experiences and circumstances. Thus, the key issue is not simply what social media displays, but rather how users interpret and assign meaning to what they see.

In the context of beauty and appearance, digital representations can establish specific standards that subsequently serve as a reference point for users when evaluating themselves. Cohen, Newton-John, and Slater (2017) demonstrated that appearance-focused activity on Facebook and Instagram is linked to body image concerns among young women. These findings indicate that issues surrounding social media stem not merely from the intensity of usage, but also from the nature of the activities performed and the characteristics of the content consumed. In other words, understanding the user experience requires considering how users engage with content and the types of representations they encounter.

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Issues regarding the representation of beauty are also evident among university students in Indonesia. Indriyani and Afrizal (2026) demonstrate that beauty standards emerging on TikTok are both accepted and critically examined by students. These findings indicate that students do not passively accept the beauty standards portrayed on social media; rather, they evaluate them, accepting some representations while questioning or rejecting others. Similarly, Wilmanda and Hariyanti (2025) show that TikTok serves as a space where evolving representations of beauty emerge. Thus, beauty standards are neither singular nor static; instead, they are subject to reconstruction and negotiation through the representations present in the digital space.

On the other hand, the experience of university students in consuming beauty content is not solely linked to issues regarding pressure concerning appearance. Agnesia and Evelynd (2026) demonstrate that Generation Z students have specific motives for selecting beauty content on TikTok. These findings indicate that the consumption of beauty content is also associated with information needs and the users' subjective considerations in determining which content is deemed relevant. Consequently, students act not merely as message recipients but also as users who possess preferences, goals, and considerations when choosing the content they consume.

When confronted with such representations, university students may also engage in social comparison. Festinger (1954) explained that individuals have a tendency to evaluate their own abilities and opinions by comparing themselves with others. Social media expands the scope for this process, as users are constantly exposed to representations of other individuals. Students may compare their appearance, lifestyle, achievements, productivity, or life circumstances with what they observe on other users' accounts. Consequently, social comparison on social media is not limited to physical aspects but can extend to the various dimensions individuals use to evaluate themselves.

Research by Yanti, Fitriani, and Izzati (2026) highlights issues regarding dissatisfaction with one's physical appearance—specifically concerning beauty standards encountered on TikTok—among university students. These findings indicate that representations of beauty on social media can shape how students evaluate their own appearance. However, the process of self-evaluation extends beyond physical appearance; students may also compare their academic achievements, productivity, career paths, and lifestyles with those of others they encounter on social media.

These findings align with research by Nurdiantara and Maesurah (2026), which indicates that the consumption of Instagram and TikTok content is linked to processes of social comparison, body image construction, and self-confidence among female university students who wear the hijab. That study provides a crucial foundation for understanding the relationship between social media content consumption and self-evaluation processes. However, the focus on body image and self-confidence does not fully explain how students—in a broader sense—make sense of themselves when confronted with diverse representations of beauty and lifestyle on social media. Consequently, there is scope to examine these experiences not merely through specific psychological consequences, but through the processes of meaning-making experienced by the users.

This process of assigning meaning is also linked to how individuals present themselves. Goffman (1959) explains that individuals manage how they are presented and perceived during social interactions. In the context of social media, this management occurs through the selection of photos and videos, the curation of information, the choice of activities to showcase, and decisions regarding which aspects of life to reveal to the audience. Research by Hernández-Serrano et al. (2022) on Instagram and TikTok users indicates that self-presentation practices involve three aspects: social validation, authenticity, and image control. These findings demonstrate that both platforms serve not merely as sites for consuming representations but also as spaces where users can manage and showcase their own self-representations.

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In a broader context, social media also serves as an environment where individuals explore their identities. A systematic review by Avci, Baams, and Kretschmer (2024)—covering 32 studies and 19,658 participants—demonstrates that active participation on social media is linked to identity exploration, whereas authenticity on the platform is associated with self-concept clarity. They also found that social comparison activities are related to both identity exploration and identity distress. These findings reinforce the view that the relationship between social media and identity cannot be fully understood based solely on usage duration; rather, it must be examined through the activities users engage in and how they interact with their digital environments.

This indicates that students do not always accept the representations they encounter as standards to be followed. They may adopt trends they deem appropriate, adapt specific representations, disregard irrelevant content, or maintain their personal styles and values when engaging with various digital representations. Indeed, these processes can occur simultaneously; a representation might be accepted in one respect while being rejected in another. Consequently, the relationship between students and social media representations is best understood as a process of interpretation and negotiation rather than a simple process of message acceptance.

Understanding students' experiences in consuming beauty and lifestyle content requires going beyond questions about the frequency of their Instagram and TikTok usage or whether that usage has positive or negative effects. More importantly, it involves understanding how students interpret the representations they see, relate them to their own circumstances, engage in evaluation or comparison, and subsequently negotiate those meanings against their own experiences, identities, and personal values. This approach positions the user as an active actor in the communication process, rather than merely a passive recipient of messages.

This study positions social media as a space for self-interpretation. Instagram and TikTok offer various representations that can serve as material for student reflection, yet the resulting meanings are not automatic. The same representation can be interpreted differently by different users. For one student, specific content might be a source of inspiration or information; for another, the same content could become a basis for comparison that triggers dissatisfaction; while for yet another user, the content might hold no personal relevance. These differences demonstrate that the meaning of social media is shaped through an interpretive process influenced by the user's experiences, position, identity, and values.

Previous research has provided important insights into several aspects related to this issue. Studies on the representation of beauty reveal the construction and shifting nature of beauty standards on TikTok (Wilmanda & Hariyanti, 2025; Indriyani & Afrizal, 2026). Research on content consumption indicates that university students have specific motives and considerations when selecting beauty-related content (Agnesia & Evelynd, 2026). Other studies demonstrate the interconnections among beauty standards, social comparison, appearance dissatisfaction, body image, and self-confidence (Cohen et al., 2017; Yanti et al., 2026; Nurdiantara & Maesurah, 2026). Meanwhile, research on identity shows that social media activity, authenticity, and social comparison are linked to the processes of identity exploration and self-concept clarity (Avci et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, the existing body of research leaves room for a more comprehensive understanding of the user experience. Studies on beauty tend to focus on representations and appearance standards, while research on the impact of social media consumption often centers on body image, appearance dissatisfaction, or self-confidence. Although studies on identity and self-presentation indicate that social media serves as a space for self-exploration and self-management, they have not specifically explained how university students connect the representations of beauty and lifestyle they consume with the process of understanding and making sense of themselves through their daily experiences on Instagram and TikTok. It is this specific area that this study addresses.

