



Scrolling towards sustainability: content analysis of gen Z influencers in India promoting well-being and conscious lifestyles across YouTube and Instagram

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Abstract

This study presents a systematic content analysis of 150 posts and videos published by 15 Indian Gen Z influencers across Instagram (n = 70) and YouTube (n = 80), examining how sustainability, wellness, and conscious lifestyle content is produced, framed, and received in the Indian digital media ecosystem. Using a structured coding scheme covering content format, thematic focus, messaging strategy, depth, sponsorship status, authenticity signals, and audience engagement metrics (views, likes, comments), this paper addresses four research questions pertaining to dominant content themes and messaging strategies, authenticity signals in sponsored versus non-sponsored content, cross-platform thematic adaptation, and engagement prediction. Findings reveal that educational messaging and deep-form content dominate across both platforms; non-sponsored content consistently outperforms sponsored content on all engagement indicators; YouTube long-form video drives significantly higher viewership, while Instagram Reels generate superior normalised like rates. Clean and conscious nutrition content emerges as the highest-engagement theme cluster, with Ayurvedic and holistic wellness content commanding strong audience loyalty. Authenticity scores are inversely correlated with sponsorship status, with 100% of sponsored posts rated Medium rather than High authenticity. These findings carry significant implications for sustainable brand communication, influencer selection, and the role of indigenous knowledge systems in contemporary digital wellness narratives.

Keywords: Gen Z influencers, Sustainable living, Ayurveda wellness, Content analysis, Instagram, YouTube, Zero waste, Conscious consumption

1. Introduction

The expansion of social media has transformed how information is created and consumed, giving rise to influencers as key opinion leaders. Generation Z, raised in a digital-first environment, relies more on influencer-led and peer-generated content than traditional advertising. Influencers are perceived as relatable figures who connect information with real-life experiences. Beyond product promotion, they shape identities, lifestyles, and values through storytelling and engagement, significantly influencing consumption patterns and behavioural norms. Growing concerns about climate change, health, and ethical consumption have driven a shift toward sustainable and conscious living, especially among Gen Z. Trends such as zero-waste practices, eco-friendly consumption, and holistic well-being have gained prominence. Social media plays a crucial role in translating these ideas into practical actions, with influencers making sustainability accessible through everyday content like routines, wellness tips, and product choices. This has led to the rise of “conscious lifestyle” content that merges environmental awareness with personal well-being.

Social media has also become a hub for wellness communication, covering physical, mental, and emotional

health. Influencers promote practices such as yoga, mindfulness, and nutrition, often integrating traditional Indian systems like Ayurveda. Platforms like Instagram and YouTube complement each other: Instagram enables quick, visually engaging content, while YouTube allows deeper, educational engagement creating a balanced ecosystem of inspiration and learning. Authenticity is central to influencer effectiveness, as Gen Z values transparency and relatability. In sustainability and wellness contexts, credibility is especially important due to their ethical nature. However, increasing commercialization and sponsored content can challenge perceived authenticity, raising concerns about how influencers balance trust with monetization.

2. Literature review

2.1 Rise of influencer culture and gen Z digital behaviour

The rapid expansion of social media platforms has transformed influencer culture into a major communication force shaping consumption, identity formation, and lifestyle aspirations among younger audiences. Gen Z, being digital natives, are particularly responsive to creator-led communication because they value relatability, peer-like interaction, and visually

engaging content. Recent systematic reviews show that influencer marketing research has shifted from celebrity endorsement models toward niche creators who build trust through authenticity, expertise, and regular audience engagement [22].

Studies further indicate that Gen Z consumers are more persuaded by influencers than by traditional advertising because influencers appear accessible and socially similar. In an Indian context, source credibility, inspiration, and parasocial interaction significantly affect purchase intention among Gen Z audiences [2]. Similarly, credible wellness influencers can motivate followers to adopt tangible and intangible well-being goals, demonstrating that influencers now shape behaviours beyond product purchases [23].

2.2 Social media as a space for sustainability communication

Social media has emerged as an important arena for environmental awareness, ethical consumption messaging, and sustainable behaviour advocacy. A review of Asian sustainability communication research found that visual platforms such as Instagram and YouTube are especially effective in encouraging pro-environmental behaviour among younger users [8].

Influencers play a bridging role by converting abstract sustainability concepts into everyday actions such as zero-waste habits, recycling, slow fashion choices, eco-friendly shopping, plant-based diets, and low-consumption routines. Exposure to sustainability content has been found to positively influence advocacy intentions and behavioural adaptation among Gen Z users [21]. Research also shows that trust in influencers significantly predicts sustainable purchase intentions, especially when followers perceive shared values and authenticity [17].

