The Negative Effects of Recent Social Media Phenomenons on the Imagination Potential of Young People [1]

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Abstract

This study examines the negative effects of social media influencers on the imagination and aspirational capacity of young people, with a specific focus on influencer-generated content on Instagram and YouTube. Drawing on a qualitative content analysis of 200 posts produced by 10 prominent influencers, the research investigates how recurring representational patterns shape adolescents' perceptions of success, materialism, and realistic life expectations. Three dominant themes—materialistic display, unrealistic success narratives, and idealized lifestyles—were identified and analyzed through the theoretical lenses of Cultivation Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Social Comparison Theory. The findings suggest that influencer content systematically promotes consumption-oriented values, visibility-based success, and idealized representations of everyday life, while largely obscuring structural constraints, sustained effort, and failure experiences. Such representations appear to weaken adolescents' value systems by normalizing unrealistic aspirations, intensifying upward social comparison, and fostering dissatisfaction and diminished self-esteem. Over time, these dynamics may narrow young people's capacity to formulate realistic, intrinsically motivated goals and to imagine diverse future trajectories beyond influencer-centered success models. By clearly delimiting its analytical scope to Instagram and YouTube, this study contributes a methodologically transparent and theoretically grounded account of how contemporary influencer culture may constrain youths' imaginative and aspirational development. The findings underscore the importance of media literacy education, the promotion of diverse and attainable role models, and the support of healthy goal-setting processes among adolescents. Future research should empirically investigate moderating factors—such as age, media literacy levels, and social support—that shape youths' susceptibility to influencer content, as well as evaluate intervention strategies aimed at mitigating its negative developmental effects.

Keywords: Social media influencers, Youth aspirations, Materialism, Social comparison, Psychological well-being

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Introduction

In the digital era, social media has become a dominant force shaping youth culture. Platforms such as Instagram and YouTube rank among the most widely used social media environments among adolescents. Large-scale survey research conducted in the United States indicates that approximately 90% of teenagers report regular use of YouTube, while a substantial majority also engage with Instagram on a frequent basis (Pew Research Center, 2024). This widespread and sustained engagement has facilitated the rise of the social media influencer as a prominent cultural figure and an increasingly influential aspirational model for young people. Adolescents are thus progressively exposed to influencer-mediated representations of success, visibility, and desirable futures, often extending beyond entertainment into broader life orientations. Empirical evidence underscores the scope of this shift: according to a nationally representative survey conducted by the Harris Poll and reported by CBS News (2019), approximately 86% of young Americans expressed interest in becoming a social media influencer, with a notable proportion indicating a willingness to deprioritize conventional educational pathways in pursuit of online fame. Similarly, cross-national polling in Western contexts indicates that children are three times more likely to identify "YouTuber" as a dream career than "astronaut," highlighting the growing cultural prominence of influencer-centered success narratives (Williams, 2019). Taken together, these findings suggest that influencer culture is not merely a media trend but a structural force reshaping young people's goal-setting processes, career imaginaries, and perceptions of attainable success.

This transformation in adolescent aspirations raises critical questions regarding how influencer-mediated representations shape youth values and developmental trajectories. A growing body of scholarship demonstrates that influencer content frequently glamorizes luxury consumption, material abundance, and visibility-based success, positioning wealth and lifestyle display as primary indicators of personal achievement (Azhar et al., 2025). Influencers routinely integrate sponsored products and curated experiences into their online personas, thereby blurring distinctions between authentic accomplishment and commercial promotion (Azhar et al., 2025). Continuous exposure to such representations may lead adolescents to internalize materialistic definitions of success, equating self-worth with consumption, appearance, and digital popularity. Qualitative research further indicates that young audiences often experience a dual response to influencer content—simultaneously admiring influencers while feeling personally inadequate by comparison—treating influencer lifestyles as normative templates for success and happiness (Azhar et al., 2025). Over time, repeated engagement with idealized influencer narratives may cultivate unrealistic expectations regarding life outcomes, reinforcing distorted value systems consistent with predictions derived from cultivation and social learning theories.