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Based on the foregoing, this study aims to understand how university students make sense of themselves while consuming beauty and lifestyle content on Instagram and TikTok. Specifically, it examines how students interpret the digital representations they consume, how this experience relates to self-evaluation and social comparison, and how they negotiate these representations in relation to their own experiences, identities, and personal values. This study is expected to contribute to the fields of digital communication and social media studies by positioning students not merely as content consumers, but as active subjects who interpret, evaluate, and construct meaning regarding the self through their social media experiences.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach and a descriptive research design. A qualitative approach was selected because the research focuses on students' experiences and interpretations when consuming beauty and lifestyle content on Instagram and TikTok. The study does not aim to measure relationships between variables or generate statistical generalizations; rather, it seeks to understand how students interpret digital representations, relate them to their own experiences and circumstances, and negotiate these meanings within their daily lives.

The study involved 17 student informants selected using purposive sampling. Informants were chosen based on the alignment of their experiences with the research focus. The selection criteria included: (1) status as an active student; (2) usage of Instagram and TikTok; and (3) experience consuming content related to beauty, fashion, lifestyle, productivity, achievements, or self-representation. The use of purposive sampling enabled the researcher to select informants with direct and relevant experience regarding the phenomenon under study.

Research data were obtained through interviews with all informants. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews comprising 20 open-ended questions. These questions were designed to explore students' experiences using Instagram and TikTok, the types of content consumed, reasons for paying attention to specific content, experiences regarding the representation of other users, experiences of social comparison, responses to beauty and lifestyle content, and how these experiences relate to the informants' self-perception and self-understanding. Open-ended questions allowed informants to elaborate on their experiences, views, and interpretations, while the interview structure ensured the discussion remained aligned with the research focus.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted over the course of one month in June 2026, lasting approximately 30–60 minutes per informant. All informants were interviewed using the same set of questions. Informant responses were documented as research data and subsequently organized by individual informant. Informant identities were kept confidential, and quotes used in presenting the research findings did not include personal identifying information.

The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, as developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). This approach was employed to identify and develop patterns of meaning within the interview data through an interpretive process involving the researcher's active engagement in understanding and constructing themes. In the reflexive approach, themes are not viewed merely as entities existing objectively within the data; rather, they are developed through the researcher's interpretation of the data as a whole and the research context (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021).

The analysis was conducted using the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis. The first phase involved data familiarization—reading through all interview responses repeatedly to grasp the informants' overall experiences and noting points relevant to the research focus. The second phase was coding, which entailed identifying meaningful segments of the data and assigning initial codes. This coding process was carried out actively to capture aspects of experience related to digital representation, self-evaluation, social comparison, emotional responses, identity, and the negotiation of meaning.

The third phase involves developing initial themes—specifically, grouping codes that share semantic connections and identifying broader patterns of meaning. The fourth phase entails reviewing the themes by re-examining the relationships between themes, codes, and the dataset as a whole to ensure internal coherence and

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relevance to the research questions. The fifth phase focuses on defining and naming themes, which involves articulating the core meaning of each theme and assigning a name that captures the essential characteristics of the identified experiences. The sixth phase is report writing, which involves presenting the themes through an analytical narrative supported by informant quotes as empirical evidence (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

During the analysis process, the researcher examined the similarities, variations, and contradictions in the informants' experiences. Responses indicating insecurity, for instance, were not treated as a singular pattern, as some informants interpreted beauty and lifestyle content as sources of inspiration, information, motivation, or self-acceptance. Similarly, experiences regarding beauty content were analyzed not only in relation to physical appearance but also in terms of achievements, lifestyle, productivity, capabilities, and personal identity.

The reflexive nature of the analysis also positions the researcher as part of the interpretation process. The development of codes and themes is not viewed as a mechanical process for identifying entirely objective categories, but rather as a systematic interpretive process that takes into account the research focus, the data context, and the informants' overall experiences. This approach enables the research to preserve depth of meaning while acknowledging the diversity of experiences within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

To strengthen confidence in the research interpretation, member checking was conducted. Initial interpretations of the informants' experiences were verified with the respective informants. They were given the opportunity to confirm, clarify, or correct the interpretations regarding their experiences. Feedback from this process served as a basis for refining the interpretations and research themes. This member checking process ensured that the researcher's interpretations remained grounded in the experiences and meanings conveyed by the informants.

The analysis focuses not merely on the frequency of response occurrences, but on the patterns and meanings of experiences constructed from the data as a whole. Informant quotes are used in the results and discussion sections to demonstrate the empirical basis for the themes developed. Comparisons between informants are conducted to identify recurring patterns while also preserving distinct or contrasting experiences that are relevant to the research focus.

Based on this process, the research findings were developed into themes characterizing Instagram and TikTok as spaces for reference and representation, comparison and self-evaluation, the emergence of both insecurity and inspiration, and the negotiation and reinterpretation of the self. These themes were then used to explain how university students interpret various digital representations and relate them to their experiences, identities, and personal values in daily life.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research results indicate that students' experiences with social media content are not uniform. The same content can be perceived differently depending on individual interests, needs, experiences, personal circumstances, and how each student interprets the representations they encounter. These findings were analyzed by linking them to relevant concepts and prior research. The analysis aimed to explain how students engage with digital representations, utilize social media as a reference point, evaluate and compare themselves against others, and negotiate the various meanings that emerge from their social media experiences. Based on this analysis, the findings were categorized into several themes, characterizing social media as a space for reference and representation, a space for self-comparison and evaluation, a space where both insecurity and inspiration arise, and a space for negotiating and reinterpreting the self.

