

**Digital Wellness Aesthetic and Drivers of Engagement: A Gen Z Perspective**

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## Abstract

**Background:** In today's digital world, social media platforms have become an essential part of daily life, shaping not just communication and entertainment, but also influencing the way individuals approach personal wellbeing. Wellness content, ranging from fitness to mental health, have become increasingly widespread, with the industry reaching 2\$ trillion dollars. While self-improvement is inherently positive, social media has allowed for the rapid and unregulated spread of wellness-related content, creating risks of health misinformation, commercialisation, and shaping of unrealistic expectations. Gen-Z users in particular show high engagement rates with wellness content, making them the centre focus of this study. **Aim:** This study dives into how Gen Z makes sense of, and emotionally engages with, wellness content on social media, as well as what drives their engagement. **Methods:** A qualitative, exploratory design were used, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 Gen Z users aged 20 to 25, and the data underwent thematic analysis informed by the theoretical background of the study. **Results:** The research reveals that Gen Z users feel inspired and motivated, particularly in fitness and health, but they also experience pressure, fatigue, and self-comparison. The drivers of engagement also vary, including visual appeal, community, and a yearning for personal growth. **Conclusion:** Wellness content on social media acts not only as an informational resource but also as a venue for building identity and living aspirational lives, which introduces risks of dependency or emotional harm. The findings carry implications for individual users and wellness initiatives while also contributing valuable insight to the growing body of research on social media and wellness.

**Keywords:** social media, digital wellness, Gen-Z, identity, engagement, consumer behavior.

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## 1. Introduction

Platforms like Instagram and TikTok have made visual content central to how modern people express themselves, and shape their identities. In these appearance centred environments, the abundance of ways to present oneself often leads users to subconsciously search for cues to behave, appear, and gain social validation (Marks et al., 2020). One of these visual subgroups is the aesthetic of "wellness", as Marks et al. (2020) explored, digital wellness is a concept that has grown far beyond its original associations with health.

The wellness aesthetic is expressed through trends such as the "clean girl" look, curated morning routines, and expensive pilates classes in luxury activewear. These trends signal deeper attributes such as self-discipline, moral worth, social capital, and economic privilege (Elias, Gill & Scharff, 2017; Scott & Liu, 2024). Despite not being modern, wellness exists in a form that has never been seen before, thanks to social media. Instagram, TikTok and other platforms have commodified wellness into a lifestyle that merges consumerism, beauty, and health into one aesthetic (Marks et al., 2020). This idea forms the basis of this research, which aims to explore whether young people are genuinely invested in health and wellbeing, or if their increasing participation is rooted in social pressure, identity performance, or economic signalling.

Digital platforms like TikTok and Instagram are the focus of this study, such platforms facilitate and encourage a fast-paced environment, with eye-catching content that lends itself to frequent use and endless scrolling (Marwick, 2013). Furthermore, Instagram has approximately one billion monthly users, of whom more than 500 million are active users every day (Cuthbertson, 2022). TikTok launched in

China in 2016, and accumulated over 800 million users, becoming one of the most popular video-based platforms worldwide (Cuthbertson, 2022).

All kinds of age groups engage with the type of content, yet social media is built on youth culture, hence why this study is focused specifically on Gen-Z's relationship to wellness and beauty as an important variable in this research. Given that younger generations may not have developed a strong sense of self yet, their development of self can become heavily influenced by the exposure to standards they perceive online (Marwick, 2013). As outlined by Cuthbertson (2022), the majority of Instagram and TikTok users are under the age of 24. Although Gen Z and millennials represent just 36% of the adult population in the U.S., they account for over 41% of total annual spending on wellness (Pione et al., 2025). According to Pione et al. (2025), essential health products are purchased at similar rates across age groups, but younger consumers are more likely to buy a broader variety of non-essential wellness products, such as health-tracking devices, massage tools, IV treatments, and apps focused on beauty and mindfulness. Therefore, Gen-Z is a relevant demographic for this study, as it reflects young individuals whose upbringing (maturing) was/is in some ways affected by the wellness content on social media.

Furthermore, the trends associated with wellness have an inherently competitive undertone (Marwick, 2013). Platforms that are algorithmically driven usually favour specific content that adheres to prevailing standards of beauty. This entails pushing forward posts that display conventional beauty standards, often enhanced further through image editing. Such imagery leads to an illusion of perfection - an unrealistic goal for the consumers of this content. Due to the aim often being unachievable, it leads to a cycle of constant self-improvement. This phenomenon is highly profitable for the brands

promoting wellness products, making it a \$2 trillion industry (Pione et al., 2025). Furthermore, the industry is predicted to reach \$9 trillion by 2028. Companies are selling a promise to perfect one's body, hair, skin and even personalities. This promise can take the form of an anti-ageing cream, cleansing powder, or premium athletic wear, all further promoted by the idealised influencers. In this context, it is not surprising that younger users are increasingly reporting self-esteem issues, as the pressure of conforming to the modern beauty standard is overwhelming (Pione et al., 2025). Moreover, the narrow beauty ideals exclude a variety of body types, skin tones and cultural artefacts, reinforcing the harmful idea that beauty and health have to look a certain way. Consequently, many participants of the wellness culture can be left dissatisfied or conscious of their appearance and lifestyle, because the mold that they are trying to fit, was never made for them (Pione et al., 2025). As found by Feltman and Szymanski (2018), time spent on Instagram predicted users' levels of appearance comparisons and self-objectification. Similarly, multiple psychological issues such as insomnia, depression and anxiety have been linked to prolonged social media platform use. Therefore, Chinn et al. (2023) state that getting involved with wellness might be a marker of modern loneliness, as people attempt to change themselves to fit in. Visually subscribing to certain "cores" (e.g., the clean girl, the gym girl, the matcha girl) can signal group membership, moral discipline, and even a form of class status, especially when there is a financial barrier to entry. Such themes are explored further in the theoretical background of this study, as they cover relevant variables for this study.

While existing literature has examined digital wellness, by examining social media's influence on beauty standards (Elias, Gill & Scharff, 2017), influencer culture (Marwick, 2013), and youth identity formation, these areas require continuous exploration. This study contributes to a growing body of work that recognises wellness

not simply as a health practice, but as a socio-digital phenomenon shaped by aesthetics, commerce, and cultural values. Furthermore, this research is significant due to wellness content's overarching influence on general issues such as health misinformation and commercialisation. Pione et al. (2025) stress the growing influence of social media on human perception of wellness, as priorities shift based on what is relevant online.

In conclusion, this thesis looks into personal drivers of engaging with this content and the effect it has on the users. Key variables explored in this research include wellness aesthetics, identity performance, social pressure, platform algorithms, and commercial influences. The study aims to answer the following research question: In what ways do Gen Z individuals interpret and emotionally experience their interactions with wellness content on social media, and what drives them to engage with it?

This study aims to explore the motivations, perceptions, and consequences of Gen-Z's engagement with wellness content. First, existing research is explored, covering the subjects of social media trends, influencer culture and health monetisation, to build a theoretical framework. Furthermore, semi-structured qualitative interviews are developed and conducted to collect empirical data on the target population. Transcribed data is assessed through a thematic analysis to identify correlations with existing research, as well as surprises. Hence, the study aims to explore the research question by collecting and analysing insights from Gen-Z users who engage with wellness content online.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

The following theoretical background explores existing literature on wellness culture on social media, including visual aesthetics, influencer culture and algorithm influence. Furthermore, the drivers of engagement with wellness content are inspected, with themes such as group influence and psychological effects.

## **2.1 Wellness Culture on Social Media World**

The notion of “healthism” is becoming more prominent in the current age, where individuals are held responsible for their health, often without acknowledging key factors such as social class, mental health or other responsibilities (Welsh, 2020). Furthermore, health can be applied to almost every facet of daily life due to its broad and frequently flexible definition (Marwick, 2013). This fluidity is part of what makes digital wellness such a wide-reaching trend, drawing in a diverse audience. While the desire for self-improvement is inherently positive, framing it through the lens of health can introduce pressure around user behaviour, often carrying an undertone of moralisation (Welsh, 2020). Reflecting this rising focus, Pione et al. (2025) report that nearly 30% of Gen Z and millennial individuals in the U.S. now prioritise wellness “much more” than they did a year ago. Hence, it appears that Gen-Z are influenced by this healthism movement, which is heavily propagated online through the lens of wellness.