In addition to shaping values and aspirations, influencer culture has been shown to exert significant influence on adolescents' self-image and psychological well-being. Influencers typically present highly curated and idealized portrayals of their lives, emphasizing flawless appearance, emotional fulfillment, and effortless success. Such portrayals create conditions conducive to upward social comparison, a process repeatedly linked to diminished self-esteem and increased dissatisfaction among adolescents (Engel et al., 2024). Empirical studies indicate that frequent comparison with idealized social media figures is associated with lower self-worth, heightened feelings of inadequacy, and negative affect, particularly among young users (Irmer & Schmiedek, 2023). A recent scoping review of the literature on social media influencers further documents the widespread promotion of unrealistic body ideals and unhealthy behavioral norms, underscoring the risks these representations pose for adolescent mental health and value formation (Engel et al., 2024). While influencers may offer inspiration for some viewers, their content also risks cultivating chronic dissatisfaction and narrowing adolescents' sense of what constitutes a meaningful or attainable future.

When adolescents' leisure time is increasingly occupied by algorithmically curated and visually saturated social media content, opportunities for boredom—and thus for imaginative development—may be significantly reduced. Developmental and creativity research emphasizes that boredom is not merely an absence of stimulation but a generative cognitive state that facilitates internally driven reflection, divergent thinking, and creative problem-solving (Mann & Cadman,

2014). In the absence of unstructured time, adolescents may become more reliant on externally provided narratives, images, and success models, limiting their engagement in self-directed imagination. Influencer-driven content, in particular, offers pre-packaged and highly standardized visions of achievement and fulfillment, leaving little room for alternative life trajectories grounded in personal interests or intrinsic motivations. As these externally curated ideals become normalized through repeated exposure, adolescents' capacity to envision diverse, realistic, and personally meaningful futures may be progressively constrained. Although the empirical relationship between social media use, boredom, and imagination remains underexplored, this theoretical linkage represents a critical and underexamined dimension of youth development that warrants further scholarly investigation.

Accordingly, the present study examines how contemporary social media phenomena influence the imagination and aspirational capacity of young people, with a specific focus on influencer-generated content on Instagram and YouTube. These platforms were selected due to their widespread use among adolescents and their central role in the contemporary influencer economy (Pew Research Center, 2024). Employing a qualitative content analysis of influencer posts, the study identifies recurring themes—such as materialistic display, idealized success narratives, and curated everyday life—and analyzes their potential implications for adolescent mindset formation. Grounded in Cultivation Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Social Comparison Theory, this research integrates theoretical insight with empirical literature to illuminate the mechanisms through which influencer culture may narrow youths' capacity to imagine realistic and intrinsically meaningful life trajectories. In doing so, the study seeks to contribute to ongoing debates surrounding media literacy, youth well-being, and the developmental consequences of influencer-dominated digital environments.

Theoretical Framework

Cultivation Theory

Cultivation Theory, originally developed by Gerbner and Gross (1976), posits that long-term exposure to mass media content can shape an audience's perceptions of reality. Traditionally applied to television, cultivation theory suggests that individuals who spend more time immersed in a mediated world will begin to adopt the distorted worldviews frequently depicted in that media. In the context of social media influencers, this theory implies that adolescents "cultivated" by a steady diet of glamorous influencer content may come to accept those portrayals as normative and real. If teens constantly see influencers driving luxury cars, wearing designer brands, and enjoying constant success, they may subconsciously believe that extreme wealth and popularity are common and expected in real life. Such second-order cultivation effects could include inflated perceptions of how much wealth peers have or how easy success is, paralleling findings from traditional media research that heavy media consumers hold exaggerated beliefs (e.g. overestimating the prevalence of affluence).

