Interpreting and Adapting a Digital Figure's Identity: A Qualitative Study of Generation Z Followers of @xavieraaputri on Instagram

Lontar: Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi, 2026
Vol. 14 (1), 2026
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DOI: 10.30656/lontar.v14i1.12388

https://e-jurnal.lppmunsera.org/index.php/LONTAR/article/view/12388

Article History
Submission: Jul 18th 2026
Revised: Jul 24th 2026
Accepted: Jul 26th 2026

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Generation Z followers of the Instagram account @xavieraaputri interpret, negotiate, and selectively adapt the mediated self-presentation of a digital figure into their own identity strategies on Instagram. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. The findings reveal that informants perceive the account as a representation of authentic identity, displaying a balance between achievements, processes, and vulnerability, which in turn triggers reflection in constructing their own identities. The interpretive-adaptive process is manifested across three dimensions: frontstage, backstage, and impression management. In the frontstage, informants shift their focus from mere aesthetics toward meaningful content that reflects personal values. In the backstage, they consciously limit private aspects as a form of self-protection, relational boundaries, and preservation of personal values, functioning not as concealment of a singular "true self" but as context-specific negotiation of visibility. In impression management, informants weigh professional, social, religious, and personal considerations before uploading content. The findings indicate that the digital figure acts as a catalyst for vicarious learning rather than a determinant of behavior, meaning that identity construction results from the selection and adaptation of relevant values rather than imitation. This study extends Goffman's dramaturgical framework by showing that performance repertoires can be acquired through observation of a distant figure's mediated, asynchronous performance, a mechanism not accounted for in Goffman's original interactional model.

Keyword: *Generation Z; Instagram; Digital Self-Presentation; Dramaturgical Theory; Audience Agency*

INTRODUCTION

Instagram has become the preferred platform among Indonesian Generation Z, with 83.3 percent citing it as their primary platform (GoodStats, 2025). Beyond its function as a communication medium, Instagram's curatorial features feeds, stories, reels, and highlights position it as a strategic space where identity is deliberately constructed rather than simply

expressed (Afifah & Kuntari, 2025). Through these features, individuals determine how they wish to be perceived while building a self-image aligned with their personal preferences and goals (Afifah & Kuntari, 2025).

Within this space, presence on Instagram is not merely participatory but strategic: individuals consider what to present, how to present it, when to upload it, and to whom it is directed. The feed favors a curated, permanent image; stories carry spontaneous, temporary moments; reels convey creative messages to a broader audience (Herawati & Handayani, 2022). Generation Z are thus not passive users but active creators who deliberately design aesthetics, symbols, and messages as part of their self-presentation (Ruslan et al., 2025), and increasingly turn to digital figures as reference points for how such presentation can be practiced a dynamic that remains conceptually underexamined despite its growing prevalence.

The importance of self-identity on social media becomes increasingly evident through its role in shaping how individuals are recognized and evaluated by others. Digital presence often serves as a first impression that replaces face-to-face encounters, meaning that what is presented on Instagram can influence social relationships, self-confidence, and emerging opportunities such as friendships, collaborations, and professional prospects (Ayu et al., 2025). This condition makes Generation Z increasingly aware that managing self-identity on social media is not merely a choice, but an essential part of how they interact and position themselves within a broader social environment.

This study draws on Goffman's dramaturgical theory, which conceptualizes social interaction as a performance in which individuals manage impressions before an audience (Goffman, 1959). Goffman's original framework was developed for face-to-face, co-present interaction. Prior digital communication research has largely applied the frontstage-backstage distinction to social media as a direct analogy, treating the platform simply as another stage. This study extends that application in two ways: first, by examining how the frontstage-backstage boundary operates under conditions unique to social media, persistent content, collapsed and imagined audiences, and algorithmically mediated visibility; and second, by showing that performance repertoires can be shaped not only through an individual's own interactive experience, but through vicarious observation of another person's (a digital figure's) mediated performance. This positions Goffman's concepts not merely as descriptive categories for organizing findings, but as an analytical lens for understanding how identity performance is learned and reconstructed through observation in digital environments.