Instagram and TikTok as Spaces for Reference and Representation

Research findings indicate that university students use Instagram and TikTok not only for entertainment and communication but also as sources of information regarding various aspects of daily life. These topics range from beauty, fashion, self-care, food, travel, and education to productivity and personal development. However, the types

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of content consumed vary among the informants; content choices are shaped by each student's specific interests, needs, activities, and current concerns. These findings demonstrate that the social media experience is selective; students do not engage with the entire flow of information uniformly but instead focus their attention on content they deem relevant to their own lives.

Differences in the user experience across the two platforms are also evident in how the informants interpret the respective characters of Instagram and TikTok. Ira, for instance, views TikTok as a more casual and entertaining platform, whereas she perceives Instagram as more serious. Nova similarly regards TikTok as a more entertaining space due to its diverse content. In contrast, she notes that Instagram more frequently presents content related to her specific search interests, such as nail art and travel recommendations. These distinctions demonstrate that students perceive social media not merely based on content, but also based on the nature of the experience they have while using each platform.

The findings indicate that Instagram and TikTok can be understood as spaces of reference, as they provide information and imagery that students use to weigh options in their daily lives. Simultaneously, they function as spaces of representation, where students encounter various depictions of beauty, appearance, lifestyle, activities, achievements, and self-presentation. In other words, what students consume is not merely information about an object, but also representations of ways of living or forms of selfhood deemed attractive, ideal, or worthy of attention.

From Hall's (1997) perspective on representation, meaning is not inherent in objects or reality itself but is produced through language and systems of signs. The social media context reveals this process to be more complex, as representations emerge through a combination of images, videos, text, music, visual styles, and self-presentation practices. Beauty content, for instance, does not simply showcase products or makeup techniques; it can simultaneously convey ideas about what constitutes an attractive appearance. Similarly, lifestyle content does more than display specific activities; it can present images of a life considered ideal or desirable.

Nevertheless, the research results show that students do not automatically accept every representation as a standard to be followed. Devia, for example, uses content featuring models and beauty trends as a reference for her choices regarding clothing, makeup, and hairstyles. While she may attempt to emulate the styles she sees, she still considers their suitability for her own personality and circumstances. Devia's experience demonstrates that digital references do not automatically translate into imitation; a process of selection and adaptation occurs before a representation is applied to daily life.

A similar pattern is evident in Tasya's experience. She primarily uses the beauty content she encounters as a source of practical knowledge—such as learning how to use foundations or skin tints suited to her skin type. In this context, beauty content is not viewed as a benchmark for determining whether she is beautiful or not, but rather as a source of information for making decisions about grooming and appearance. The meaning derived from the content depends on how the user connects that information to her own needs and circumstances. These findings align with research by Lang and Ye (2024) on female university students in China, which demonstrates that young women are aware of beauty standards on social media and do not merely position themselves as passive recipients of such representations. The study also reveals a critical interpretation of social media content regarding beauty and body positivity. This similarity reinforces the finding that exposure to digital representations does not automatically determine how students perceive themselves; users retain the agency to evaluate, accept, adapt, or question the representations they encounter.

These research findings also relate to the study by Wuna and Fadillah (2025) regarding beauty-related information on Instagram and the transformation of student identities. That study demonstrated that Instagram can serve as a space for the formation and negotiation of student identities, involving practices such as the selection of self-representations and processes of self-evaluation. However, the present study expands upon this understanding by showing that the referential function of social media extends beyond the mere formation of digital identities or

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appearances. The references students derive from these platforms also inform various practical decisions concerning self-care, fashion, travel, food, education, and personal development.

Consequently, within the informants' experiences, Instagram and TikTok cannot be viewed merely as media that generate standards for passive user acceptance. Instead, they are best understood as communication environments offering diverse representations that students interpret and utilize according to their specific life contexts. Students play an active role in determining which content to attend to, assigning meaning to the representations they encounter, and deciding whether to adopt, adapt, ignore, or reject a particular representation.

These findings are significant as they demonstrate that the process of making sense of the self on social media does not stem from the direct impact of content on the student; rather, it arises from the student's encounter with representations, which are then processed through their personal experiences and needs. Instagram and TikTok function simultaneously as spaces of reference and representation, integral to the process by which students understand both their social environment and themselves.

Digital Representation as a Mirror of the Student's Self

Further findings indicate a point where digital representations cease to be mere spectacles and begin to function as a mirror of the self—specifically, when students stop merely observing the lives or achievements of others and start relating them to their own circumstances. At this stage, the content consumed becomes a reference point for evaluating one's own standing. The resulting comparisons extend beyond physical appearance or beauty to encompass achievements, careers, productivity, capabilities, and lifestyles. What students see on social media serves as a basis for assessing whether their own situation aligns with, lags behind, or differs from that of others.

Vini experienced this process firsthand. She frequently compared herself to peers who had achieved a certain level of success—partly due to her intensive use of Instagram, and partly because her habit of seeking career-related information led her to encounter content about young high achievers more often. While such representations can be motivating, they simultaneously trigger an awareness of her own position. For Vini, the success of others is not merely information; she uses it as a tool to view and evaluate her own personal growth.

Widiya articulated this pattern more explicitly. "People my age are already doing amazing things, while I'm still just... here," she said. This illustrates that comparison arises when she positions herself against others perceived to have achieved more. The comparison here is not based on physical characteristics but on life standing. Their shared age serves as a reference point, making the achievements of others feel relevant to her own self-evaluation. In this instance, digital representations highlight the gap between her current situation and the lives of those perceived to be further ahead.

A different form of comparison emerged in Diana's experience. Her attention was drawn primarily to individuals perceived as productive and highly active. For her, social media served as a space to observe how others manage their time, carry out activities, and develop their lives. The comparison that arises does not stem from explicit standards presented in the content itself; rather, it occurs because Diana uses the activities of others as a benchmark against which to reflect on her own life.

Resti exhibits a similar tendency, albeit with a different focus. She notes that she is not significantly influenced by beauty-related content; instead, she finds herself making comparisons when she sees others landing jobs or demonstrating career progress that she perceives as superior. As this illustrates, the object of a student's comparison can shift in line with the issues currently relevant to their individual lives. When the focus is on future employment and career prospects, representations of others' success carry more weight than representations of physical appearance or beauty.