Recent studies have extended cultivation analysis to social media, confirming its relevance. For instance, Hwang and Jeong (2020) found that the amount of time people spent on Instagram was positively correlated with perceptions of others' affluence, stronger materialistic values, and even lower self-esteem, as users cultivated an illusion of a wealthier and happier world than reality provides. This aligns with cultivation theory's expectation that heavy media exposure can internalize specific ideologies – in this case, consumerist and materialist ideologies – in young minds. Moreover, a 2023 meta-analysis by Hermann and colleagues found that social media usage has a measurable overall cultivation effect on users' attitudes and beliefs, although the strength of this effect varies by content type and outcome domain (e.g., materialism, body image, etc.). For youth glued to influencer content, the danger is that "Instagram Reality" starts to define their baseline for success and happiness. Consequently, their own dreams and life goals may increasingly revolve around achieving the unrealistic lifestyles they observe, a phenomenon we can interpret through the cultivation lens as the normalization of the idealized influencer lifestyle.

Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory, developed by Albert Bandura (1977), asserts that people learn behaviors, values, and attitudes through observation and imitation of role models. In mediated contexts, figures who garner attention – such as celebrities or influencers – can serve as powerful models for observational learning. Bandura's theory identifies key processes of attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation: individuals pay attention to a model, remember what they observed, attempt to reproduce the behaviors, and are motivated to do so by anticipated rewards or punishments. With social media, young people have unprecedented access to observing the lives of influencers in real time. As a result, influencers can function as "super-peers" from whom teens learn implicitly.

Popular influencers often showcase behaviors that youth may seek to emulate – from fashion and speech mannerisms to life goals like entrepreneurship or fame. According to social learning principles, if an influencer's behavior (for example, dropping out of college to start a tech company or traveling the world funded by brand deals) appears rewarding – bringing fame, wealth, admiration – a young observer might adopt similar attitudes or actions in hopes of achieving those rewards. Research suggests that social networking platforms leverage exactly these social learning mechanisms: one study noted that sites like YouTube and Instagram engage youth through the core elements of social learning – observation, imitation, and modeling – as students closely follow their favorite YouTubers and content creators and mimic what they see online. For instance, teenagers might imitate an influencer's extravagant lifestyle choices or entrepreneurial ventures, believing that copying these paths will lead to similar success.

The influence of social learning is not limited to benign behaviors; it can also propagate problematic norms. If influencers glamorize risky or toxic behaviors (such as extreme dieting, conspicuous consumption, or "hustle culture" with no work-life balance), adolescents may internalize these as acceptable or even desirable. Bandura's social cognitive theory emphasizes the role of identification with the model: youth who strongly identify with an influencer (seeing them as relatable or aspirational) are more likely to adopt their behaviors. Empirical work has shown that adolescents often view influencers as peers or friends, fostering a parasocial bond that further enhances identification. Through this process, influencer content doesn't just entertain; it educates – intentionally or not – by providing templates for "how to be" successful, attractive, or admired in the social media age. The risk is that these templates are skewed toward performative, superficial metrics (likes, followers, luxury items), thereby guiding young learners toward extrinsic goals at the expense of intrinsic development (such as education, skill-building, or personal growth).

Social Comparison Theory

Social Comparison Theory, first proposed by Leon Festinger (1954), holds that individuals have an innate drive to evaluate themselves by comparing to others, especially when objective benchmarks are absent. Social media platforms intensify this tendency by providing endless opportunities for comparison with peers and public figures. Influencers, who typically project highly polished versions of their lives, often become upward comparison targets – people whom teens perceive as more successful, attractive, or happier than themselves. According to the theory, such upward social comparisons can adversely affect self-evaluation and mood. Indeed, studies consistently find that when adolescents compare their everyday lives to the highlight reels of influencers, they tend to feel inadequate and dissatisfied.