2.3 Well-being, yoga, ayurveda and conscious lifestyle narratives

Consumer well-being literature defines well-being as encompassing hedonic, eudaimonic, and social dimensions, all of which can be shaped through digital media exposure [4]. For Indian audiences, conscious lifestyle narratives often include indigenous wellness traditions such as yoga, Ayurveda, herbal remedies, mindful eating, seasonal routines, and spiritual balance. Gen Z influencers are increasingly repackaging these traditions through modern content formats such as Reels, short tutorials, vlogs, and aesthetic routine videos.

Research on adolescent well-being also indicates that trusted creators can reduce some negative effects of social media by offering supportive, aspirational, and identity-affirming content [8]. This is particularly relevant in an era where digital platforms are often criticised for anxiety, comparison pressure, and misinformation.

2.4 Platform differences: YouTube vs Instagram

Platform architecture significantly shapes how influencers communicate. Prior studies note that Instagram and YouTube

are the two dominant platforms in influencer research, yet comparative evidence remains underdeveloped [1]. Sustainability research also confirms that these platforms are central channels for Gen Z discovery and engagement [22]. However, content logic differs: Instagram may reward concise motivational messaging, aspirational visuals, and trend-friendly hooks, whereas YouTube may better support educational depth, documentary-style sustainability routines, and nuanced wellness discussions.

2.5 Research gap

A major gap in existing literature is the lack of systematic content analysis of Indian Gen Z influencers promoting sustainability and wellness on YouTube and Instagram. Most studies rely on survey-based methods, focusing on audience responses rather than analysing actual influencer content. Limited research in India further neglects themes, formats, and platform-specific differences, leaving influencer communication patterns underexplored. Another gap concerns the unclear relationship between influencer authenticity, sustainability messaging, and behavioural change. While prior studies highlight authenticity as crucial, findings remain inconsistent, especially regarding whether such content influences new audiences or only reinforces existing beliefs. This issue remains untested in the Indian Gen Z context. Finally, there is a lack of comparative research between YouTube and Instagram. Existing studies either focus on a single platform or do not differentiate between them. Given differences in content format, user engagement, and audience demographics, especially in India, platform-specific analysis is essential. This study addresses these gaps through a comparative content analysis approach.

2.6 Research questions

RQ1: Dominant themes, formats & messaging strategies in conscious lifestyle influencer content

RQ2: Authenticity signals in sponsored vs. non-sponsored sustainability & wellness content

RQ3: How themes, depth & messaging adapt across YouTube long-form vs. Instagram short-form

RQ4: Platform differences in audience engagement & which content features predict higher engagement

3. Research methodology

This study employs a mixed-method content analysis design to systematically examine the social media content produced by Generation Z influencers in India promoting well-being and conscious lifestyles on YouTube and Instagram.

3.1 Research design

The study integrates quantitative frequency analysis with qualitative thematic analysis, following Creswell and Creswell's (2018) convergent mixed-method model, wherein both data strands are collected simultaneously and interpreted together [6]. Quantitative coding captures the distributional frequency of themes, formats, and engagement metrics, while

qualitative coding interprets the nature, framing, and depth of messaging strategies. The codebook is developed using a deductive-inductive approach: categories are derived a priori from the existing literature, yet remain open to inductively emerging codes as new thematic patterns surface during analysis [9]. The unit of analysis is the individual post or video a single YouTube video or Instagram post treated as a discrete, codeable communicative artefact [16].

3.2 Sample and sampling strategy

The study sample comprises 150 posts drawn from 15 purposively selected Gen Z Indian influencers 10 posts per influencer. Influencers must be Indian nationals born between 1997 and 2012, actively creating content on both YouTube and

Instagram, and working predominantly within one of seven identified content niches: sustainable health practices, Ayurveda, yoga, sustainable living, clean food, indigenous medicines, and holistic well-being.

Purposive sampling is adopted in line with Patton 's (2002) recommendation that information-rich cases be selected deliberately for in-depth study [20]. Post selection follows a systematic interval method all qualifying posts from the 12-month data window are listed chronologically and every nth post is selected to ensure temporal representativeness and eliminate researcher selection bias [19].