### **2.1.2 Packaging Wellness: Aesthetic Labour in the Age of Social Media**

Visual aesthetics have increasingly become central to the wellness culture of today. Social media has become a hub for users to share photos and videos depicting their lifestyle choices and appearances. McKinsey Future of Wellness Survey (2024), claim that Gen-Z include appearance in the top three of their wellness concerns, above nutrition and mindfulness. As a result, products and services associated with this sphere are now tailored to fit into this vision. Instead of how well a product works, products now commonly centre on how the brand appears, and the image it creates (Pione et al., 2025). An example of this is Crystal Guasha’s or “Skims” shapewear; they are no longer just its product, but rather they are tied to an aesthetic. Both are



designed with glossy packaging and a clean look; made to fit into the “wellness” image, users want to portray online. In that the appeal of the products is no longer a focus on the ingredients or actual benefits, it is correlated with the lifestyle they represent. This is one of the reasons why users are highly engaged with wellness content online, as users can relate to being a part of a bigger community, which is both aspirational and aesthetically pleasing.

Society’s visions of beauty have developed into expectations.

Keyser-Verreault (2018) mentions these expectations, in relation to “Aesthetic Labour”, a concept defining and explaining ‘why’ individuals put significant amounts of effort into how they are perceived and look. As a result of this, the wellness industry has profited, with influencers and brands promoting beauty standards that have been acknowledged as almost impossible to meet. Furthermore, as influencers and brands are presenting themselves with a standard for their appearance, their content has expanded into the lifestyle in general. For example, “Skin Care Essentials” content showcases a collection of organised and luxurious product collections that have been designed to appear necessary for individuals (Welsh, 2020). In that, users are now not only expected to comply with beauty standards but also make the process in itself both beautiful and aspirational. Welsh (2020) discusses how following these standards online is crucial to fitting in socially, which has become synonymous with better opportunities, such as higher wages or increased connections worldwide. Thereby, wellness content on social media has a significant number of engagements, as it has become reliant on individuals’ insecurities and self-comparison, in turn accumulated through the exposure to this content. Hence, a loop of self-improvement is created, fueling both positive and negative outcomes for

the user. It is a privilege to stay informed and have access to endless data, yet the journey of wellness becomes arbitrary in the process (Raggatt et al., 2018).

### 2.1.3 Algorithms and the Rise of the Wellness Influencer

The implementation of user-generated content (UGC) and influencer marketing has emerged as a significant driver of engagement within wellness content. UGC is viewed as more relatable, providing ‘real-time’ viewpoints from regular users, in contrast to the polished and professional style of mainstream advertising. As a result, brands are consistently dedicating 10% and more of their marketing budget towards partnerships with influencers, as they appear more reliable and approachable (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025). Hence, users are met with subtle advertising that feels relatable and relevant, promoting the expansion of wellness culture online.

**Figure 1**

Internet Communication Model (“The Modern Transformation of Internet Communications”, 2022)

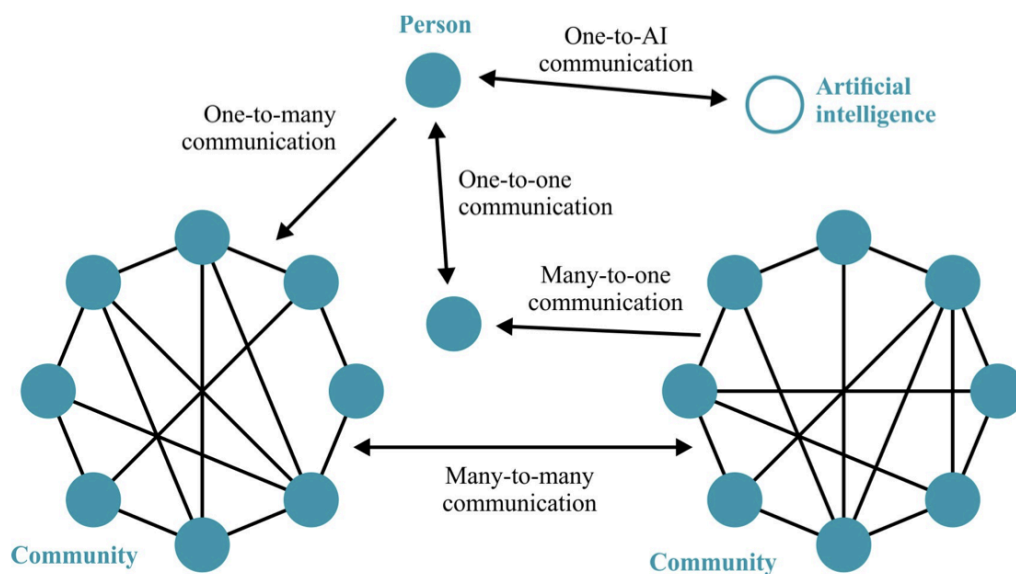


Figure 1 illustrates the various forms of digital connections. Most prominently, unlike traditional forms of advertisement, digitalisation is able to allow quick and free “one-to-many” communication patterns. Whereas consumers of the past idealised “untouchable” celebrities, the modern user is able to directly engage with an influencer’s video (“The Modern Transformation of Internet Communications,” 2022). This creates tight-knit communities around shared wellness goals, for example, pilates communities or skin-care enthusiasts. Defined by Solomon (2020), influencers on social media have become the opinion leaders of modern-day society, with the ability to shape attitudes and behaviours of mass audiences. Furthermore, 69% of modern users report having trust in the recommendations of influencers they follow (Matter, 2020). As a result, wellness influencers who successfully engage with their audiences can create a chain reaction in which a product or a concept gains popularity and quickly shifts into a trend. Consequently, as this idea becomes increasingly adopted, other users (apart from the followers) are indirectly influenced, without viewing original posts. According to Ali and Amir (2024), this phenomenon is often referred to as ‘herding’ behaviour. In that viewing a product or service performing well amongst others, instill confidence in the consumer, resulting in skipping the typical research phase of a product, and instead blindly follow the opinion of the majority. In the context of wellness, “herding” behaviour is especially prevalent in the beauty sphere, where rapidly emerging trends can create a strong sense of urgency to purchase specific makeup products or even undergo cosmetic procedures like lip fillers or brow lifts (Ali & Amir, 2024).

Furthermore, algorithms play a role in choosing which content exactly is shown to the users. Bhandari and Bimo (2022) argue that while TikTok is similar to many other social media platforms, the app’s popularity among young people can in part be attributed

to the exceptionally accurate algorithm of the platform. TikTok is known to have one of the most accurate algorithms among social media platforms.

## **2.2 Drivers of Wellness Content Engagement Among Gen Z.**

The following section explores the potential drivers of Gen Z's interaction with wellness content online, based on existing research and theories. Such drivers include social belonging and identity formation, visual aesthetics, aspirational culture, social media algorithms and more. As the topic of wellness is complex and multi-sided, this literature review attempts to account for the variety of factors influencing a modern user, to consequently gain a deep psychological understanding of the digital phenomena at hand and potential themes of interest.

### **2.2.1 Social Belonging and Identity Formation**

Due to social media's interactivity features, a community-centred, aspiration approach to wellness has developed, where complying with the 'in-group' is essential for fitting in. Hence, social belonging is a common motivator for the choice behind participation in wellness culture, developed online.

Based on the Social Identity Theory framework (Hogg, 2016), individuals tend to feel an overwhelming feeling of pride in groups they feel they belong to, and will often feel either defensive or cautious about outsiders, further amplifying their sense of identity. Further emphasised by Hogg (2016), belonging to a group offers individuals a framework for thinking, behaving, and creating a sense of the world. Thereby, higher-status groups are typically focused on protecting their identity and maintaining their position, whilst lower-status groups are subjected to negative stigmas and stereotypes (Hogg, 2016). This pushes individuals to conform, as part of

the process to break negative stigmas, influencing how they behave and present themselves in everyday life. Readjusting not only their actions but also their beliefs as a response to real or perceived social pressures (Raggatt et al., 2018), becoming a subconscious action, driven by implicit social norms, and the need to be accepted by higher-status communities. Thereby, in the context of wellness culture, this results in conformity through acquiring particular products, appearance correspondence and lifestyle changes.

Social media can provide a sense of social belonging by its ability to shape not only behaviour but also the identity formation of users (Solomon, 2020). Hence, in the context of wellness, a sense of social belonging entails owning trending luxury cosmetic products and workout clothes recommended by group leaders, such as celebrities or influencers. An example of this can be seen with the skincare brand, 'Drunk Elephant' and activewear brand 'Lululemon', both high-end labels that are often presented as essentials for achieving the popular 'clean-girl' aesthetic (Steinbekk et al., 2020). Furthermore, social media has the capabilities of providing quick gratification for conformity, in the form of likes, comments, reposts, and views (Steinbekk et al., 2020). Thus, for society, acquiring these products has developed into a form of social signalling, allowing users to visibly align themselves with in-group's values and create a sense of belonging within the wellness community.