This perspective broadens the understanding of social comparison on social media. It occurs not only when students view individuals deemed more physically attractive but also when they observe others perceived as more

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successful, productive, accomplished, or advanced in life. Rafiq and Linden (2024) identified a similar pattern. Students' social media experiences involve various forms of comparison, including those regarding body image, academics, and abilities. According to the study, these comparisons based on ability or achievement are also linked to students' self-perceptions.

Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory explains this tendency as an individual's effort to evaluate themselves by using others as a reference point. Social media expands the opportunities for this process because students have constant access to representations of other users' lives. However, it is important to note that what is being compared is not the direct reality of others' lives, but rather the representations of those lives as displayed on social media. Consequently, self-evaluation occurs based on what is visible and how students interpret those visuals.

The term "self-mirror" must be understood carefully in this context. It does not imply that social media directly reflects a student's objective reality. Instead, social media is better understood as a "social mirror"—a space providing representations of others that students use to reflect on their own standing. This mirror is selective, as it reveals only specific aspects of others' lives presented through content. The resulting evaluations are also shaped by how students interpret these representations.

Not all informants engage in this process of comparison. Tasya, for instance, stated that she is not in the habit of comparing herself to the figures she sees on social media. When she sees someone considered beautiful or leading an interesting life, she prefers to admire them rather than using their situation as a benchmark for herself. In Tasya's experience, there is a distinction between viewing a representation and using it as a basis for self-evaluation.

This distinction is significant because it demonstrates that exposure to digital representations does not automatically trigger social comparison. The same representation might evoke admiration in one student while serving as a basis for self-evaluation for another; it all depends on how each individual assigns personal relevance to what they see. Based on the informants' experiences, the factors that render a representation relevant appear linked to the specific issues they are currently facing—whether related to educational achievements, employment, career paths, productivity, or physical appearance.

This indicates that the process of self-interpretation on social media unfolds through the interplay between representations of others and the students' own subjective positions. The question is not merely "who am I looking at?" but also, implicitly, "where do I stand?" The outcomes vary: for some students, this process sparks the motivation and drive for personal growth, whereas for others, it fosters feelings of falling behind or dissatisfaction. Thus, digital representations function as a mirror, the meaning of which is shaped by each user's personal experiences and context.

This reveals that Instagram and TikTok do more than simply provide references for how one ought to look or live—roles identified in earlier studies. They also serve as benchmarks against which students evaluate their own standing. The shift from "reference" to "mirror" occurs precisely when representations of others are linked to one's own circumstances; it is from this process that a more diverse range of emotional experiences and interpretations emerges.

Insecurity, Inspiration, and Self-Acceptance

Research also indicates that there is no single response when students encounter digital representations. Some informants experience feelings of insecurity when viewing others perceived as more beautiful, possessing an ideal body shape, or displaying superior achievements and abilities. Yet, for other informants, the same content is interpreted as a source of inspiration, motivation, or information—or simply accepted without triggering negative self-evaluation. In other words, students' experiences with beauty and lifestyle content span a wide spectrum of responses, depending on how those representations are interpreted and linked to their individual personal circumstances.

Ira experienced one such negative response. She admitted to feeling somewhat insecure when seeing women on TikTok who were considered beautiful and garnered significant praise. The physical characteristics and social acceptance displayed by others became a benchmark against which she measured herself. In her experience,

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representations of beauty were no longer merely visually appealing; they began to intersect with how she evaluated herself.

Similar patterns—albeit in different forms—emerged in the cases of Vini and Widiya. Vini felt dissatisfied with her own body shape after seeing women with bodies perceived as ideal. Widiya experienced similar discomfort when encountering content that disparaged plus-sized women. For both, social media representations of the body directly interacted with how they viewed their own physical selves. Feelings of insecurity did not arise solely from the existence of beauty content, but rather because those representations took on personal relevance during the process of self-evaluation.

Research by Ando et al. (2021) involving female university students in Japan reveals a similar pattern. While there is pressure to conform to beauty ideals found on social media, there is simultaneously an emergence of criticism, resistance, and negotiation regarding those ideals. In other words, young women do not merely accept appearance standards passively; they can respond to them in diverse ways. This consistency reinforces the idea that representations capable of causing discomfort can still be processed in varied ways by different individuals.

Interestingly, these responses can also evolve over time. Ira, for instance, was actually motivated to pay greater attention to her health and body care after viewing fitness content. Content that initially triggered self-consciousness regarding her own condition shifted toward something more constructive. This demonstrates that a single media environment can simultaneously elicit both evaluative and motivational experiences, depending on the type of content and how the user interprets it.

Devia experienced a similar shift. She admitted that she used to feel insecure when seeing women considered beautiful, but as she continued using TikTok and Instagram, she began actively seeking information on skincare, makeup, exercise, and diet. Her focus regarding beauty shifted from the question "Am I as beautiful as others?" to "What can I do to take care of myself?" This process is known as *reframing*—changing the way a representation is interpreted from an object of comparison into a source of knowledge and motivation.

This type of reframing is significant because it demonstrates that self-interpretation is never static. A representation that causes discomfort in one situation can be interpreted differently once a student acquires new knowledge, develops specific needs, or finds a more suitable way to relate the content to their own life. For Devia, beauty content eventually ceased to function as a benchmark for appearance and instead became a source of practical information for self-care.

Silvy demonstrated a more positive response from the outset. Seeing others with superior abilities or achievements did not automatically make her feel inferior; instead, she viewed those achievements as a source of motivation. Comparing oneself to individuals perceived as superior does not always result in a negative self-evaluation; representations of success can also serve as a guide for personal growth.

Tasya has her own approach. Seeing influencers with enviable appearances, families, financial status, or lifestyles does not make her feel inferior. She can admire them without using their lives as a yardstick for her own self-worth. For her, admiring and accepting the strengths of others can coexist with accepting her own circumstances.