Inclusion criteria of influencer

Age	• Born between 1997 - 2012; identified as Gen Z
Nationality	• Indian-based influencer; creates content in English, Hindi or regional Indian languages
Platform	• Two social media platforms: YouTube and Instagram
Follower Floor	• Minimum 10,000 followers/subscribers
Time Frame	• 10 recent posts have been chosen from each account created during last 1 year
Content Themes	• Sustainable Health Practices; Ayurveda; Yoga; Sustainable Living; Clean food; Indigenous Medicines; Holistic Well being

Source: Compiled by author

Fig 1

3.3 Data collection and instrumentation

Data are collected directly from publicly accessible Instagram and YouTube profiles. For each post, the following information is extracted: caption or description text, post format, hashtags, sponsorship status, engagement metrics (views, likes, comments), follower count, and posting date. These data are recorded in a structured Microsoft Excel master sheet organised by influencer ID, platform, and post ID. The codebook comprises 18 variables organised across five categories: post metadata (A), dominant themes (B), authenticity signals (C), messaging strategy (D), and engagement metrics (E). Thematic and messaging variables are coded on both nominal and ordinal scales, while engagement metrics are recorded as continuous values. The engagement rate is calculated using the standard formula: (Likes + Comments) ÷ Followers × 100 [12].

3.4 Data analysis

Four complementary analytical approaches are employed. Frequency analysis and cross-tabulation in Excel address RQ1 (thematic mapping) and RQ3 (platform comparison), with chi-square tests applied where cell sizes permit. Braun and Clarke's six-phase reflexive thematic analysis is applied to qualitative codes and analytical memos to address RQ1 and RQ2, chosen for its flexibility in integrating deductive and inductive coding streams. Spearman rank correlations between engagement rate and content predictor variables address RQ4 [5].

4. Results & Discussion

4.1 Quantitative results

4.1.1 Frequency and percentage analysis

Table 1: Summary of descriptive profile of influencers across YouTube & Instagram

Category	Sub-category	Frequency (n)	%
Platform	YouTube	80	53.3%
	Instagram	70	46.7%
	Sub-total	150	100%
Content Format	Long Video	64	42.7%
	Reel	29	19.3%
	Static Post	21	14.0%
	Carousel	20	13.3%
	YT Short	16	10.7%
	Sub-total	150	100%
	Main Thematic Clusters	Holistic wellness & Mind-Body Integration	42
Sustainable Living & Conscious consumption		34	22.7%
Clean & Conscious Nutrition		28	18.7%
Ayurveda & Natural Healing		26	17.3%
Yoga & Movement		20	13.3%
Sub-total		150	100%
Messaging Strategy & Tone	Educational	74	49.3%
	Inspirational	38	25.3%
	Motivational	24	16.0%
	Storytelling	14	9.3%
	Sub-total	150	100%
Content Depth	Deep	73	48.7%
	Moderate	44	29.3%
	Surface	33	22.0%
	Sub-total	150	100%
Sponsored Status	Sponsored	7	4.7%
	Non-sponsored	129	86.0%
	Unclear	14	9.3%
	Sub-total	150	100%
CTA (call-to-action)	Save	57	38.0%
	Comment	39	26.0%
	Follow	37	24.7%
	Buy	14	9.3%
	Share	3	2.0%
	Sub-total	150	100%

Source: Compiled by author

The two platforms represent complementary but structurally distinct content ecosystems. YouTube functions as a depth-first platform where educational authority is built through long-form video, enabling complex knowledge transmission, personal narrative arcs, and detailed practice demonstrations. Instagram operates as a breadth-first platform where visual identity, motivational resonance, and aesthetic coherence drive reach. The platforms are not in competition but rather form a pipeline: Instagram generates discovery and aspiration while YouTube cultivates knowledge and commitment. Table 1 shows the distribution of 150 posts analysed from Gen Z influencers across YouTube and Instagram. YouTube contributed 53.3% of the posts, while Instagram accounted for 46.7%, indicating a slightly higher use of YouTube for conscious lifestyle communication. In terms of format, Long Videos (42.7%) were the most common, followed by Reels (19.3%), suggesting that influencers prefer detailed formats to explain wellness, sustainability, and lifestyle practices. The leading theme was Holistic Wellness & Mind-Body Integration (28.0%), followed by Eco-Conscious & Sustainable Living (22.7%) and Clean & Conscious Nutrition (18.7%). This shows