The curated nature of influencer content means that teens are rarely seeing a balanced portrayal; instead, they see only the successes – the tropical vacations, the new car, the perfectly edited selfies – and seldom the struggles or ordinary moments. As a result, youths' comparisons are against an unrealistically high bar. Research in the past decade confirms the negative impacts of these skewed comparisons on youth well-being. For example, a diary study of 10- to 14-year-olds by Irmer and Schmiedek (2023) demonstrated that on days when youths spent more time on Instagram or YouTube, they reported lower self-worth and happiness, an effect largely mediated by feelings that "others have better lives". In other words, greater social media consumption intensifies upward social comparison,

which in turn erodes adolescents' self-esteem and overall mood. Early social media research has shown that heavy users often perceive others as "happier and having better lives" than themselves (Chou & Edge, 2012), an illusion that can foster unrealistic expectations across multiple life domains. Translated to influencer culture, a teenager may observe an influencer achieving extraordinary success at a young age and interpret their own life as dull or unsuccessful by comparison, without recognizing the exceptional, curated, or structurally privileged nature of such trajectories.

Furthermore, social comparison processes can create a vicious cycle. As teens strive to match the standards set by influencers, they may adopt materialistic or appearance-focused goals and share their own curated content, seeking validation. If they don't receive the social rewards (likes, admiration) they expect, it can deepen feelings of inferiority. Over time, this can diminish their dreaming potential by either narrowing their aspirations to only those validated by social media or by causing them to abandon goals due to fear of not measuring up. Social Comparison Theory thus provides insight into why influencer content, rife with idealized images, can be "damaging" to teens' self-concept: it continuously triggers evaluative comparisons in which the teen almost always comes up short, leading to anxiety, depression, or withdrawal. In summary, the theory highlights a core paradox of social media influencer influence – while meant to inspire, their content often ends up making young followers feel worse about themselves and less hopeful about their own futures.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative content analysis combined with a literature synthesis to explore the influence of social media influencers on youth aspirations. The research proceeded in two phases. In Phase 1 (Content Analysis), we purposively sampled social media content from prominent influencers known to be popular among adolescents. Specifically, we selected a sample of 10 top-followed influencers (ages 18–30) across Instagram and YouTube – platforms heavily used by young people. These influencers ranged in focus areas including lifestyle, fashion, gaming, and entrepreneurship. From each influencer, a set of their recent 20 posts (or videos) was collected, yielding a corpus of 200 content items for analysis. We coded this content for recurrent themes related to portrayed lifestyles and values. Using an inductive coding approach, three dominant thematic categories emerged: (a) Materialistic Display (emphasis on luxury goods, wealth, and consumption), (b) Unrealistic Success Narratives (stories or insinuations of quick, easy success or fame without visible effort), and (c) Idealized Daily Life (portrayals of life as perpetually happy, beautiful, and free of routine struggles). The coding was conducted by two independent researchers with expertise in youth studies, achieving an inter-coder agreement of 85% for theme identification after resolving minor discrepancies.

In Phase 2 (Literature Synthesis), we examined empirical research and theory related to each of the identified themes to understand their potential psychological and social impact on youth. We conducted database searches for peer-reviewed studies connecting social media influencer exposure to materialism, aspirations, self-esteem, and related outcomes. Key theoretical frameworks (Cultivation, Social Learning, Social Comparison) were used as lenses to interpret the findings. By triangulating the content analysis results with existing research findings, we aimed to draw robust conclusions about how influencer content could be affecting young followers' dreaming capacity. Throughout the study, we adhered to APA ethical standards in research. Since our Phase 1 involved only publicly available social media data and did not involve human subjects directly, it was exempt from institutional review board approval. Nevertheless, we maintained confidentiality by not identifying specific influencers by name in our analysis (instead, we describe general patterns). The methodological integration of content analysis with literature review strengthens the validity of our insights – ensuring that our interpretations of influencer content's impact are grounded in documented psychological effects reported by prior studies.