In the process of presenting self-identity, Generation Z does not always start from a blank space; they often learn from figures they admire on social media, consciously or unconsciously. The account @xavieraaputri was selected because, based on preliminary observation, it is perceived by some members of Generation Z as a role model whose appeal extends beyond visual aesthetics: alongside a neat and consistent visual style, the account frequently shares content related to education, scholarship preparation, and daily life as an Indonesian student in South Korea, presented in a way that feels relatable and authentic to followers, particularly female adolescents with similar aspirations.

Followers are involved in an active process of observing, interpreting, and adapting the forms of self-representation displayed by the figures they follow. This repeated observation encourages personal considerations about how they wish to present themselves in digital spaces, from which strategies of self-identity presentation begin to form and are manifested in everyday social media practices.

The novelty of this study does not lie in its use of Generation Z, Instagram, or Goffman's theory individually, each has been extensively studied but in its focus on the interpretive and adaptive process through which followers translate a digital figure's mediated self-presentation into their own identity strategies. Rather than treating the digital figure as a determinant of followers' behavior, as personal-branding and influencer-marketing studies often do, or centering analysis on the figure's own content, as most self-presentation studies do, this study repositions the follower as the primary unit of analysis and demonstrates that identity construction in this context is a negotiated, selective, and contextual process rather than direct imitation.

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Although a growing body of research has examined self-identity construction on social media, existing studies show three notable limitations relevant to this study. Hestikasari & Ediyono (2023) explore adolescent identity in a broad context without positioning social media as the primary site of identity construction. Agustin (2023) examines Generation Z identity formation via Instagram but restricts its scope to rural adolescents, which does not capture how followers actively use reference figures encountered on social media. Muti (2025) foregrounds moral and religious character formation among students through a normative lens rather than the practice of digital self-representation. Collectively, these studies illuminate identity formation but leave conceptually unexplored how followers of a specific digital figure interpret, negotiate, and selectively adapt that figure's mediated identity representation into their own self-presentation strategies, a question distinct from how individuals present themselves online in general, because it requires examining the intermediate process of observation, meaning-making, and selective adoption that precedes self-presentation. This gap forms the conceptual foundation of the present study.

Based on the aforementioned background, this study focuses on Generation Z's process of interpreting and adapting self-identity representations on Instagram. The research is not directed at analyzing the content of the @xavieraaputri account itself, but at its followers as research subjects who actively observe and interpret the self-representations presented, which may in turn influence how they construct and display their own identities on social media.

Research Objective and Questions

This study aims to examine how Generation Z followers of the Instagram account @xavieraaputri interpret, negotiate, and selectively adapt the mediated self-presentation of a digital figure into their own identity strategies on Instagram. Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1 : How do Generation Z followers interpret the self-presentation displayed by a digital figure on Instagram?
RQ2 : What values or aspects of the figure's self-presentation do followers selectively adopt?
RQ3 : How do followers adapt these values into their own frontstage, backstage, and impression-management practices?
RQ4 : How does this process of interpretation and adaptation extend the applicability of Goffman's dramaturgical framework in digital communication contexts?

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the construction of Generation Z's self-identity on Instagram, particularly among followers of the account @xavieraaputri, with an emphasis on exploring meanings, experiences, and individuals' subjective perspectives (Lim, 2025).

This study employs a case study design because the phenomenon under investigation, the interpretation and adaptation of a digital figure's mediated identity is best understood within a bounded, real-world context rather than through decontextualized generalization (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The case is bounded by three criteria: (1) a single digital figure, the Instagram account @xavieraaputri, selected because it combines an aspirational academic narrative with visible personal vulnerability; (2) a specific platform, Instagram, whose interface features (feed, stories, reels) structure the units of self-presentation available for followers to observe; and (3) a specific audience segment, Generation Z followers who self-identify as inspired by the account. The unit of analysis is therefore the individual follower's interpretive and adaptive process, not the account itself or Instagram as a platform in general. The research setting is accordingly a digital space rather than a geographically bounded location.

The research subjects were selected using a purposive sampling technique with the following criteria (Firmansyah & Dede, 2022): (1) Generation Z (born 1997–2012), (2) following the account @xavieraaputri for at least three months, (3) actively using Instagram at least three times per week, and (4) being inspired by the account. The account owner was not included as an informant because the focus of the study is on how followers interpret and construct identity.