These four responses—insecurity, inspiration, motivation, and self-acceptance—are not mutually exclusive; they can all arise in the same individual depending on the context. What matters is the content itself, the specific aspect of life being highlighted, and the extent to which that representation feels relevant to the student. Therefore, it is a mistake to view social media content deterministically as the sole cause of insecurity.

The nature of the content itself plays a crucial role here. Content showcasing ideal bodies or beauty standards can trigger negative self-evaluations when used as a benchmark against one's own reality. Conversely, content related to fitness, self-care, education, or achievements can serve as a source of information and motivation—provided students focus on what they can learn or do, rather than merely the volume of content consumed. Ultimately, how content is interpreted and utilized is far more significant than the sheer extent of exposure to it.

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From a communication perspective, these findings underscore that the communication process extends beyond the mere production and distribution of messages. Meaning emerges from the intersection of media-conveyed representations and the recipient's subjective experiences. Students are not passive recipients who automatically internalize the beauty standards or lifestyles they encounter; rather, they interpret the content, assign it personal relevance, accept some aspects while questioning others, and—in certain instances—transform it into a source of motivation or knowledge.

For the informants, social media is not merely a space that fosters insecurity; it is also a realm that cultivates inspiration, motivation, and self-acceptance. These findings reinforce the argument that the construction of self-meaning on platforms like Instagram and TikTok is a dynamic process. Digital representations acquire meaning when students connect them to their own experiences and positions, subsequently determining for themselves how to use those representations to understand their own identities.

The process of making meaning goes beyond simply accepting or rejecting representations; students also negotiate the meanings they encounter. Some adopt elements they deem appropriate, others transform them into motivation, while some choose to maintain a distance and uphold their own standards. This negotiation process forms the basis for the subsequent discussion on how students shape and negotiate their self-conceptions within the social media landscape.

Agency and the Negotiation of Self-Meaning in Digital Spaces

One significant finding of this study is the emergence of student agency when engaging with social media content. This agency refers to an individual's capacity to make decisions and act consciously in response to their social environment. Agency does not imply that students are entirely free from social media's influence or possess total control over the content appearing on Instagram and TikTok; rather, it highlights the space students have to determine how they respond to, perceive, and manage the representations they encounter.

This agency manifests in various forms. It can be seen in actions such as choosing to continue viewing a piece of content, skipping it, seeking out other material, following or ignoring specific accounts, limiting app usage, or even considering whether a trend aligns with their personal identity. This ability is not merely about rejecting media influence but also about selecting, filtering, adapting, and utilizing what is available in the digital environment according to personal needs and understanding. Hernández-Serrano et al. (2022) observed similar patterns in their study on self-presentation practices on Instagram and TikTok, noting that users weigh factors regarding authenticity and control over their self-image while using social media.

This understanding is crucial for interpreting the experiences of the study's informants. When students encounter content that does not align with their identity or begins to exert a negative influence, they do not simply accept it. Some divert their attention, limit their exposure, or distance themselves from the platform. Conversely, they treat content deemed beneficial as a source of information, motivation, or reference. In other words, agency is clearly evident in the decisions students make regarding the content they consume and the meanings they derive from it.

Vini demonstrates this agency through the management of her attention. When she feels uncomfortable after viewing certain content, she chooses not to linger in that stream of material. "I keep scrolling to find content with a different concept—for instance, looking for cooking videos or motivational content," she says. This statement reveals that Vini actively alters the direction of her media consumption; she not only recognizes the influence of specific content but also takes action to seek out a content environment that better suits her needs. Shifting away from content that triggers discomfort toward cooking or motivational material demonstrates a process of selecting which media experiences to maintain.

Widiya handles this situation more assertively; when comparisons with others' achievements begin to trouble her, she sometimes simply closes the app. In this instance, limiting usage serves as a way to create distance from the

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source of comparison. Agency does not always manifest as a search for alternative content; it can also take the form of temporarily ceasing interaction with the platform.

Devia employs a different approach—one of selection and adaptation. While she is open to following or trying out styles encountered on social media, she does not accept them uncritically. Before adopting a style, she considers whether it aligns with her own character and circumstances. This illustrates that students can adopt specific elements of digital representations without having to internalize the entirety of the meanings attached to them.

Resti demonstrates a more intentional form of agency than the others. Recognizing that content regarding others' achievements affects her more deeply than beauty-related content, she takes further action. She deactivates her main Instagram account and redirects her attention to content focused on work, education, and skill development. This decision shows that students are capable of restructuring their media consumption environments based on an awareness of how content impacts them. Social media is not merely used as-is; rather, it is tailored to meet personal needs and goals.

These five experiences demonstrate that student agency extends beyond the mere ability to accept or reject a message. It also manifests through managing attention, selecting content, limiting exposure, altering consumption habits, and tailoring the media environment to personal needs. Students take these actions whenever they deem a representation incompatible with their identity or when it begins to generate unwanted experiences.

However, this agency does not imply that students have total control over their social media environments. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok possess inherent characteristics, algorithms, and content distribution mechanisms that shape what users encounter. Consequently, student actions are best understood as agency exercised *within* digital media structures rather than outside them. While students have space to manage their media experiences, that space constantly interacts with platform conditions and mechanisms.

The ways students negotiate fashion trends and representations of appearance also illustrate this agency. Widiya tends to maintain a style that makes her feel comfortable; she feels no obligation to follow every trend, recognizing that a trend may not necessarily suit her. For her, a representation's popularity does not automatically establish it as a personal standard.

Resti goes a step further by prioritizing authenticity when defining her style. She prefers cultivating a style aligned with her values and comfort rather than following trends simply because they are popular. For students like Resti, the choice is not merely about "following" or "not following" a trend, but rather evaluating how well a representation aligns with their self-understanding.

This pattern reveals that the negotiation of self-identity occurs through selective acceptance. Students may accept a representation because it feels appropriate, adopt only parts of it that are useful, adapt it to fit their identity, or maintain distance if they deem it irrelevant. Negotiation does not mean rejecting all social media influence; rather, it involves determining the extent to which a representation is incorporated into one's self-understanding and personal practices.