Ultimately, the concepts of both identity and belonging have become closely synonymous with wellness content on social media. For which conformity within these digital spaces has become a driving force to adopt certain products or aesthetics, as a means of fitting in, while the interactive nature of social media rewards these actions, with validation and approval. Thereby, online wellness culture encapsulates

more than individual health, but additionally involves feelings of social connection and conformity to shared values.

### **2.2.2 Psychological Drivers: Comparison, Insecurity & Validation Loops**

Psychological drivers heavily influence the overall experiences of wellness. In the context of this thesis, the mental state of a user, ultimately, determines their self-perception, need to belong, and vulnerability to digital marketing. Thereby, this section explores cognitive learning theory (Li & Hua, 2022), and observational learning (Solomon, 2020), each offering insights into how consumers form habits and make decisions in online wellness domains.

Although habitual behaviour is extremely common, individuals are still faced with decision-making daily, whether it happens subconsciously or consciously. According to Li and Hua (2022), acquiring more information about a brand or product can not only foster a more positive attitude, leading to greater brand loyalty. This notion relates to the cognitive learning theory, which identifies individuals as active participants in their decision-making processes through autonomy (Li & Hua, 2022). By cognitive learning theory, individuals typically rely on information they possess to guide their choices, rather than acting on impulse or habit alone; however, a limitation of this model is being able to make a distinction between those cases when people do act out of impulse, strong emotion or habit. As a result, through social media, brands can deliver an assortment of content for millions of people to view, helping consumers believe that they are “learning” about a product; thus, users are more likely to justify a purchase, as they seemingly possess information about an item. Ultimately, this process allows for a connection to form between users, showing interest in the same products (Li & Hua, 2022).

This sense of “learning”, however, is not always direct; instead, it is often influenced by watching others, which leads to the underlying layer of cognitive learning, known as observational learning (Solomon, 2020). This concept is relevant in the context of visual aesthetics and social media content of wellness, through which Solomon (2020) claims that observational learning occurs when people observe others being rewarded for particular behaviours and use that knowledge to influence their behaviours. Thus, in the context of social media platforms, users can view the number of likes, comments, and views each piece of content receives.

### **2.3 Literature Review**

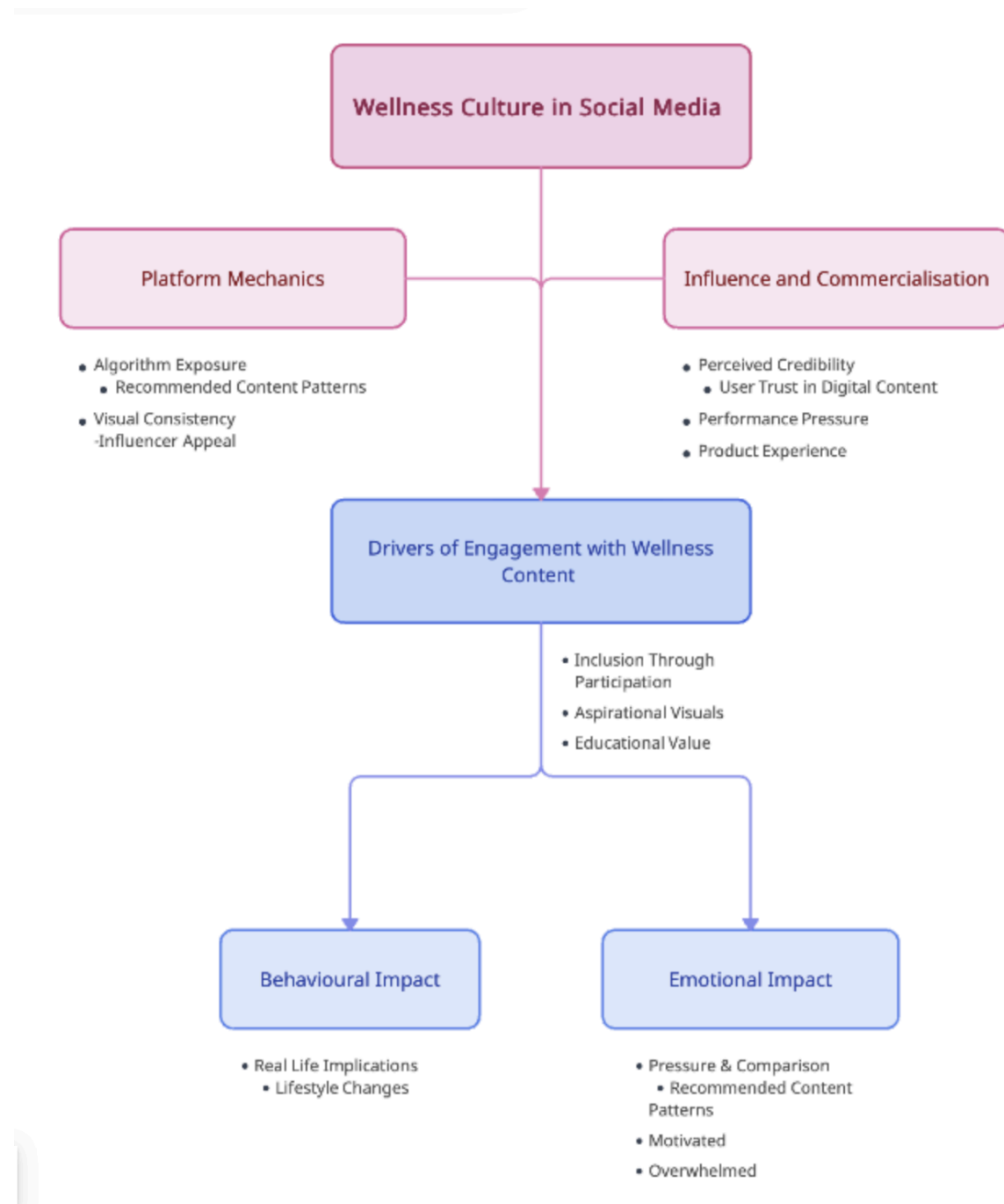
Overall, the theoretical framework has made an effort to consider and explore themes relevant to the experience of Gen-Z with modern wellness. At the forefront are topics of aesthetic labour and the increased popularity of wellness influencers. Social cognitive theory and learning theories are both introduced to provide further grounds for certain customer behaviour in this sphere, for example, the herding concept. Individuals are seen as social beings, and the popularity of wellness cannot be examined without its group aspect. Such factors contribute to the further development of the theoretical framework, as it begins to identify more “drivers of engagement”, through social belonging and aspirational needs of users.

In conclusion, the theoretical background provides meaningful insight into the existing studies, which lays the foundation for empirical research. Throughout the familiarisation with literature, it has become apparent that the topic of wellness is nuanced and multi-faceted, which directly inspires the choice of semi-structured interviews, whereas participants will be able to share their experience extensively. Moreover, the themes of the interview are also set within the model established by the

theoretical framework (Figure 2). As the popularity of wellness on social media platforms is rising, it is important to understand why a modern consumer feels the need to contribute to this growing industry and do they improve their wellbeing along the way.

**Figure 2**

Theoretical Background Model





### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Aim & Overview**

The purpose of this study is to explore the social dynamics that shape online wellness culture and understand why Gen-Z engages with it. The theoretical background has already established themes of influence that will be considered, including aesthetic labour (Keyser-Verreault, 2018) and healthism (Welsh, 2020). Moreover, the choice of empirical qualitative research allows for underlying meanings to be uncovered, and collect data on the general attitudes within the sample, specifically the Gen-Z population. On the other hand, a quantitative study would not allow for the level of detail to explore the nuanced experience of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore, this study aims to answer the research question by examining how wellness content is perceived and adopted by Instagram and TikTok users.

The study implements a qualitative research approach, which involves conducting semi-structured interviews with Gen-Z social media users. This approach enables open discussions, allowing for follow-up questions and themes about personal motivations, social belonging, and the pressures linked to wellness representation to be explored. Moreover, this study will utilise Thematic Analysis (TA) as a means to gain an increased understanding and comprehension of how wellness ideals are created and experienced within social media. As supported by Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a particularly helpful tool for exploring meaning amongst participants' accounts.