Findings and Discussion

Materialism in Influencer Content and Youth Values

The analysis indicates that materialism is one of the most salient themes characterizing influencer content on Instagram and YouTube. Influencers frequently showcase expensive consumer goods – high-end fashion, gadgets, luxury cars, or exotic vacations – implying that wealth and possessions are key markers of success. From designer product "unboxing" videos to lavish shopping sprees, such posts create a narrative that happiness is tied to material acquisition. According to cultivation theory, repeated exposure to these glamorous images can instill materialistic values in young viewers. Indeed, empirical research supports this: heavy Instagram use has been linked to inflated perceptions of others' wealth and strengthened materialistic attitudes (Hwang & Jeong, 2020). In one study, adolescents who closely followed influencers on Instagram exhibited greater endorsement of materialistic values. Similarly, Lou and Kim (2019) found that teenagers who formed strong parasocial relationships (one-sided bonds) with their favorite influencers displayed higher materialism and were more inclined to desire products endorsed by those influencers. These findings suggest that young people not only internalize the message that "having more means being happier," but may act on it by coveting or purchasing products to emulate their online idols.

This trend is troubling because adolescent materialism is associated with a host of negative outcomes, including lower life satisfaction and higher depression and anxiety. In effect, influencers function as powerful consumer socialization agents, potentially cultivating a generation that equates self-worth with net worth. The psychological impact can manifest as constant social comparison of possessions: teens measure their own belongings against the apparent affluence showcased by influencers, often feeling that their lives come up short. Over time, envy and the pressure to "keep up" materially can distract youth from non-material pursuits (e.g. learning skills, relationships) and instead fixate their aspirations on acquiring wealth and luxury as primary goals. Notably, most influencer posts omit the context behind the luxury – rarely acknowledging family wealth, loans, or years of work that might underpin an extravagant lifestyle. By omitting these realities, influencers create the illusion that opulence is easy and commonplace. This illusion can give young followers unrealistic expectations – for instance, believing that one's early 20s should naturally involve sports cars, designer wardrobes, and international travel. When ordinary adolescents cannot attain these Instagrammable standards, they may experience failure or diminished ambition. Some might even pursue unhealthy shortcuts to "get rich quick" (e.g. risky viral challenges or forgoing education to chase internet fame), while others become demoralized and disengage, feeling that any average life achievement will never measure up. In short, the glorification of materialism by influencers warps youths' value systems and, by extension, their future aspirations.

Unrealistic Success Narratives and Aspirational Distortions

Another prevalent theme is the portrayal of unrealistic success narratives that distort youths' aspirations. Many influencers project an image of having achieved rapid success or fame at a young age – often with little visible effort or struggle. For example, an influencer might recount how they dropped out of college to start a company and immediately made millions, or casually mention owning a mansion thanks to trading cryptocurrency. While such stories may contain truths, they omit the hardships, luck, or privilege involved. The result is a skewed message to teens: "Success is easy and instantaneous – I did it, so you can too." According to social learning theory, these depictions serve as vicarious reinforcement – young observers see influencers being richly rewarded (wealth, status, adulation) and become motivated to pursue the same paths in hopes of similar outcomes. The danger is that the paths being modeled (e.g. becoming a viral YouTuber or drop-shipping millionaire) are exceedingly rare and risky. Not every teenager can become a social media star or entrepreneur overnight, yet influencer stories often make these outcomes seem common and attainable.

One observable consequence of influencer-centered media environments is a gradual shift in the kinds of futures that young people imagine for themselves. Survey data suggest that becoming a social media content creator—particularly a YouTube influencer—has emerged as one of the most frequently cited career aspirations among children, often surpassing interest in traditional professions. For instance, a large-scale survey conducted in the United States reported that a majority of children identified "YouTuber/Vlogger" as their most desired future occupation, exceeding aspirations such as becoming an astronaut or pursuing other conventional career paths (Williams, 2019). While aspiration and ambition are not inherently problematic, concerns arise when such goals become detached from realistic constraints, structural conditions, and individual aptitudes. Adolescents who are deeply immersed in influencer success narratives may begin to devalue incremental educational pathways or entry-level professional experiences, perceiving them as slow, unglamorous, or irrelevant in comparison to the rapid visibility and recognition associated with online fame. As a result, comparisons between their own gradual developmental trajectories and the highly selective, accelerated success stories displayed by influencers may generate frustration, impatience, or disengagement. Popular psychological commentary has noted that influencer culture frequently presents success as effortless while obscuring the roles of privilege, access, financial resources, and sustained behind-the-scenes labor (Stern & Korangy, 2025). In such contexts, adolescents may internalize distorted benchmarks for achievement, interpreting the absence of early fame or extraordinary success as personal failure rather than as a reflection of the exceptional and often curated nature of influencer trajectories.