that influencers connect sustainability with health, mental well-being, and mindful consumption. Regarding messaging strategy, Educational content dominated (49.3%), followed by Inspirational (25.3%) and Motivational (16.0%) messages. This indicates that influencers mainly act as educators and guides. Almost half of the posts were classified as Deep content (48.7%), while only 22.0% were surface-level, reflecting a preference for meaningful and informative communication. A major finding is that 86.0% of posts were non-sponsored, while only 4.7% were sponsored, showing low commercialization in this niche. Similarly, 82.7% of posts scored high on authenticity, highlighting trust-based and relatable communication. For calls-to-action, Save (38.0%) was the most frequent, followed by Comment (26.0%) and Follow (24.7%), whereas Buy (9.3%) was relatively low. This suggests that influencers focus more on engagement, learning, and community-building than direct selling. Overall, the results indicate that Gen Z conscious lifestyle influencers are largely authentic, education-oriented, and value-driven creators promoting sustainability and well-being rather than aggressive commercial content.

4.1.2 Cross-tabulation analysis

Table 2: Summary of cross-tabulation across YouTube & Instagram

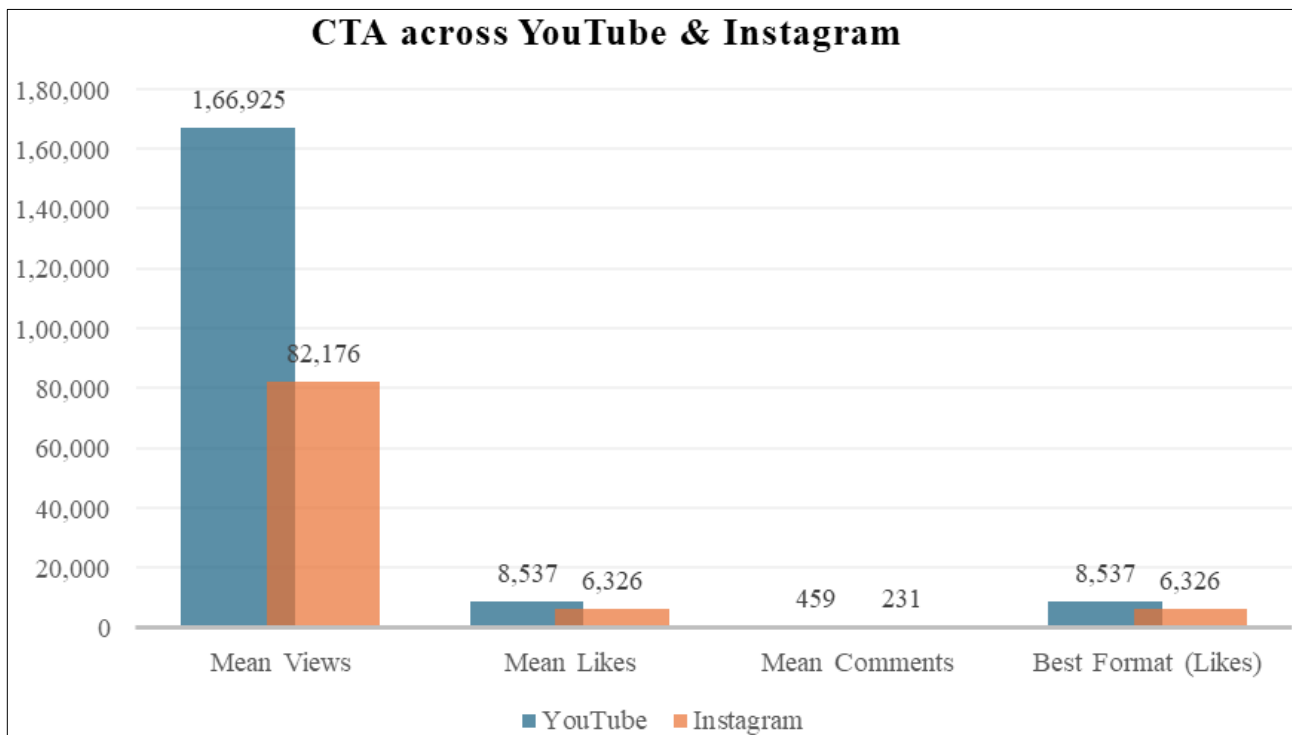
Cross-Tabulation	Category	Long Video	YT Short	Reel	Carousel	Static Post	Total
Platform*Content Format	YT	64 (80%)	16 (20.0%)	-	-	-	80
	IG	-	-	29 (41.4%)	20 (28.6%)	21 (30.0%)	70
	Total	64	16	29	20	21	150
Cross-Tabulation	Category	Holistic wellness	Eco-conscious	Clean Nutrition	Ayurveda	Yoga & Movement	Total
Platform*Theme Cluster	YT	20 (47.6%)	16 (47.1%)	20 (71.4%)	15 (57.7%)	13 (65.0%)	80
	IG	22 (52.4%)	18 (52.9%)	8 (28.6%)	11 (42.3%)	7 (35.0%)	70
	Total	42	34	28	26	20	150
Cross-Tabulation	Category	Educational	Inspirational	Motivational	Storytelling	Total	
Platform*Messaging Strategy or Tone	YT	37 (46.3%)	17 (21.3%)	14 (17.5%)	12 (15.0%)	80	
	IG	37 (52.9%)	21 (30.0%)	10 (14.3%)	2 (2.9%)	70	
	Total	74	38	24	14	150	
Cross-Tabulation	Category	Deep	Moderate	Surface	Total		
Platform*Content Depth	YT	45 (56.3%)	20 (25.0%)	15 (18.8%)	80		
	IG	28 (40.0%)	24 (34.3%)	18 (25.7%)	70		
	Total	73	44	33	150		