### **3.2 Research Philosophy**

This research is founded on the principles of social constructivism. Social constructivism defines reality as something that does not exist independently of our understanding, but instead is developed through social interactions and shared meanings (Creswell, 2014). Adopting this framework allows for this study to explore how wellness ideas are created, facilitated, and disseminated into social media platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok. Furthermore, as social media is inherently ‘social’ in that individuals share their thoughts and beliefs online with others, the attention to the effect of community is crucial (Li & Hua, 2022). These platform types can create, shape, and reinforce ideas of health, beauty, and self-worth.

Furthermore, social constructivism as a framework links itself to the research aim of the study. Specifically, through its ability to uncover not only how wellness is portrayed online, but also what drives users to consume these trends. Additionally, according to Creswell (2014), this perspective aids in developing a holistic understanding of the role of influencer culture, user-generated content, and brand marketing in shaping what it means to be both “healthy” and “well”. Thus, the research philosophy suggests that such ideas are not only shaped by individual choices, but significantly by social expectations and digital norms (Creswell, 2014).

### **3.3 Research Design**

This research involves a thematic analysis of qualitative data acquired through semi-structured interviews. Qualitative data and interviews, in particular, are chosen for their ability to provide depth and contextual understanding. Hence, this approach serves the aim of the study to capture personal experiences and emotions associated with the online wellness trends (Creswell, 2014). Additionally,

semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to set the direction of the discussion while allowing the participant to follow-up when relevant. In particular, the interviews focus on how participants perceive wellness aesthetics, their motivations for engaging with wellness content, and the influence of influencers, brand marketing, and user-generated content on their consumption behaviours.

The goal of the research is to generate an immersive understanding of Gen-Z's experience with contemporary wellness. This includes the factors affecting the very nature of this relationship, as well as the feelings and themes associated with it. Therefore, semi-structured qualitative interviews are considered the best fit as they offer space for personal insights but remain quite focused on the topic.

### **3.4 Participants and Sampling**

This study employs a non-probability, snowball sampling technique to identify participants who actively engage with wellness content on Instagram and TikTok. Snowball sampling is particularly helpful for reaching specific communities or networks that may be challenging to reach using traditional sampling techniques, claim Naderifar, Goli, and Ghaljaie (2017). Given that wellness communities often form tight-knit, interest-based clusters online, leveraging existing participant connections is an efficient way to identify additional individuals who regularly consume or produce wellness-related content.

The first participants, who are found through personal networks and online communities related to wellness, are asked to suggest other people in their social circles who also interact with wellness-related content. This approach allows for a time-efficient participant recruitment process. In order to ensure the relevance of the conducted studies, participants must meet the following criteria:

- Active and ongoing use of Instagram and/or TikTok.
- Familiarisation and engagement with wellness-related content.
- Aged between 18 and 30 years.

The scope of this research covers 20 participants, with different levels of social media presence and engagement. Engagement includes liking, commenting on, watching, or creating wellness-related content. This sample size provides thematic saturation while remaining realistic and manageable within the research timeline.

The sample consists of 13 female and 7 male participants, aged between 20 and 28. It includes various levels of engagement - from checking on social media a few times a week and making a wellness-related purchase once, to those who are on social media throughout the day and continuously make wellness purchases to keep up with the trends. The group also reflects diversity in nationality, education, and financial background, enhancing the breadth of the research.

Snowball sampling has some limits that should be taken into account, even though it might help reach niche online communities. In general, participants are more likely to recommend people who are part of their social group. This might limit the variety of perspectives within the collected data (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981).

### **3.5 Data Collection**

The following study requires an open and flexible research approach that would allow for a self-reflective discussion. Hence, semi-structured interviews are implemented, whereas the interviewee has control over the conversation structure, while allowing the participant to develop deeper into relevant experiences and viewpoints (Bryman, 2016).

As the study does not call for any special accommodation, and rather benefits from international participants, the interviews are to be administered digitally, using Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Participants will be made aware of the study's objectives, their

rights to confidentiality, and their freedom to discontinue participation at any time without facing consequences. Following that, the interviews will be audio recorded. In addition, the interviewer will take notes of any significant attitude or behavioural changes observed on camera. The interview questions are designed to address the main research objectives, focusing on individual motivation for engaging with wellness content on Instagram and TikTok, perception of wellness and its digital portrayal, as well as feelings of social belonging within this community, self image, and whether any purchases were made driven by health improvements or aesthetic conformity.

The interview questions are presented below (Table 1). The layout follows a funnel method, whereas the interviewer begins with simple and general questions and proceeds to more specific and complicated inquiries. Overall, the data collection process requires an average of 20 minutes. Before the main interviews, the interview guide was piloted with two Gen-Z users to assess question clarity and ensure relevance to the study objectives. Furthermore, each interview begins by obtaining verbal confirmation of user familiarity with the information sheet, as well as consent for the audio recording.

**Table 1**

Interview Questions

Theme	Question	Question
Introductory Section	How often do you use Instagram and/or TikTok?	Do you engage with any wellness-related content? If yes, please elaborate on what kind of content it is.

Perception of Wellness	How would you personally define wellness, in terms of beauty and health?	How do you think wellness portrayed on Instagram and TikTok, does it differ from your personal perception?
Drivers of Engagement	Can you identify what aspect/s of wellness content provide value for you?	Is there anything that makes you steer away from wellness related content when you see it?
Social Belonging	Do you pay attention to the number of likes and/or view when viewing wellness-related content?	
Platform Algorithms	What role, if any, do you think platform algorithms play in the visibility of different types of wellness content? Can you share any examples?	
Influencer Culture	Do you tend to seek a second source of information for the wellness advice you see	What motivates you to follow a particular wellness influencer?

	online?
Commercialisation	Can you recall a time when you purchased a wellness product after seeing it on social media? If yes, please elaborate on this experience in terms of psychological satisfaction and monetary value.
Closing Reflections	Has engaging with wellness content influenced your lifestyle or habits? If yes, please elaborate how. Are there aspects of wellness culture that you find particularly positive or negative?

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### 3.6 Data Analysis

The qualitative data is further analysed using Thematic Analysis (TA). As Braun and Clarke (2006) affirm, this method is most suited for identifying and reporting patterns within qualitative data. In particular, the advantage of TA lies in combining inductive and deductive coding. Inductive coding is meant to investigate new findings and detect "surprises" within participants' answers. Meanwhile, deductive coding is concerned with pre-established theories; in this case, this can include Aesthetic Labour (Keyser-Verreault, 2018) and Social Identity Theory (Hogg, 2016). Consequently, this method is effective for investigating participants' experiences and opinions of social

media wellness content while maintaining the analysis's structure and allowing for the possibility of surprising results.

The analysis follows multiple steps in the process of data assessment. The data collected through 20 semi-structured interviews has been transcribed by Otter.ti platform, and further analysed through Atlas.ti. The second platform facilitates thematic analysis of the transcribed data. The data is inspected for main research themes, including motivational expressions, social pressure, wellness aesthetic perceptions, and the processes involved in selecting wellness products. Relevant abstracts are found and labelled for further analysis on recurring patterns, group trends and anomalies. The codes are assessed on their relevance to this study and evaluated accordingly. A codebook is developed to aid in the process of data assessment (Table 2).

**Table 2**

Thematic Analysis Codebook

Themes	Subthemes	Definitions	Example from Transcript
Drivers of Engagement	Aspirational	Participants feel that	“I really relate to the way that
	Visuals	the visual aspect of wellness content, drives them to engage with it.	they're presenting it. Like, I also want to go in Lululemon, do these Pilates classes, like that.”



Educational Value	Participants state that some type of educational value drives them to engage with wellness content.	<p>“A positive is how fast and accessible this information is.</p> <p>So let's say I just woke up and I have a headache - I can search up and see quickly what Huberman would say.”</p>
Inclusion Through Participation	Participants state that the feeling of inclusion (relatability) drives their engagement with wellness content.	<p>“I think, because they have the same lifestyle as me, in the sense of, like, oh, students age, like, the same demographic. I resonate because it's like watching a friend of mine getting ready.”</p>
<hr/>		
Pressure & Comparison	Participants feel pressure and/or self-comparison, as a result of engaging with wellness content.	<p>“And this kind of Stark comparisons create unrealistic expectations for myself, there are transformations in beauty and wellness that I think are obtainable realistically, but are actually in essence, maybe not.”</p>

	Motivated	Participants feel motivated as a result of engaging with wellness content.	“The fitness aspect of it really pushes me, because I see people who are at the place I want to be.”
	Overwhelmed	Participants feel overwhelmed as a result of engaging with wellness content.	“You can get overstimulated, over-informed and confused, thinking about, oh, I should have went out for the sunlight and I didn't.”
	Behavioral Impact	Participants mention the effect of wellness content on their behavior.	“After watching some of the content, I integrated some of the habits into my life. For example, drinking warm water instead of cold or stomach in the morning.”
Influence & Commercialization	Perceived Credibility	Participants share their perception of credibility towards wellness content online and wellness related product recommendations.	“I look at least at some other sources instead of just trusting one person.”