In light of the previous discussion, this process demonstrates that feelings of insecurity do not inevitably lead to the acceptance of standards promoted on social media. Upon recognizing a specific influence, students can take action to alter their relationship with that content. Conversely, they may adopt or adapt representations they deem beneficial. Thus, the social media experience progresses from exposure, interpretation, and evaluation to selective action regarding meanings considered relevant.

From a communication perspective, these findings reinforce the view that users are active subjects in the process of making meaning. Messages and representations circulating on social media do not carry entirely fixed consequences once received by users; their meanings are negotiated through personal experiences, needs, values, and understandings. The students' agency in this study is evident in how they determine what to view, what to limit, what to learn, and what not to incorporate into their self-conception.

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Ultimately, how students construct their sense of self on Instagram and TikTok is an active, selective, and negotiative process. They are not merely objects of digital representation but possess the capacity to manage their relationship with those representations. They can alter consumption patterns, limit exposure, derive benefits, adapt to trends, or uphold personal values. It is this agency that explains why similar digital representations can yield different experiences for each student.

Overall, these findings indicate that Instagram and TikTok serve as communication spaces offering diverse representations, yet the meaning of these representations is shaped through user experience. Students encounter representations as points of reference, using them to evaluate their own positions and experiencing varied emotional responses; they then select and negotiate meanings that resonate with their own identities. Thus, constructing a sense of self in digital spaces is not a process of passively accepting representations, but rather an active process in which students interpret, evaluate, and determine their own stances regarding the representations they encounter.

Personal Values and Identity Negotiation in Content Consumption

When deciding how to respond to representations encountered on social media, university students rely on personal values as a key basis for consideration. These values may relate to comfort, personal principles, identity, experience, or existing beliefs. Consequently, digital representations do not automatically supplant the students' self-perception; rather, personal values serve as a criterion for accepting, adapting, limiting, or rejecting specific representations.

The way informants respond to fashion content clearly illustrates this. Diana chooses to bypass fashion content she deems inconsistent with her values, while Tasya demonstrates a similar selectivity, particularly regarding clothing considered too revealing. The decision to forgo such representations underscores a crucial point: the popularity or appeal of a trend does not inherently make it a standard to be adopted in one's personal life.

Personal values also shape how students understand beauty itself. Widiya associates beauty with gratitude rather than viewing it solely in terms of physical appearance. Similarly, Diana evaluates women not just by their looks, but also by their knowledge, attitude, and character. This evaluative framework—rooted in experience and personal values—ensures that the beauty representations circulating on social media do not entirely dictate how students define beauty.

Thus, social media emerges as a meeting ground between digital representations and personal values. Faced with various portrayals of beauty, fashion, lifestyle, and success, students are not in a position of absolute acceptance or rejection. They may adopt specific elements they deem suitable, adapt them to their own circumstances, or maintain distance when a representation conflicts with their held values. Social media consumption, therefore, serves simultaneously as a process of evaluating the alignment between the representations encountered and one's self-understanding.

This process is vital to identity formation, as identity encompasses not only how one wishes to be perceived but also how one understands and upholds one's own sense of self. A systematic review by Avci et al. A 2024 study involving 19,658 participants found that social media activity is linked to identity exploration, while social media authenticity correlates with self-concept clarity. Crucially, the findings suggest that what matters is not merely the duration of social media use, but rather how the platform is utilized in the processes of self-exploration and making sense of the self.

Vini's experience illustrates a more complex process of identity negotiation. She once harbored a desire to remove her hijab, feeling she would look more beautiful and have more options for styling her hair: "The thought of taking off my hijab crossed my mind. Yes, because I felt I'd look prettier without it and could try out cute hairstyles." This statement reveals how representations of beauty and fashion can spark a desire to alter one's appearance. At this stage, digital representations are no longer merely objects to be viewed; they begin to shape how Vini envisions her

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own potential appearance. In other words, social media provides references for versions of the self that might be perceived as more attractive.

However, that desire did not automatically dictate Vini's decision. She weighed it against her deeply held values: "Because of the Islamic values I uphold, I maintained my hijab." A process of negotiation is at play here—between the desire for a specific visual representation and a commitment to personal values. While digital representation offers alternative ways of presenting oneself, the final decision is filtered through one's own value framework. In this context, identity is not shaped solely by what is seen on social media, but rather through a process of evaluating whether a given representation aligns with one's self-conception.

Interestingly, the negotiation of identity in Vini's experience does not always manifest as a rejection of social media. She can acknowledge the appeal of a certain representation—and even desire to try it—while still preserving aspects of her identity she deems essential. This negotiation unfolds through a process of weighing, filtering, and drawing boundaries between what is visually appealing and what is acceptable as part of herself.

This pattern aligns with the findings of Stahl and Literat (2022) regarding Generation Z's self-representation on TikTok. They demonstrate that young users engage in a process of self-definition—both internally and externally—through representational practices on the platform. Identity in digital spaces is not a fixed entity; rather, it is constantly negotiated through the ways individuals define and present themselves.

In light of these earlier findings, this process reveals that student agency manifests not only in the curation of consumed content but also in the determination of which meanings become part of their identity. Students can accept information regarding skincare, makeup, fashion, health, or lifestyle without necessarily adopting all the values embedded in those representations. This selection process is grounded in their experiences, comfort levels, principles, and established identities.

Therefore, identity negotiation in this study is best understood as a dynamic process rather than a one-time decision. Students constantly encounter new representations, compare them with their self-understanding, and then determine whether these representations are worth adopting, modifying, or discarding. This process explains why exposure to social media does not always result in the same identity changes for every student.

The findings reveal that personal values serve a dual function: acting as both a boundary and a source of orientation in the process of self-definition. As a boundary, personal values help students identify representations they do not wish to emulate. As a source of orientation, these values assist them in determining the forms of appearance, lifestyles, and behaviors they deem consistent with their sense of self. Consequently, students are confronted not only with the question "What is popular?" but also with "Does this align with who I am?"

Ultimately, the consumption of beauty and lifestyle content on Instagram and TikTok constitutes a communication process that brings together digital representations, personal experiences, agency, and identity values. Students do not merely consume messages; they interpret and situate them within their own framework of self-understanding. Some representations are accepted as references, others are adapted, and some are rejected because they conflict with personal values.