Source: Compiled by author

The platforms exhibit complete format exclusivity. YouTube content is bifurcated between long-form video (80.0%) and YouTube Shorts (20.0%), while Instagram distributes across Reels (41.4%), Static Posts (30.0%), and Carousels (28.6%). This structural divergence fundamentally shapes content depth and messaging approach on each platform. YouTube over-indexes on Clean Nutrition (71.4%), Ayurveda (57.7%), and Yoga content (65.0%) – all areas requiring detailed instruction, contextual explanation, or recipe demonstration. Instagram tends towards Holistic Wellness (52.4%) and Eco-Conscious content (52.9%), where visual aesthetics and quick-form communication are more viable. Storytelling is markedly more prevalent on YouTube (15.0%) than Instagram (2.9%),

reflecting long-form video's structural capacity for personal narrative arcs. Instagram concentrates more on inspirational messaging (30.0%), likely capitalising on aesthetic visuals and quick emotional impact afforded by Reels and carousels. Notably, educational messaging is the top strategy on both platforms (46.3% YouTube, 52.9% Instagram), demonstrating that the pedagogical influencer identity transcends platform format constraints adapting, rather than abandoning, its educational mission across short-form visual and long-form video contexts.

4.1.3 Engagement across YouTube and Instagram



Source: Compiled by author

The table highlights clear differences in audience engagement between YouTube and Instagram. YouTube recorded higher mean views (1,66,925) compared to Instagram (82,176), indicating stronger reach and visibility for long-form conscious lifestyle content. Similarly, mean likes on YouTube (8,537) were higher than Instagram (6,326), suggesting greater audience appreciation and interaction on the platform. Mean comments were also notably higher on YouTube (459) than Instagram (231), reflecting deeper audience participation and discussion. The best-performing format in terms of likes also favoured YouTube, showing that long-form videos may generate stronger engagement than short-form Instagram content for sustainability and well-being topics. Overall, the findings suggest that YouTube is more effective for driving reach, interaction, and deeper engagement, while Instagram may serve better for quick visibility and short-form inspiration.

4.2 Qualitative results

Inductive thematic analysis was conducted across the dataset's coded variables including content themes, messaging strategies, authenticity signals, sponsorship patterns, and platform distribution to identify recurring conceptual patterns that transcend individual posts. The following five overarching themes were derived through iterative pattern-matching and theoretical saturation.

Theme 1: The pedagogical influencer: education as currency

The most pervasive theme across both platforms is the repositioning of the influencer from entertainer to teacher. Educational messaging constitutes 49.3% of all content, with deep-depth posts comprising nearly half the dataset. These creators function as para-professionals dispensing actionable knowledge on nutrition, yoga, Ayurvedic practices, and eco-living. The "Save" CTA dominates (38.0%), signalling that audiences treat this content as reference material a form of digital textbook rather than passive entertainment. This positions conscious lifestyle influencers within a distinct pedagogical economy where credibility, accuracy, and depth carry more algorithmic and relational value than virality.