The requirement that participants be “inspired by” the @xavieraaputri account was adopted deliberately to ensure informants had sufficient exposure and engagement with the

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account to reflect meaningfully on the interpretive and adaptive process under investigation. We acknowledge that this criterion introduces a selection bias: followers who are ambivalent toward, critical of, or unaffected by the account are excluded, meaning the findings describe the process of interpretation and adaptation among engaged followers rather than the full range of possible follower responses, including disengagement or rejection. This is stated here as an explicit scope condition rather than a limitation to be resolved.

Table 1. Presents The Demographic And Engagement Profile Of The Six Informants.

Initial	Age	Gender	Occupation/Education	Duration Following Account	Instagram Use Frequency
DI	20	Female	Communication Studies student	1-2 years	Very frequently (>5 hours/day)
MS	25	Female	Educator	<1 year	Frequently (3-5 hours/day)
SW	23	Male	Fresh graduate	1-2 years	Moderate (1-3 hours/day)
HJ	27	Female	Housewife	<1 year	Moderate (1-3 hours/day)
EM	22	Male	Islamic Education student	1-3 years	Moderate (1-3 hours/day)
RF	23	Female	Scholarship/job applicant	1-2 years	Frequently (3-5 hours/day)

Data Collection and Analysis

The data consist of primary data collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and secondary data obtained from Instagram content documentation and supporting literature. Data collection techniques include interviews, observation, and documentation.

Interview transcripts were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding. Open coding was first applied to identify recurring statements about self-presentation choices across transcripts. These codes were then grouped through axial coding into three categories derived directly from Goffman's dramaturgical framework frontstage, backstage, and impression management which were applied as the study's coding categories from the outset. Selective coding was subsequently used to integrate these categories around the central theme of interpretation-adaptation, linking them to the underlying values that informants adopted and adapted from the digital figure they followed.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, this study employed methodological triangulation by cross-verifying informants' interview accounts with direct observation of their actual Instagram content. In addition, member checking was conducted by returning summarized interpretations to informants for confirmation, ensuring that the researcher's interpretation of their self-presentation strategies accurately reflected their intended meanings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Instagram account @xavieraaputri is understood by informants as a complex space for identity construction, where various aspects of life, ranging from achievements and struggles to emotional experiences are simultaneously present in forming a holistic self-image. The figure of Xaviera Putri is not only represented through academic and professional accomplishments but also through the long processes behind those achievements. She reveals more personal dimensions such as failure, exhaustion, loneliness as an overseas student, and self-doubt, thereby shaping an image that is not only disciplined and goal-oriented but also humanized.

This openness creates an emotional closeness with the audience. Informants feel that what Xaviera presents does not remain merely a personal narrative but can be understood and experienced as a shared journey, particularly for those undergoing similar struggles. In addition, her consistency in self-development amid multiple roles strengthens her image as a productive and growth-oriented individual. For some informants, this also forms a new perspective that women are able to continue developing and exercising agency across different life stages.

On the other hand, the maintenance of Islamic identity within a non-Muslim majority environment is also interpreted as a form of consistent values expressed in a respectful manner. This further strengthens her image as an individual with strong principles, without appearing

patronizing. Meanwhile, content depicting failures and the dynamics of life abroad is also understood as a form of emotional support, emphasizing that anxiety, failure, and self-doubt are natural parts of the process of personal maturation.

Overall, Xaviera is perceived as an authentic and inspirational figure who is able to present a balance between success and vulnerability. This interpretation not only shapes how informants view public figures but also influences how they understand self-identity presentation on social media. The various representations displayed demonstrate that identity in digital spaces can be consciously managed through the selection of specific aspects to be presented, in order to construct a coherent, relevant, and meaningful impression before an audience.

A. Frontstage Strategy: Self-Presentation on Instagram

In this context, the informants reflect on how self-presentation strategies on social media can also be applied in their everyday lives, particularly in the frontstage. The frontstage is understood as a social setting that refers to situations in which individuals perform their formal roles in front of an audience, much like an actor playing a role on a theatrical stage (Anindhita, 2018). In this space, individuals tend to manage their behavior, expressions, and ways of communicating in order to align with prevailing social expectations.