Product	Participants share	“The benefit brow gel. It was
	their experience	horrible. I saw so much
Experience	with a product they	content on it. It ended up
	purchased as a result	being piece of shit.”
	of engaging with	
	wellness content on	
	social media.	

Performance Pressur	Participants share	“I feel pressured into
	their feelings	following the lifestyle they're
	regarding the	promoting. I don't feel this
	pressure to	piece of control anymore. I
	participate in	feel like I'm just trying to stay
	wellness as a result	on this wave of trends “
	of consuming	
	related content.	

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Platform	Algorithm Exposure	Participants share	“I was getting more acne,
Mechanics		their experience	breakouts, a lot of things — I
		with algorithmically	started to get more content.
		suggested wellness	Because phones hear
		content on social	everything, you start getting
		media.	content that's more tailored to
			you.”

Content Consistency	Participants feel that the wellness content recommended to them has an element of consistency (similarity).	“I think all of them are promoting more or less a similar lifestyle — super healthy, super luxury, mindful.”
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To ensure the accuracy of the coding analyses, a second coder goes through the coding process for 4 of the 20 (20%) interviews. Cohen's Kappa was used to measure inter-coder reliability, as explained by McHugh (2012), it is a metric for reliability that determines the level of agreement above chance agreement. Based on the coding in the four transcripts, the computed kappa was 0.70; Cohen defines this level of agreement between ( $\kappa = 0.61$  and  $0.80$ ) as being substantial (McHugh, 2012). Hence, this process strengthened the validity of the codebook.

Following that, the data is assessed for unexpected findings outside of the theoretical framework and codebook. Finally, the findings are constructively reported to ensure academic value and applicability. Ethical considerations are upheld throughout the analysis process, as the data is anonymised to protect privacy and confidentiality; hence, pseudonyms are to be used if necessary. The data is safely stored for the duration of the project, and further erased 30 days after.

### 3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study has been granted by the University of Twente Ethics Committee (National Ethics Council for Social and Behavioural Sciences et al., 2025). In addition to that, informed consent is to be obtained from all participants before

the interviews, to establish voluntary participation with the right to withdraw at any point, or skip a particular question. Considering the sensitivity of topics like beauty, social inclusion and the need to belong, the interviewer strives to remain neutral and supportive towards the participants during the entire interaction.

Finally, along the university's guidelines on undertaking research, all data requires secure handling and storage (VSNU, 2024). To ensure participant confidentiality, if it becomes necessary to publish the document, the participants' identities will be concealed.

## **4. Results**

A codebook has been developed to provide structure to the analysis by containing theory-driven emergent codes. These codes represent segments of the text that reflect key concepts of this study, such as: engagement drivers, user impact (internal and behavioural), influence & commercialisation, as well as platform mechanics. Each code has been self-reviewed and refined to maintain relevance, contributing to the construction of larger themes discussed below. The themes have been derived from the theoretical framework and re-evaluated through data analysis, to ensure their relevance for the participants interviewed.

### **4.1 Key Themes and Findings**

Thematic analysis focused on four themes primary to this study: engagement drivers, user impact, influence & commercialisation, and platform mechanics. Hence, the results will be discussed concerning these topics, as well as surprising findings that contribute to the novelty of the study. In conjunction, the research findings present a

well-rounded understanding of Gen-Z's experience with wellness on social media and the emotions attached to it.

#### 4.1.1 Engagement Drivers

While investigating engagement drivers, certain trends appeared within the participants. There are endless nuances to what draws every particular user in; however, some common themes include visual aesthetics, educational value and inclusion through participation.

The visual side of wellness seems to be a very common driver of engagement (N=10, 50%), particularly popular, but not limited to, female participants ranging from 20 to 25 years old.

*“I think the aesthetic of it and the - position, I feel like I resonate with it. I like to see girls that look like me, yeah and yeah, getting ready and everything. I like that.”*

Hereby, the participant mentions that they enjoy viewing content of users they relate to, and the aesthetically pleasing visuals of these posts. Interestingly, the next abstract contains a user observing the effect of aesthetics on them:

*“If I feel like a video is aesthetic, it really speaks to me in some way, I will go check the comments, check the views, check the likes. But if it's a video that isn't very attractive to me, I might even follow their advice, but I will not check any of the actual likes, views, or comments like that.”*

In the abstract above, the user feels more inclined to participate and interact based on the visual appeal. The participant mentioned they might still follow advice from less

visually engaging content, but choose not to associate with it through on-platform interaction. This relates to the next driver of engagement - inclusion through participation.

*“I am definitely living my life through Instagram. I use it the most out of all apps.”*

This quote does not relate to wellness directly, but it shows valuable insight into Gen-Z engagement with social media platforms. The participant does not just state that they use Instagram frequently, but acknowledges that they often “live their life through Instagram”. Meanwhile inclusion through participation is a common driver of engagement (N=6, 30%) it is not mentioned as often as the other drivers. This could partially be related to the desire for inclusion being a subconscious driver, rather than something users consciously process.

Educational value is another engagement driver reported by multiple (N=9, 45%) participants.

*“A positive is how fast and accessible this information is. If I want to find something out, just do 5-10 minutes of research, I'll find something, somebody who's credible enough, at face value at least. You get that information quickly. So let's say I just woke up and I have a headache from a hangover, I can search up and see quickly what Huberman would say.”*

In the extract above, the participant expresses their satisfaction with the availability of wellness information online, as they can look up relevant content. The educational value is an especially prominent engagement driver for male participants,

who are generally more interested in themes of nutrition and fitness, in contrast to beauty and fashion.

*“I like see things and I just don't do anything, because, practically speaking, it doesn't make sense for me to look at that, so I try and do the bare minimum. But the bare minimum is 90% of what you need to do, you know, like, I just don't like, I know I need to sleep certain amount of hours, or whatever, eat good foods and all this kind of stuff.”*

The transcript extract above showcases an example of a male approach to wellness, that conveys a lack of pressure for conformity and inclusion. The participant feels that taking care of themselves is about maintaining the basic health habits such as sleep.

#### **4.1.2 User Impact**

The user impact aspect looks into the emotional side of engaging with wellness content, as well as behavioural changes to their lifestyle. To specify the analysis focused on themes of: pressure and comparison, motivation and feeling overwhelmed.

Motivation and aspiration are emotions that are commonly referred to as the emotions associated with wellness engagement for the majority of participants (N = 14, 70%). Participants expressed feeling inspired, especially when they felt they could relate to the influencers.

*“For me, the fitness aspect of it really pushes me, because I see people who are at the place I want to be. So it's very aspirational.”*



Hereby, the participant shares that viewing fitness-related content gives them the motivation to pursue their wellness goals. The individual also mentions viewing people who are “at the place I want to be” as an important part of this process.

On the other hand, there has also been a high consensus on feelings of stress amongst the participants. Users reported feeling overwhelmed by the wellness expectations presented on Instagram and TikTok.

*“And this kind of Stark comparisons create unrealistic expectations for myself, because there are transformations in beauty and wellness that I think are obtainable realistically, but are actually in essence, maybe not, maybe through surgery, et cetera, I don't know.”*

Henceforth, this section illustrates that the emotional impact of wellness is often contradictory and complex. While feelings of aspiration and motivation are inherently positive, they are often rooted in more underlying themes of pressure, fatigue and comparison. One participant directly addressed this contrast, as they stated:

*“I would say, as I said, it's a 50/50 situation for me. Sometimes I feel so much better by those aspirational recommendation purchases. Sometimes it feels so much worse. So I think so far I'm just trying to balance.”*

The participant feels a double-sided effect of engaging with wellness, signalling some kind of frustration with their social media activities.

Feelings of comparison were also very prominent in participants who place high value to the visual aspect of wellness.

*“I think self-comparison is the biggest reason why I would want to steer away from this type of content, because I did go through like a bad place where it was like always self-comparison, always watching people online - Why am I not doing that now? And so I think I try and steer away from people who seem more real to me - and I try going for the people who are more celebrity status,”*

Hereby the participant expressed how they used to engage in continuous and harmful self-comparison through relating themselves to social media influencers. The participant feels that watching content from people with a “celebrity status” is more beneficial for them, as there is less relatability.