These findings demonstrate that students' self-definition in the digital realm unfolds through a negotiation between what they see and their understanding of who they are. While Instagram and TikTok offer a wide array of possibilities regarding beauty, fashion, lifestyle, and success, students retain the capacity to determine their stance toward these possibilities. At this juncture, social media ceases to be merely a space for content consumption; it becomes a venue where students explore, test, uphold, and negotiate their identities.

Instagram and TikTok as Spaces for Self-Meaning Making

Based on the overall findings, Instagram and TikTok can be understood as communication spaces where university students construct meaning about themselves through encounters with various representations of others.

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Social media provides a wide array of images regarding beauty, fashion, lifestyle, achievements, productivity, careers, and identity. However, these representations do not automatically dictate how students perceive themselves. Meaning is formed through a process in which students pay attention to, interpret, relate to, evaluate, and subsequently adopt an attitude toward the representations they encounter.

Research findings indicate that the process of students constructing self-meaning on Instagram and TikTok unfolds through a series of interconnected stages: digital representation, attention and interpretation, evaluation or self-comparison, response, negotiation, and re-signification. The process begins when students are confronted with various representations of beauty, fashion, lifestyle, achievements, productivity, careers, and identity. Representations deemed interesting or relevant capture their attention and are interpreted based on personal experiences and needs. In the subsequent stage, students relate what they see to their own circumstances, leading to evaluations or comparisons regarding their appearance, body, achievements, abilities, or lifestyle.

These evaluations can elicit diverse responses, such as feelings of insecurity, motivation, inspiration, self-acceptance, or a lack of significant change. The resulting responses may prompt students to negotiate the representations they have encountered. This negotiation can take the form of accepting, rejecting, adapting, limiting, or adopting specific elements of the representation in alignment with their personal circumstances and values. Through this process, students can reconstruct the meaning of the self—understanding their strengths and limitations, upholding values they deem important, or identifying specific aspects they wish to develop. This process does not always unfold linearly, as students may return to earlier stages upon encountering new representations or experiencing different situations. Constructing self-meaning in the digital space is a dynamic, reflective, and iterative process in which students continuously reconcile digital representations with their own experiences, identities, and personal values. These findings align with Avci, Baams, and Kretschmer (2024), who demonstrated that active social media engagement, identity exploration, authenticity, and social comparison are linked to the process of identity development; in other words, what matters is not merely the duration of social media use, but rather how one interacts with the medium. Based on the study's overall findings, the process by which university students derive meaning from the beauty and lifestyle content they consume on Instagram and TikTok can be conceptualized as shown in Figure 1.

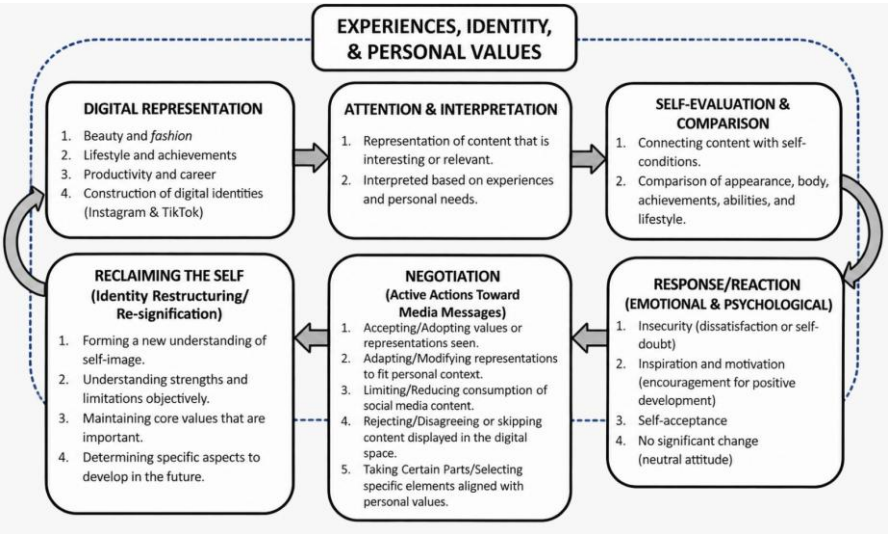


Figure 1. Model of Students' Self-Meaning-Making Process in the Digital Space

The model of students' self-meaning-making in digital spaces on figure 1, illustrates a cyclical, dynamic, and reflective process grounded in an individual's experiences, identity, and personal values. The cycle begins when

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students encounter various digital representations on Instagram and TikTok. Beauty content presents standards of appearance and the ideal body; lifestyle content showcases productive and enjoyable lives; and content regarding achievements and careers serves as a benchmark for an ideal life position. In this context, digital representations are not merely passive visual objects but serve as primary material for students to understand their own standing.

When these representations are perceived as relevant to personal needs, the students' attention shifts toward a process of interpretation. Students connect what they see with their own circumstances, using digital representations as a "social mirror" to evaluate their appearance, achievements, and lifestyles. These findings expand the discourse on social comparison in social media usage; comparison is not limited to physical aspects (body image) but encompasses broader life domains. The experiences of informants such as Vini and Widiya reveal evaluations of achievements and life circumstances, while Diana and Resti demonstrate that productivity, work, and career progression also become subjects of self-evaluation.

This evaluation process does not yield deterministic or uniform outcomes. Some students experience insecurity, dissatisfaction, or a sense of falling behind, while others view the content as a source of inspiration, motivation, or mere information, without adopting others' metrics as standards for their own self-worth. It is this variation in response that triggers the emergence of agency and active negotiation processes. Students do not passively accept media constructions; instead, they consciously choose whether to consume, limit, or skip content, select specific accounts, or adopt elements of trends that align with their comfort levels and personal values—as seen in the cases of Widiya, Resti, and Vini, who balance fashion and beauty representations with their deeply held internal values.