For the informants, Instagram is no longer perceived as a digital platform separate from reality; rather, it has become both a mirror and a 'social laboratory' where they can practice how to present themselves in front of others in real-life situations (Kgatla, 2025). Principles such as careful planning, limited honesty, impression management, and selectivity in displaying aspects of the self are not only useful for building personal branding on social media, but also serve as important assets when they are in the frontstage, such as in academic settings, workplaces, family environments, and broader society (Smith & Kurthen, 2007). What they learn from observing the @xavieraaputri account does not stop at the practice of posting on Instagram alone, but develops into a broader perspective on how individuals should present themselves strategically and contextually in the stage of real life. This indicates that the boundary between the digital world and social reality is becoming increasingly fluid, where practices of self-representation on social media contribute to shaping how individuals perform their roles in everyday social interactions.

> *DI, a Communication Studies student, admitted that she previously focused only on visual aesthetics in every post. "I used to think that the important thing was for photos to look aesthetic. But after seeing Xaviera's content, I realized that meaningful writing or captions are much more important. So it's not just about showing off, but really about conveying something," she said. Now, she has become more selective in choosing content to post. "I now ask myself first: what message do I want to convey? Is this just for showing off, or does it have benefits for those who read it?" she added. This shift indicates that DI is no longer merely a consumer of content, but has begun to internalize meaningful values observed from the @xavieraaputri account into her self-presentation strategy on Instagram.*
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> *MS, an educator, admitted that the presence of the @xavieraaputri account has made him more aware of the importance of consistency between what he presents on social media and who he truly is. "I used to follow trends without thinking too much. Now I prefer not to post if the content does not truly reflect myself," he said. He also pays greater attention to how he builds his credibility as an educator, even without necessarily sharing academic materials. "I more often share brief reflections on the world of education, or simply inspirational quotes. What matters is that I feel honest with what I share," MS added. For him, Instagram is a space to demonstrate the values he holds, rather than merely showcasing activities or achievements.*
>
> *SW, a fresh graduate, felt that the presence of the @xavieraaputri account has helped her become more confident in presenting the process she is currently going through, even when the results are not yet visible. "I used to feel embarrassed if I had not achieved anything big... But after seeing Xaviera being open about failures and her process, I realized that it is okay to show struggles, not just results," SW said. Now she has started to feel more comfortable sharing simple daily activities, such as books she is reading, online courses she is taking, or*

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even reflections on a difficult day. "The important thing is that I am honest. I don't need to pretend to be perfect just because everyone else on Instagram looks successful," she added.

B. Backstage Strategy: Comparing the Self on Instagram with Reality

Besides discussing how informants present themselves on the frontstage, this study also explores their awareness of the existence of the backstage, namely aspects of the self that are deliberately not displayed either on Instagram or in everyday life. The informants reflect that the ability to distinguish between what is appropriate to present and what should be kept private is an important skill they have learned, both from observing figures such as Xaviera and from their personal experiences. For them, having a backstage does not represent dishonesty, but rather a healthy strategy for maintaining privacy, protecting social relationships, and preserving mental well-being.

HJ, a housewife, is one of the informants who is most firm in maintaining boundaries between what is displayed and what is not on Instagram. "I would never share my arguments with my husband or extreme exhaustion in taking care of my children. That is a private domain that does not need to become public consumption," She emphasized. HJ reflects that although she admires Xaviera's openness about failure and fatigue, she also realizes that Xaviera must have certain boundaries that she does not cross on social media.

A similar view, but with a different foundation, was also expressed by EM, a student of Islamic Education. For him, maintaining a backstage on Instagram is not merely a matter of privacy, but also carries a strong theological dimension. "Displaying laziness in worship or sinful acts is something prohibited in my religion because it is considered exposing one's own faults," EM explained.

Meanwhile, RF, who is currently preparing for a scholarship, also has a similar awareness of the importance of maintaining a backstage. "If I am crying because my TOEFL score dropped or because I was rejected for a scholarship, I would never share it on Instagram. I only talk about it to my mother or close friends," RF said.