#### **4.1.3 Influence & Commercialisation**

An absolute majority of participants (N = 18, 90%) mentioned making a wellness-related purchase based on interacting with wellness posts and influencers.

*“There’s something about how the products are shown that makes you want to buy it... so you feel like you're living the influencer lifestyle when you're not.”*

Hereby, the user expresses their feelings associated with purchasing an advertised wellness product. There is more to the purchase aside from the product itself. The participant feels drawn to the influencer lifestyle, hence the purchase has aspirational significance.

*“Initially, I saw it (Fenty Beauty Gloss LipBalm Stick) two weeks ago, I have it now. I love it. I'm so happy with it. I went through so much trouble to get it.”*

In this example, the participant states observing a make-up product on a social media platform, and going through some type of difficulty, to obtain it within two weeks.

A similar experience is shared by another participant in the extract below.

*“Okay, the L'Oréal glycolic acid hair thing. I was obsessed with that, like I was trying to find that for a good three months, just because I kept seeing it on TikTok so much.”*

In this case, the user is describing their behaviour as “obsessed” with the product, as they mention seeking to purchase it for 3 months, as a result of continuously seeing it on TikTok. These two examples convey a sense of urgency to purchase a product, potentially because modern trends are often short-lasting, hence reflecting the pressure of conformity to digital wellness.

Yet it is important to acknowledge that multiple participants (N = 4, 20%) also expressed a change in the way they shop.

*“Over time, I realised that many products are basically the same, just marketed differently, so now I’m less easily influenced than before.”*

The user hereby states that through their experience of prolonged conformity to wellness, they began to notice similarities between the variety of products advertised. In conclusion, when it comes to making better shopping decisions, users vary greatly on personal factors and especially on the amount of experience they have had with wellness content. Considering the interviews are conducted within the Gen-Z audience, it is interesting to observe self-awareness regarding maturing and consumer behaviour.

Perceived credibility has been another prominent theme in the context of wellness commercialisation. The majority of users (N = 13, 65%) mentions double-checking the wellness related information they see online, either through external sources or on social media itself.

*“But most of the time, I don't really listen to like products ever, because you can never really trust the product anymore in this like world, because, like, either they're lying to you, they just want the money, oh, or it, like works for them, but it doesn't have to work for me.”*

Hereby, the participant stated their complete lack of trust towards digital advertisements and recommendations. On the other hand, there are also prominent cases of participants showing full trust or even devotion to the social media personas they connect with.

*“Yeah, I would say that most of my purchases are based on their advice and whatever they promote. For example, if one of the girls that I follow uses this brand or she's recommending a product, most probably I will end up following those recommendations too.”*

This participant mentioned that most of their purchases are based the digital wellness content they see online, particularly from their following list. Such cases of complete trust in social media promotions are not as common for the Gen-Z participant group, but are still present.

#### **4.1.4 Platform Mechanics**

Several users mention interacting with wellness content through their recommended feed, rather than following many influencers (N = 13, 65%). Hence, a pattern appears of Gen-Z being particular with the influencers they choose to follow.

*“When I see a content creator that I notice that I frequently watch, or rather, that their content appears frequently and I consume their content frequently, in the sense that I click on their posts and I watch their videos or read their posts, then I*

*begin to follow them, because I think that their content is in line with the things that I want to see and are relevant to me.”*

The participant in the extract above explains the process they go through as they transition from passively watching content to actively following a wellness influencer. There seems to be a level of self-awareness as the user seeks content that “is in line with the things I want to see and is relevant to me”. Similarly to the previous paragraph on advertisement susceptibility, Gen-Z seem to display a level of maturity in their interactions with social media content that is likely due to prolonged experience with platforms like Instagram and TikTok.

## **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

This study set out to explore the drivers behind Gen-Z’s engagement with wellness content and the emotional impact associated with this interaction. The wellness industry is increasing in popularity online, providing meaning and relevance for this research. This study contributes to the collective research by conducting an empirical semi-structured interview-based study. The findings reveal a complex, paradoxical relationship of the user with wellness, as the content can provide community, motivation and aspiration, while instilling feelings of inadequacy and comparison.

### **5.1 Key Findings**

#### **5.1.1 Engagement Drivers**

The participants of this study vary in their levels of engagement with digital wellness, as well as drivers for this engagement. This is justified by the theoretical framework, which exposes a variety of factors influencing individual perception of wellness. Through the thematic analysis approach, three main clusters of engagement

drivers have been identified, including: educational value, aspirational visuals and inclusion through participation.

Educational value has been especially popular among male participants, in the themes of fitness and “body-hacking”. This section of participants is purposefully utilising social media wellness to advance their workouts with additives like “creatine”, or seeking to improve their foot health with “barefoot shoes”. Participants who prioritise educational value, also report higher satisfaction with online purchases. Accordingly, the theoretical framework highlighted the importance of gaining knowledge on product and/or brand (Li & Hua, 2022). The participants with lower trust towards digital advertising experienced higher product satisfaction as such users perform further research before making a purchase, acting with health in mind, rather than being swayed by trends and social pressure.

On the other hand, female participants were more likely to report visual aesthetics as a driver of their participation. Furthermore, these findings support the McKinsey Future of Wellness Survey (2024), which claims that Gen-Z include appearance in the top three of their wellness concerns, above better nutrition and mindfulness. Curated workout outfits and aesthetically pleasing skin care routines are very popular on social media, gaining impressive interaction rates, as explored by Keyser-Verreault’s (2018) work on visual labour. Conforming to beauty standards can feel especially important for women, as the performance of wellness is often intertwined with femininity, attractiveness, and self-worth (Keyser-Verreault, 2018). This is likely a contribution to the reason why female participants are reporting higher urgency when purchasing wellness products and following trends. The participants who placed great importance on this aspect of wellness have also reported making more social media-prompted purchases to fit a certain aesthetic. Simultaneously, these

purchases are more likely to lack in quality. However, it is important to acknowledge that wellness advertisements targeted towards women are known to be especially intrusive and even manipulative.

The inclusion-through-participation driver for participants seems to be closely linked to visual appeal, as participation in the wellness community involves curating and presenting a certain image of oneself, often supported by popular wellness products. Hogg (2016) also explores the way belonging to a group provides users with a framework for external presentation and an internal way of thinking. Hence, the participants who indicated inclusion as a factor of engagement, have also shown interest in the visual side of wellness. In this sense, participants mentioned the benefit of connecting with others, yet they also expressed feelings of pressure to conform to the standards of those groups. Furthermore, the theoretical framework touched on the way readjusting not only their actions but also their beliefs as a response to real or perceived social pressures (Raggatt et al., 2018), becoming a subconscious action, driven by implicit social norms, and the need to be accepted by higher-status communities.

### **5.1.2 User Impact**

Existing research by Pione et al. (2025) highlights Gen-Z as the population that has the highest response of feeling “constantly stressed”. The interview findings of this study similarly report high rates of users feeling overwhelmed and/or pressured to conform, in the context of their social media engagement with wellness. However, the data derived from transcripts simultaneously reveals a high saturation of users feeling motivated.

The discourse on the topic of influencers and commercialisation has been very varied, between participants who follow and connect with specific influencers, and those who are only exposed to wellness through their recommended feed. As mentioned by Solomon (2020), modern social media influencers hold a lot of power in shaping public opinion, as well as setting trends and standards. Similarly, the research by Matter (2020) reveals that 69% of modern users trust in the recommendations of the influencers they follow. The interview transcripts showcase that while some users are trusting of the influencers, the majority of participants state their intentions of double-checking the transmitted information. The validation process often occurs on social media platforms as well, rather than scientific, reputable sources, signifying a need for digital literacy.

### **5.1.3 Influence and Commercialisation**

Strikingly, 18 out of 20 participants shared in their interviews that they have made a wellness-related purchase after perceiving a product online. This highlights the effectiveness of digital advertising, and the materialistic nature of modern online wellness. Furthermore, influencer presence directly correlates with the commercialisation of health and beauty that is happening online. On Instagram and TikTok, users are technically required to disclose when a post is a paid advertisement (Musiyiwa & Jacobson, 2023). However, this regulation lacks monitoring. As a result, disclosure might appear in the fine print or hidden behind vague hashtags. This issue arose during participant interviews, as multiple users (N=3, 15%) were convinced they purchased a product completely due to their own intentions, however, after asking for further details on how they became aware of the product, it was clear that this is a case of sponsored content. Introducing more specific and explicit sponsorship



statements could be a start to reducing bias in wellness product recommendations. A beneficial change over time would be to see wellness content shift towards highlighting individual characteristics and fostering self-appreciation, even while striving for improvement. This type of content could lessen pressure and encourage a more positive self-perception rather than continuously promoting unattainable and uniform standards of beauty. Of course, moving away from the commercialisation of health and wellness entirely is probably unrealistic — companies will continue to profit from selling products. But at the very least, the marketing tactics used could be more responsible and less emotionally pressuring.