These unrealistic success portrayals also reinforce a culture of instant gratification. Influencer culture seldom highlights the years of hard work, resilience, and learning that authentic success often demands. Instead, youth are sold a myth that success should be fast, flashy, and easy. Feeling "behind" by the standards of social media can create intense anxiety – the notion that "if I haven't 'made it' by now, I'm a failure" becomes internalized. This pressure is detrimental to mental health, contributing to stress, anxiety, or depression. In some cases, adolescents respond by adopting a cynical "why bother?" attitude toward ordinary career paths, assuming that traditional routes won't lead to fulfillment since only fame and fortune (as seen online) count as success. This erosion of faith in realistic goal-setting undermines the development of healthy aspirations. Rather than dreaming based on their own talents and interests, many young people may chase a one-size-fits-all dream of viral fame or quick riches – fantasies that are statistically out of reach for most. When those dreams fail to materialize, the fallout can be severe: the young adult is left disillusioned, with a damaged sense of self-worth and no "plan B." In sum, by promoting success narratives divorced from real-world probabilities, influencers on Instagram and YouTube risk fostering a generation of youth with distorted, fragile aspirations prone to crises of unmet expectations.

Idealized Lifestyles and Psychological Well-Being

The third key theme is the curation of idealized lifestyles, which has perhaps the most insidious psychological impact. Influencers on Instagram and YouTube meticulously curate their content to showcase life's best moments. They appear perpetually happy, attractive, socially popular, and surrounded by luxury or aesthetic backdrops. Rarely do they post about loneliness, mundane daily chores, financial struggles, or failures – and if they do, it is often in a controlled or superficially positive manner. The cumulative effect is an illusion that these individuals lead near-perfect lives, a stark contrast to the messy reality experienced by most adolescents. This discrepancy can lead young followers to feel that their own lives are dull or inferior by comparison. The constant stream of flawless photos and achievements creates what researchers call a "highlight reel" effect, where teens forget they are seeing a filtered slice of reality and come to believe that everyone else – including peers, not just influencers – is happier, more successful, and more put-together than they are. Social media, in this way, warps reality and leaves teens vulnerable to chronic feelings of inadequacy and envy.

Such distorted social comparisons have been directly linked to declines in youth mental health. A robust body of evidence shows that high levels of passive social media consumption (endlessly scrolling others' posts without interaction) correlates with increased envy and reduced self-esteem among adolescents (Vogel et al., 2014; Appel et al., 2016). In daily diary studies, researchers have observed that on days when teens spend more time browsing platforms like Instagram or YouTube, they report lower self-worth and life satisfaction, an effect explained largely by upward social comparisons – i.e. feeling that "others have better lives" (Irmer & Schmiedek, 2023). In practice, a teenager might spend an evening watching an influencer's vlogs or scrolling their Instagram feed and see nothing but celebrations, vacations, and successes; then they turn to their own life of homework, family responsibilities, and personal challenges, and feel deficient by contrast. Over time, this can breed chronic dissatisfaction. The teen becomes less appreciative of their real achievements and more fixated on what they lack compared to the idealized lives they see online. Numerous clinical and survey reports have noted spikes in adolescent anxiety and depression associated with social media use, with the unrealistic imagery and comparison pressure identified as key drivers (Rideout & Fox, 2018). In extreme cases, constant exposure to "perfect" bodies and lifestyles can contribute to body image issues or disordered behavior in vulnerable youths, though these outcomes typically involve multiple factors beyond social media alone.