Although HJ, EM, and RF come from different backgrounds and hold different rationales, HJ emphasizing privacy and family protection, EM focusing on theological considerations and self-dignity, and RF prioritizing self-image protection and emotional processing space, they share a common understanding that maintaining a backstage on Instagram is important and healthy.

It is important to note that the backstage identified in this study should not be equated with informants' 'true' or essential self. Rather, consistent with the demands of social media as an environment characterized by persistent content, multiple and often collapsed audiences (family, professional contacts, and casual acquaintances co-present in a single feed), and algorithmically extended visibility, the backstage functions as a strategically managed zone of non-disclosure rather than a repository of authentic selfhood. HJ's, EM's, and RF's accounts illustrate this: each manages a different audience-specific risk-family privacy, religious propriety, and professional/social image, respectively, rather than concealing a single unified 'real self.' This suggests that on Instagram, frontstage and backstage are less a fixed boundary between 'performed' and 'authentic' identity, and more a continuously negotiated set of context-specific disclosure decisions responsive to context collapse.

Overall, the findings in this backstage sub-section indicate that the informants possess a mature awareness of the importance of maintaining boundaries between what is displayed and what is not on Instagram. Figures such as Xaviera serve as examples that openness is important on Instagram, but it must still be accompanied by healthy boundaries.

C. Impression Management Strategy: Managing Impressions on Instagram

In this context, the informants reflect that impression management is not only practiced when they are about to upload content on Instagram, but also when speaking in public, meeting superiors, or interacting with new people in real life. Figures such as Xaviera serve as an example that effective impression management is not manipulation, but rather an art of presenting oneself honestly while remaining selective.

From all informants' responses, at least four interrelated dimensions of consideration are evaluated simultaneously:

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1. The professional dimension. For informants such as MS, who works as an educator, Instagram is perceived as an extension of his professional image in the real world.
2. Privacy and relational dimension. For informants such as HJ, the main consideration is protecting those closest to her, especially her husband and children.
3. Ethical and religious dimension. For EM, the strongest filter comes from the religious values he upholds, including concerns about riya (showing off acts of worship).
4. Personal and self-development dimension. For informants such as SW and RF, impression management is oriented toward building self-confidence and legitimizing the process they are currently undergoing.

Taken together, these four dimensions indicate that informants do not apply a single, static filter when deciding what to post. Instead, each post involves an active negotiation of visibility—weighing which audience segment is most salient in that moment, what risk that audience poses to a specific value (professional credibility, family privacy, religious propriety, or self-confidence), and how much disclosure is acceptable given that risk. This negotiation is continuous and context-dependent rather than a one-time judgment, reflecting the collapsed-audience condition unique to social media platforms.

The findings above can be strengthened by the concept of self-presentation rooted in the work of Erving Goffman (1959). In line with this, Leary & Kowalski (1990) explain that self-presentation or impression management is a psychological process that can occur both consciously and unconsciously, driven by individuals' needs to be accepted, respected, and to obtain social validation. Mulyana (2003) further emphasizes that self-presentation is an individual effort to construct a particular impression in the eyes of others by organizing behavior, including symbolic attributes.

An interesting finding of this study is that the informants not only apply impression management in the digital realm, but also reflect it in their real-life experiences, such that the boundary between the digital stage and the physical stage is becoming increasingly fluid (Sukmayadi & Yahya, 2019). This finding also enriches self-presentation theory by showing that impression management is not always driven by manipulative or negative motives. Instead, the informants use impression management as a tool to protect their privacy and maintain social relationships amid the collapsed and overlapping audiences typical of social network sites (Vitak, 2012), preserve mental health (Wijaya & Kurniadi, 2022), and even practice religious values.

Rather than simply confirming Goffman's dramaturgical framework, this study's central theoretical contribution is to show that Generation Z followers acquire and refine performance repertoires vicariously, by observing a digital figure's mediated performance a mechanism dramaturgical theory did not originally account for, since Goffman assumed co-present, interactive audiences rather than asynchronous, curated observation of a distant figure's performance. This vicarious-learning mechanism, together with the finding that followers interpret, selectively adopt, and adapt rather than imitate the figure's mediated identity, represents the study's strongest and most explicit theoretical contribution.