### **5.1.2 Platform Mechanics**

Finally, when it comes to platform mechanics digital platforms themselves need to take a level of accountability for the wellness content distributed on them. As an example, the hashtag “thinspo” that was used to promote “thin inspiration” content has been removed from Instagram and TikTok, as it propagated harmful eating disorder romanticisation (Chancellor et al., 2016). However, the users have adapted by simply coming up with new hashtags to share content promoting unhealthy eating habits. The situation with wellness content is even more complex, as the content is seemingly self-improving and health-oriented, even when it subtly promotes unattainable beauty standards, hyper-consumerism, or pseudo-scientific advice. Because of this ambiguity, it becomes harder to regulate. Furthermore, the majority of interviewed participants shared the fact that they were consuming wellness content through their recommended feed. Hence, it appears that users are subjected to the self-improvement content almost involuntary, through the platform recommendations algorithm.

## 5.2 Theoretical & Practical Implications

The findings confirm that wellness content is not purely consumed for health-related reasons, but is deeply interconnected with processes of identity formation, social belonging and aspirational self-presentation. Social media platforms, like Instagram and TikTok, are central to this process, as they provide ground for open discourse, community formation and a lot of digital advertising. Algorithms that control these platforms have the power to shape the feed of every user, setting the social consensus for new wellness standards and trends.

Theoretically, this study adds to the growing literature on digital healthism (Welsh, 2020) and aesthetic labour (Elias et al., 2017), highlighting how wellness is used as both a tool for empowerment and a subtle mechanism of social control. It also supports existing research on herding behavior (Ali & Amir, 2024) by showing how Gen Z users curate their wellness engagement as part of an online identity. This signifies the importance of investigating and moderating the vulnerable topic of health online, as the effects of this content are quick to spread and recruit new trend participants. The study also reinforces the need to critically examine how the broad definition of "health" is used online, as it allows for moralising narratives that frame personal wellbeing as a responsibility or obligation (Valles, 2018). It is particularly crucial to conduct more research in this area, given that 69% of users say they trust social media influencers (Matter, 2020) and that the results of this study support these claims. Stricter rules for companies and influencers marketing wellness products online must be implemented, or educational initiatives that assist consumers in critically assessing non-scientific health advice must be developed. Media literacy is becoming an increasingly urgent concern. While it would be ideal for wellness brands

to adopt more mentally healthy marketing tactics, it is difficult to rely on companies whose primary motivation is profit. This makes it all the more important to ensure that the public is well informed on the safety of engaging with social media content. As younger and younger users are getting on digital platforms, there is a reason to integrate media literacy into the school curriculum. Students can be taught how to stay safe online, question the content they see, and double-check the information they perceive. In addition to that, the theme of health itself deserves attention, to provide the growing generation with a strong sense of self-worth and the knowledge to take care of their body and mind. These educational incentives can minimize user susceptibility to misleading advice and the pressure of conformity.

### **5.3 Limitations & Methodological Reflection**

Semi-structured qualitative interviews are seen as most fit for the complex theme of this study; however, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this approach. While allowing deep contextual insights, qualitative data does not provide grounds for generalisability. Hence, the relatively small sample size is objectively unable to present the full range of Gen-Z users. The integrity of the interviews would not allow for a larger participant group, as this approach is time-consuming.

Moreover, Chintagunta and Labroo (2020), mention how much a longitudinal study can broaden the variety of questions that can be answered in full complexity. Consumer behaviour and the wellness industry are perfect themes for such prolonged studies, due to the presence of various underlying human factors. Meanwhile, interviews allow for deeper understanding, but they are limited in their ability to uncover the full complexity of each participant's psychological or emotional motivations. A recommendation for future research would be a prolonged study that involves

psychological assessments. This format would allow the researchers to observe both short and long-term effects of user engagement with wellness-related content. In addition to that, a psychological assessment could aid in minimising misinformation from the participants, as it is difficult to confirm the answers provided by people verbally (Sekar & Bhuvaneswari, 2024).

Finally, the researcher's positionality as a Gen Z social media user may influence the lens through which the data is interpreted. Self-bias is difficult to eliminate, but it will be minimised through ongoing reflexive journaling and self-awareness. The interview questions are also intentionally designed to minimise bias and encourage free thought from the participants.

## **5.4 Conclusion**

The study contributes to the research and understanding of the complicated relationship between Gen-Z users and digital wellness. The research question at hand: In what ways do Gen Z individuals interpret and emotionally experience their interactions with wellness content on social media, and what drives them to engage with it?

Gen-Z users revealed in their interviews that this socio-digital pressure often drives their engagement. This includes the visual and almost prestigious appeal of being a part of the wellness space, as well as the community aspect that it provides. This has been especially true for the domain of make-up, skin care and fashion (like athleisure). There is an appeal to the influencer lifestyle, that drives sales and trends but similarly leads to self-comparison issues in users. The pressure of adhering to the often unrealistic standards of social media leaves participants feeling overwhelmed and doubting their abilities. Wellness trends greatly profit from this narrative, as

companies are reported to be investing exponentially in influencer marketing and digital marketing (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025). Yet it is important to bring attention and awareness to these themes, as the commercialisation of wellness carries great consequences on the emotional and physical well-being of its users.

Gen-Z participants also recognise and appreciate the educational and motivational side of wellness. User interviews consistently reported their efforts to consume content that aligns with their goals and aspirations. This has been especially relevant in the context of fitness and nutrition, as these spheres have a slightly less commercial feel than skin care and fashion items. Hence, even if participants ended up purchasing products as a result of their engagement with wellness, the driver of this situation remains the desire to better oneself rather than inclusion or aesthetics. In addition to that, multiple Gen-Z participants displayed critical assessment of the content they consume and the products they purchase. The users possess a level of personal and social media experience that allows them to minimise susceptibility to digital wellness advice.

Overall, Gen-Z are native to digital platforms that both reflect and reinforce consumerist values. This generation feels drawn to the visual appeal of wellness, as well as to its practical sides, as a way to feel stability, community and prestige. Ultimately, wellness is a concept that promotes self-improvement and self-care, yet the commercial side of this theme often leads to manipulative marketing, causing self-comparison and feelings of inadequacy. Further studies and considerations on this topic are necessary, in order to reach a more mentally sustainable outlook on one's wellbeing online and offline.

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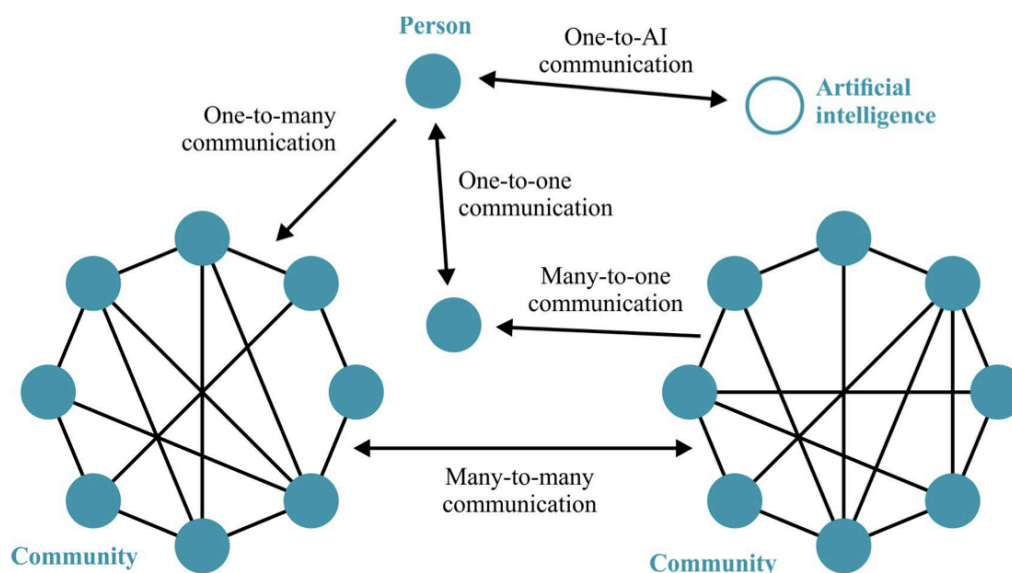
McKinsey & Company.