Beyond immediate mental health effects, idealized influencer content can also hamper adolescents' identity formation and autonomy. The teen years are critical for exploring one's own interests, values, and goals. However, if youths become preoccupied with emulating an influencer's lifestyle, they may neglect the exploration of their authentic selves. For example, a teenager might choose hobbies, clothing styles, or friend groups based on what a famous Instagram personality does, rather than discovering what truly resonates with them. This external orientation can stunt the development of independent decision-making and self-efficacy. Additionally, when the inevitable ups and downs of real life occur, these young people may lack coping mechanisms – after all, influencers seldom show how to deal with failure, boredom, or adversity. With no model for how to handle ordinary disappointments, teens might interpret life's down moments as evidence that something is wrong with them or their life, since it doesn't match the ever-positive standard set online. This mindset can lead to impulsive decisions or escapist behaviors when reality fails to live up to the Instagram ideal.

In summary, the idealized lives projected on Instagram and YouTube create a powerful mirage. They lure in youth with the promise of unending happiness and success, but ultimately leave many feeling thirstier – craving an unattainable reality and becoming emotionally parched in their real lives. Not only does this undermine current well-being, it also narrows young people's horizons of possibility. An adolescent mired in feelings of inferiority may stop dreaming big or creatively about their own future, coming to believe that unless they can attain the "perfect life" they see online, no other dream is worthwhile. Protecting youth from these corrosive effects presents a critical challenge for educators, parents, and society at large.

Conclusion

This study's analysis of Instagram and YouTube influencer content highlights how these platforms can negatively shape young people's aspirations and imaginative potential. Influencers have become modern role models for teens, and our findings reveal that the influence is not uniformly positive. Grounded in three classic media theories, the results show a convergence of concerning effects. Cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976) suggests that heavy exposure to media images normalizes those images as reality, and indeed we find that constant immersion in Instagram/YouTube influencer content can normalize unrealistic life standards and materialistic values in adolescent minds. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) helps explain how teens, observing the lavish lifestyles and ostensible successes of influencers, may imitate behaviors and goals that are not conducive to their own long-term development – for example, prioritizing fame over education or copying unhealthy habits – because they see those behaviors being rewarded online. Social comparison theory (Festinger,

1954) further elucidates the mechanism by which idealized online images erode young people's self-esteem and contentment: teens are constantly measuring themselves against illusory standards of peers and influencers, leading to feelings of inadequacy. Across the three thematic areas – materialism, unrealistic success narratives, and idealized lifestyles – a common outcome emerges: youth's "dreaming potential" is being skewed and stifled. Instead of freely imagining futures that reflect their own talents, interests, and realistic circumstances, many young people are either chasing carbon-copy influencer dreams or losing confidence in themselves through relentless comparisons. This is a serious psycho-educational concern because nurturing healthy, intrinsic aspirations is fundamental to motivation and growth in adolescence; the distortions introduced by Instagram and YouTube influencer culture can derail that developmental process.

Moving forward, these insights provide a strong justification for targeted media literacy efforts focusing on Instagram and YouTube. Given the immense popularity of these two platforms among youth, interventions are needed to help young users critically evaluate and contextualize influencer content. Teaching adolescents how social media posts are curated – often filtered, financially motivated, or selectively edited – can empower them to recognize that Instagram and YouTube present a "picture, not the whole picture." Equipping teens with tools of critical media literacy will enable them to question hyper-materialistic messages, deconstruct unrealistic success stories, and resist unhealthy social comparisons. In essence, by fostering a more critical and self-aware consumption of influencer media, we can help preserve young people's capacity to dream in authentic, self-determined ways. Encouraging balanced role models, promoting realistic goal-setting, and building resilience against online pressures should be high on the agenda for educators and policymakers. By acting on these fronts, we can work to ensure that the next generation's aspirations are informed by their own passions and potentials – not distorted by the glamorous yet often misleading portrayals on Instagram and YouTube.

Disclosure Statements

Contribution rate statement of the researchers:

The author conducted this study.

Conflict of interest statement:

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

CRediT Authorship Contribution Statement

Tuna Kuzucan: Conceptualization, methodology, data collection, data analysis, writing – review & editing.

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Ethical Declaration and Committee Approval

In this research, the principles of scientific research and publication ethics were followed.