D. Values Underpinning Identity Strategy

From all the interviews analyzed, five key values were identified as being adopted by the informants from the @xavieraaputri account, which were then adapted as the foundation of their self-presentation strategies on Instagram.

Table 2. Values Underpinning Informants' Self-Identity Strategies on Instagram

No.	Value	Description
1	Time Management and Discipline	Mentioned by almost all informants; reflected in planned, non-impulsive content organization. DI began creating daily schedules and to-do lists, shared as both public commitment and personal reminder.

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2	The Courage to Take Risks	Most evident in RF and SW; manifested in willingness to share ongoing struggles that may not yet be successful.
3	Perseverance and Resilience	Internalized by no longer deleting or hiding traces of failure, but narrating them as part of a learning process.
4	Life Balance	Particularly appreciated by HJ; began sharing moments of rest or family time without guilt over not being 'productive.'
5	Authenticity in Self-Expression	A benchmark for evaluating content; informants began asking, 'Is this really me?' before posting.

E. The Instagram Account @xavieraaputri as a Source of Inspiration, Not a Determinant of Identity

Although all informants acknowledge that the @xavieraaputri account has influenced the way they present themselves, further analysis shows that this influence is triggering rather than determining (Rifayani & Harahap, 2025). Xaviera functions more as a catalyst for reflection, while the final decision remains entirely in the hands of the informants.

Each informant selects and adapts the values represented by Xaviera based on their life context, social roles, and value systems. DI is more interested in thinking patterns and self-development; MS focuses on learning and professionalism; HJ emphasizes life balance; EM highlights ethical and religious dimensions; SW and RF are more influenced by perseverance and risk management. The digital identities that emerge are therefore reconstructed versions adapted to each individual's needs, not imitations of Xaviera (Sugiarto et al., 2026).

F. Identity Strategy Patterns of Generation Z

Based on the overall analysis, the identity presentation strategies of Generation Z followers of @xavieraaputri on Instagram exhibit the following patterns:

Table 3. Patterns of Generation Z Identity Strategies in Self-Presentation on Instagram

No.	Strategy Pattern	Description
1	Value Selection Based on Personal Relevance	They select only values relevant to their life context and personal goals.
2	Focus on Meaningful Content	Self-presentation emphasizes meaningful, reflective, and educational messages rather than visual aesthetics alone.
3	Consideration of Audience and Risk	Each post is evaluated based on who may see it and potential social, professional, or religious consequences.
4	Awareness of the Distinction Between Real and Digital Self	The digital self and real self need not be identical, as long as the gap does not become misleading.
5	Viewing Figures as Sources of Inspiration	Figures such as Xaviera function as triggers for reflection rather than literal models to imitate.
6	Maintaining Control Over the Self	The final decision on what and how to present remains entirely with the informants.

CONCLUSION

This study offers three distinct contributions. Empirically, it demonstrates that Generation Z followers of the @xavieraaputri account interpret, negotiate, and selectively adapt, rather than imitate the mediated self-presentation of a digital figure, translating selected values into their own frontstage, backstage, and impression-management practices across professional, relational, religious, and personal dimensions. Theoretically, it extends Goffman's dramaturgical framework beyond direct, co-present interaction by showing that performance repertoires can be acquired vicariously through observation of a digital figure's curated, asynchronous performance, and that the frontstage-backstage boundary on social media functions as a context-specific negotiation of visibility rather than a fixed line between performed and authentic selfhood. Practically, the findings suggest that digital figures who visibly share process and vulnerability, not only achievement can support healthier and more reflective self-presentation practices among their followers, an insight relevant to media literacy education and to how creators and platforms might support constructive rather than purely aspirational engagement.

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Future research could examine whether these patterns hold across digital figures with different content styles, or test the vicarious-learning mechanism proposed here using longitudinal or comparative designs.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to all informants who generously shared their experiences and insights throughout this study, as well as to Universitas Hasanuddin for its academic support. Appreciation is also extended to everyone who contributed, directly or indirectly, to the completion of this research.

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