<https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/consumer-packaged-goods/our-insights/future-of-wellness-trends#/>

## 7. Appendix

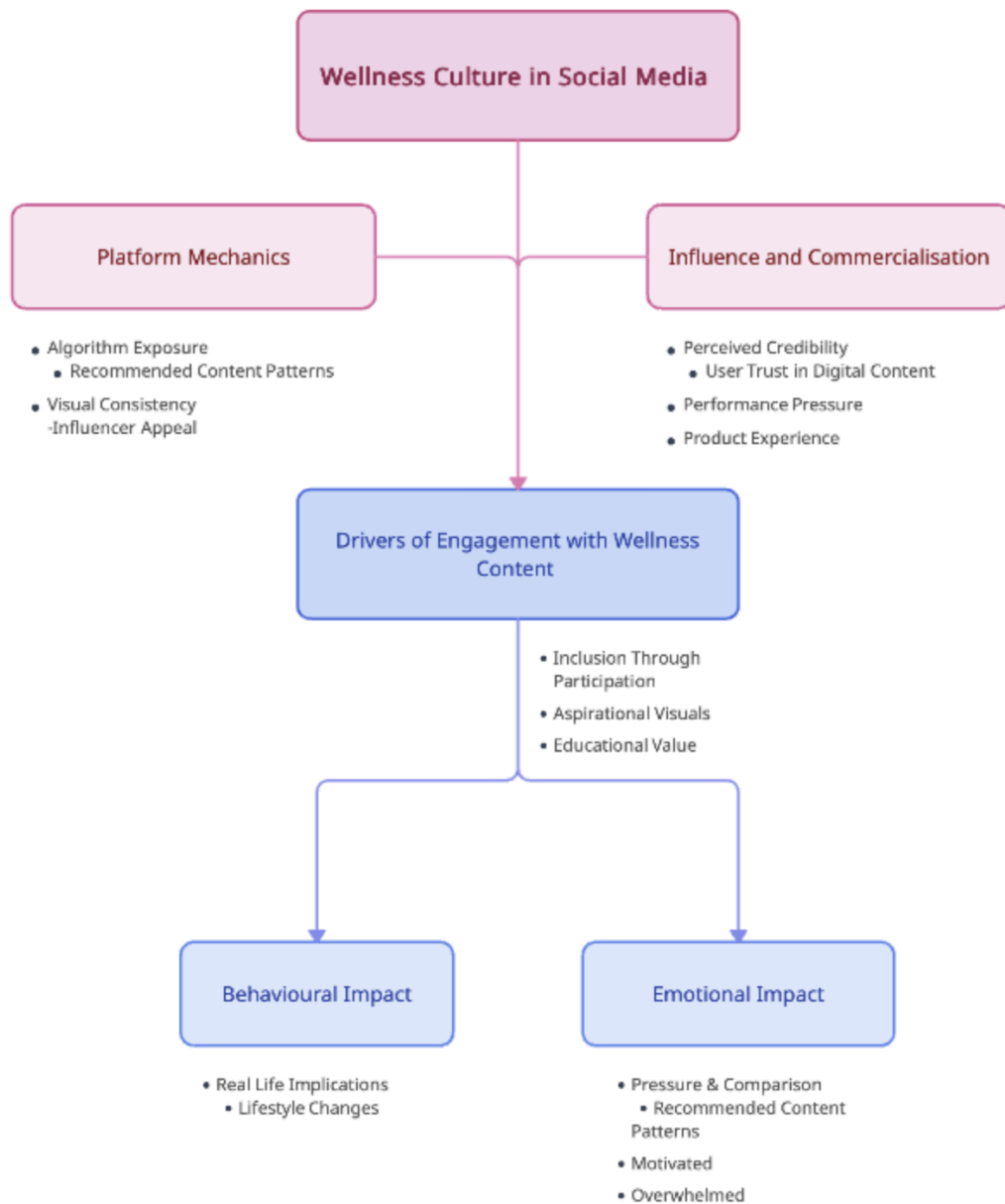
**Figure 1.**

Internet Communication Model (“The Modern Transformation of Internet Communications”, 2022)



**Figure 2**

## Theoretical Background Model

**Table 1**

## Interview Questions

Theme	Question	Question
Introductory Section	How often do you use Instagram and/or TikTok?	Do you engage with any wellness-related content? If yes, please elaborate on what kind of content it is.
Perception of Wellness	How would you personally define wellness, in terms of beauty and health?	How do you think wellness portrayed on Instagram and TikTok, does it differ from your personal perception?
Drivers of Engagement	Can you identify what aspect/s of wellness content provide value for you?	Is there anything that makes you steer away from wellness related content when you see it?
Social Belonging	Do you pay attention to the number of likes and/or view when viewing wellness-related content?	
Platform Algorithms	What role, if any, do you think platform algorithms play in the visibility of	

different types of wellness  
content? Can you share  
any examples?

#### Infuencer Culture

Do you tend to seek a  
second source of  
information for the  
wellness advice you see  
online?

What motivates you to  
follow a particular  
wellness influencer?

#### Commercialisation

Can you recall a time when  
you purchased a wellness  
product after seeing it on  
social media? If yes, please  
elaborate on this experience  
in terms of psychological  
satisfaction and monetary  
value.

#### Closing Reflections

Has engaging with wellness  
content influenced your  
lifestyle or habits? If yes,  
please elaborate how.

Are there aspects of wellness  
culture that you find  
particularly positive or  
negative?

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**Table 2**

## Thematic Analysis Codebook

Themes	Subthemes	Definitions	Example from Transcript
Drivers of Engagement	Aspirational	Participants feel that the visual aspect of wellness content, drives them to engage with it.	“I really relate to the way that they're presenting it. Like, I also want to go in Lululemon, do these Pilates classes, like that.”
	Visuals		
	Educational	Participants state that some type of educational value drives them to engage with wellness content.	“A positive is how fast and accessible this information is. So let's say I just woke up and I have a headache - I can search up and see quickly what Huberman would say.”
	Value		
	Inclusion Through Participation	Participants state that the feeling of inclusion (relatability) drives their engagement with wellness content.	“I think, because they have the same lifestyle as me, in the sense of, like, oh, students age, like, the same demographic. I resonate because it's like watching a friend of mine getting ready.”

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User Impact	Pressure & Comparison	Participants feel pressure and/or self-comparison, as a result of engaging with wellness content.	“And this kind of Stark comparisons create unrealistic expectations for myself, there are transformations in beauty and wellness that I think are obtainable realistically, but are actually in essence, maybe not.”
	Motivated	Participants feel motivated as a result of engaging with wellness content.	“The fitness aspect of it really pushes me, because I see people who are at the place I want to be.”
	Overwhelmed	Participants feel overwhelmed as a result of engaging with wellness content.	“You can get overstimulated, over-informed and confused, thinking about, oh, I should have went out for the sunlight and I didn't.”
	Behavioral Impact	Participants mention the effect of wellness content on their behavior.	“After watching some of the content, I integrated some of the habits into my life. For example, drinking warm water instead of cold or stomach in

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the morning.”

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Influence & Commercial ization	Perceived	Participants share	“I look at least at some other
	Credibility	their perception of	sources instead of just trusting
		credibility towards	one person.”
		wellness content	
		online and wellness	
		related product	
		recommendations.	
	Product	Participants share	“The benefit brow gel. It was
		their experience	horrible. I saw so much
	Experience	with a product they	content on it. It ended up
		purchased as a result	being piece of shit.”
		of engaging with	
		wellness content on	
		social media.	
	Performance Pressur	Participants share	“I feel pressured into
		their feelings	following the lifestyle they're
		regarding the	promoting. I don't feel this
		pressure to	piece of control anymore. I
		participate in	feel like I'm just trying to stay
		wellness as a result	on this wave of trends “
		of consuming	
		related content.	

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Platform Mechanics	Algorithm Exposure	Participants share their experience with algorithmically suggested wellness content on social media.	“I was getting more acne, breakouts, a lot of things — I started to get more content. Because phones hear everything, you start getting content that’s more tailored to you.”
	Content Consistency	Participants feel that the wellness content recommended to them has an element of consistency (similarity).	“I think all of them are promoting more or less a similar lifestyle — super healthy, super luxury, mindful.”

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## 7.1 Use of AI

During the preparation of this work, I used ChatGPT to help in creating structure for some sections of the text. After using this tool, I thoroughly reviewed and edited the content as needed, taking full responsibility for the outcome.