Theme 2: Authenticity as differentiator: the anti-sponsorship economy

A stark authenticity binary structures the dataset: 92.2% of non-sponsored posts achieved High authenticity scores, while 0% of sponsored posts did so. This near-absolute divergence reveals an audience-reinforced norm in which commercial endorsement is fundamentally incompatible with the credibility expected in wellness and sustainability niches. Influencers in this space have cultivated a parasocial trust architecture built on personal testimony, unfiltered documentation, and relational transparency. When commercial signals intrude, audiences and coders register a rupture in that architecture. Non-sponsored content also outperforms sponsored content by 132% on mean likes and 188% on mean views, making authenticity the most economically consequential variable in the dataset.

Theme 3: Neotraditional wellness: ayurveda and indigenous knowledge resurgence

A culturally distinctive theme emerges in the dataset's strong representation of Ayurvedic, herbal, and traditional medicine content (n = 26, 17.3%). Indian Gen Z influencers are actively recontextualising ancient wellness systems for contemporary digital audiences presenting Dosha balancing, Panchakarma, home remedies, and herbal prescriptions through modern visual aesthetics and accessible vernacular. This theme reflects a broader neotraditional turn in Indian wellness discourse, where indigenous epistemologies are being recovered, validated, and circulated through digital platforms as credible alternatives to Western biomedical models. Crucially, Ayurveda content ranks second in engagement performance (mean likes 9,015), demonstrating robust audience appetite for this synthesis of tradition and modernity.

Theme 4: Platform-mediated depth gradient: long-form as legitimising space

YouTube emerges as the legitimising platform for complex, evidence-dense wellness content, while Instagram functions as a gateway medium providing accessible entry points. YouTube posts are coded as Deep in 56.3% of cases versus 40.0% on Instagram, and storytelling-format content is five times more prevalent on YouTube (15.0% vs. 2.9%). This gradient is not merely structural but ideological: YouTube long-form content enables influencers to build extended arguments, demonstrate practices in real time, narrate personal transformation journeys, and cultivate expertise-based authority. Instagram, by contrast, prioritises aesthetic access and motivational brevity. Together, these platforms form a complementary ecosystem in which Instagram attracts and inspires, and YouTube converts and educates.

Theme 5: Food as activism: clean nutrition as the highest-engagement domain

Clean and conscious nutrition content (n = 28) achieves the highest mean engagement of all thematic clusters, with mean likes of 12,271 and mean views of 367,765. This cluster encompasses plant-based diets, satvic lifestyle, gut health, juice fasting, vegan recipes, and disease reversal narratives all of which frame food choices as simultaneously personal, political, and ecological. The extraordinary engagement metrics (particularly for Satvic Lifestyle, mean likes 58,000; and Juice Fasting, mean likes 46,000) suggest that food-as-activism content occupies a particularly resonant intersection of health anxiety, environmental consciousness, and spiritual identity among Gen Z Indian audiences. These numbers indicate not just passive interest but high participatory intent — audiences saving, commenting, and sharing recipes and protocols as lifestyle blueprints.

5. Implications & Conclusion

5.1 Implications of the study

The findings highlight important implications for brands, sustainability communication, and future research. For brands, traditional sponsored content strategies appear ineffective, as

they generate lower engagement and authenticity. Instead, marketers should prioritise value alignment, collaborate on long-form educational content (especially on platforms like YouTube), and allow influencers creative freedom to maintain authenticity. Content that informs, teaches, and serves as a reference tool performs better than direct promotional messaging.

From a sustainability communication perspective, eco-conscious content receives lower engagement compared to health- and food-related themes. This suggests that Indian Gen Z resonates more with “embodied sustainability” (health, diet, healing) than behavioural sustainability (waste reduction). Integrating environmental messages with personal wellbeing narratives can improve impact.

The strong engagement with Ayurvedic and traditional healing content reflects a growing “neotraditional” shift, where Gen Z embraces indigenous wellness systems.

Future research should include longitudinal analysis, sentiment studies, and cross-cultural comparisons to enhance understanding of these patterns.

5.2 Conclusion

The study highlights that Gen Z influencers play a significant role in promoting sustainable and conscious lifestyles through authentic, educational, and value-driven content. The findings reveal that holistic well-being, eco-conscious living, and clean nutrition are the most dominant themes, reflecting an integrated approach to sustainability. Influencers primarily adopt educational and deep-content strategies, positioning themselves as guides rather than mere promoters. Platform-wise analysis indicates that YouTube generates higher engagement and deeper interaction, while Instagram supports quick visibility and inspiration. Gen Z influencers emerge as credible digital change agents who influence lifestyle behaviours through relatable storytelling and meaningful engagement. The study contributes to understanding how social media content can foster awareness and adoption of sustainable living practices in the contemporary digital landscape.

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