This series of negotiations culminates in the re-signification of the self. This process of re-signification does not necessarily entail a radical transformation of identity; rather, it can manifest as the reinforcement of pre-existing values and self-understanding, a drive for personal growth, or an increase in self-acceptance. Rooted in personal values, this process operates dynamically, recurring whenever students encounter new representations in the digital space. These findings align fully with the systematic review by Avci, Baams, and Kretschmer (2024), which emphasizes that active engagement, identity exploration, and authenticity on social media are far more crucial to identity development than the mere amount of time spent on these platforms. The findings indicate that Instagram and TikTok serve not only as spaces where students observe others but also as spaces where they reflect upon themselves. When students view the bodies, appearances, achievements, lifestyles, or lives of others, they simultaneously gain an opportunity to reflect on their own circumstances. However, this reflection does not yield a uniform meaning, as it is shaped by each student's unique experiences, needs, values, and personal positioning.

In the context of communication, these findings underscore the importance of viewing users as active agents in the creation of meaning. Messages produced and distributed via social media do not automatically generate specific meanings for their recipients. Students engage in interpretive work regarding the representations they encounter; they determine relevance, connect these representations to their own experiences, make judgments, and decide how to integrate these representations into their self-understanding.

At this juncture, the concept of a "space for self-signification" becomes significant. Social media provides the material for representation, while students perform the interpretive work on that material. Consequently, notions of what is considered beautiful, attractive, successful, productive, ideal, or personally fitting do not originate solely from social media representations. Instead, these meanings emerge from the intersection of digital representations with the students' own experiences, needs, identities, personal values, and agency.

In this study, the consumption of beauty and lifestyle content on Instagram and TikTok is best understood as a reflective, active, and negotiative communication process. While university students may experience pressure and feelings of insecurity, they can simultaneously utilize this content as a source of information, inspiration, motivation, and self-learning. Indeed, experiences that initially trigger discomfort can prompt students to selectively curate and reinterpret the content they consume.

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Ultimately, this study demonstrates that students' self-conception is not determined solely by the representations they consume; rather, it is shaped through processes of interpretation, evaluation, response, agency, and negotiation involving their personal experiences and values. Instagram and TikTok provide a space where students encounter various possibilities regarding how one ought to appear and live one's life. Students then determine their stance toward these possibilities—whether to accept, adapt, question, limit, or reject them.

From this perspective, the study's contribution lies in understanding the consumption of beauty and lifestyle content as a process of self-definition, rather than merely a matter of social media usage intensity or the positive and negative impacts of media. The research reveals that students are active subjects who continuously engage in the interpretive work of processing digital representations and using them for self-reflection. This process allows social media to serve simultaneously as a space for reference, comparison, reflection, and identity negotiation.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Instagram and TikTok serve not only as platforms for entertainment and information but also as communicative spaces where university students construct meaning about themselves through encounters with various digital representations. Content related to beauty, fashion, lifestyle, achievements, productivity, careers, and identity provides reference points that students use to view and evaluate themselves. Consequently, the social media experience extends beyond mere content consumption, evolving into a process of interpreting one's own position and identity.

This process of meaning-making unfolds dynamically through stages involving digital representation, attention and interpretation, self-evaluation or comparison, response, negotiation, and re-interpretation. The representations students encounter can act as a social mirror for evaluating their appearance, bodies, achievements, productivity, and lifestyles. However, this process is not uniform. Some students experience feelings of insecurity when they perceive a mismatch between themselves and the representations they see, whereas others derive inspiration, motivation, or information, or are able to admire these representations without using them as a benchmark for themselves.

The study also reveals that students exercise agency in managing their social media experiences. This agency is evident in their ability to select and switch content, limit social media usage, distance themselves from specific representations, and adopt trends they deem compatible with their own selves. These findings demonstrate that students are not passive recipients of digital representations; rather, they possess the autonomy to determine how content is understood and the extent to which it influences their lives and self-conceptions. This aligns with the perspective that the relationship between identity and the digital environment is shaped by processes such as choosing or avoiding digital spaces, altering experiences within them, and integrating digital experiences into personal life (Soh et al., 2024).

At the same time, students' self-interpretation is influenced by their personal values. Values regarding comfort, principles, identity, and beliefs serve as the foundation when students decide whether a representation will be accepted, adapted, limited, or rejected. The informants' experiences demonstrate that digital representations can spark a desire for change, yet decisions regarding such change are ultimately negotiated through personal understanding and values. Thus, students' identities are not shaped solely by representations available on social media, but rather through an interplay of digital representations, personal experiences, agency, and deeply held values.

Based on these findings, this study positions Instagram and TikTok as spaces for self-interpretation—communication environments where students utilize digital representations as material to reflect upon, evaluate, and understand themselves. The process of self-interpretation within these spaces is neither linear nor deterministic. The same representation can yield different meanings because each student brings unique experiences, needs, identities,

and personal values. Consequently, the student experience is defined not merely by the presence of or intensity of exposure to content, but primarily by how they interpret, respond to, and negotiate those representations.

This study contributes to the understanding that the consumption of beauty and lifestyle content on social media is a communicative process characterized by reflection and negotiation. Students do not simply consume images of how one ought to look or live; rather, they actively determine their own stance in relation to those images. While social media can be a source of insecurity, it can simultaneously serve as a wellspring of knowledge, inspiration, motivation, and self-acceptance. Therefore, students' self-interpretation on Instagram and TikTok should be understood as an ongoing process in which individuals reconcile digital representations with their own experiences, identities, agency, and personal values.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1 (Robby Rachman Nurdiantara): Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing.
Author 2 (Yupitriani): Data Collection, Investigation, Writing – Review & Editing.
Author 3 (Herry Setianto Wahyono): Supervision, Validation, Writing – Review & Editing.

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest related to the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

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The data are not publicly available because they contain confidential information and/or are subject to ethical, privacy, or institutional restrictions.

AI USE DECLARATION

The authors used Gemini to assist with language editing and grammar improvement. The authors reviewed and verified all AI-assisted output and remain fully responsible for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

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ETHICAL CLEARANCE

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained in accordance with the applicable institutional research ethics procedures. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their participation was voluntary while ensuring the confidentiality of their identities.

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