

Identity Construction of Generation Z Foodie Nano-Influencers as a Personal Branding Strategy

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to explore the phenomenon of the influencer profession as a strategic solution for Generation Z in dealing with the high unemployment rate through the use of the digital creative economy. The main focus of this study is to analyze how foodie nano-influencers from Generation Z construct their identities as an instrument to strengthen personal branding on social media. Using a qualitative approach, this study applied Stuart Hall's identity construction theory which views identity as a dynamic process of "becoming", as well as Peter Montoya's personal branding theory to dissect self-image strategies. The results show that the identity construction of these nano-influencers is flexible (dynamic identity), where they adaptively adjust communication styles and content based on audience preferences and directives from brand partners. The personal branding strategy applied includes eight main laws (The Eight Laws of Personal Branding), namely Specialization (The Law of Specialization), Leadership (The Law of Leadership), Personality (The Law of Personality), Difference (The Law of Distinctiveness), Consistency (The Law of Visibility), Unity (The Law of Unity), Steadfastness (The Law of Persistence), and Good Name (The Law of Goodwill). These findings confirm that digital identity is not just a self-representation, but a planned strategy to build credibility and unlock economic opportunities amid fierce competition in the digital industry.

KEYWORDS *Konstruksi Identitas, Nano Influencer, Generasi Z, Personal Branding, TikTok.*



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INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology has brought the world community into an era of digital disruption, where social media is no longer just a space for personal interaction, but has transformed into the main pillar of the global creative economy. This phenomenon creates both opportunities and challenges for Generation Z, a digital native group that grows side by side with algorithms and seamless connectivity (Aithal, 2024; Douglas, 2023; Henry & Shannon, 2023; Khurana & Girdhar, 2024; Reid et al., 2023). In Indonesia, the urgency of using social media as an economic instrument is intensifying, particularly in light of the high rate of educated youth unemployment. For Generation Z, limited employment in the formal sector encourages them to innovate independently through the creation of creative content. One of the most obvious manifestations of this career shift is the emergence of the influencer profession. In the digital marketing ecosystem, influencers are divided into five categories based on the number of followers, namely, nano (<10 thousand), micro (10 thousand–100 thousand), macro (100 thousand–1 million), mega (>1 million), and celebrity influencers whose fame is outside of social media (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Despite having a small number of followers, nano-influencers have emotional closeness and a high level of trust (engagement) with their audience. This condition confirms the significance of their role in the digital creative economy ecosystem. The low number of followers of an influencer is positively correlated with the level of character specificity of the managed

audience (Kay, cited in W. P. Sari et al., 2024). The phenomenon of nano-influencer foodies among Generation Z shows how personal preferences can be managed professionally to build economic and social legitimacy.

However, amid the flood of information and similar content on social media, the biggest challenge faced by nano influencers is the issue of differentiation and credibility. Identity in the digital space is not something that is given naturally, but rather a construct that is managed with full awareness. The main problem examined in this study is how nano-influencer foodies from Generation Z construct their identity as a strategic foundation in personal branding efforts. This is crucial because an inconsistent or inauthentic identity will fail to attract the attention of the audience and brand partners. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the process of identity formation as well as how the eight laws of personal branding are implemented to strengthen their position in the creative industry. This research departs from the need to understand the dynamics of "new work" in the digital era that relies heavily on perception and self-image management (Douglas, 2023; Toth, 2017; Vayre, 2022).

Theoretically, the discourse on identity in this study is rooted in Stuart Hall's thinking on the construction of identity. Hall asserts that identity is not a finished essence, but a "process" that is always in motion and never complete a process of "becoming" rather than simply "being". In the context of social media, the identities of nano-influencers are very dynamic (Hall in (Misbah et al., 2023)). They are constantly negotiating identities between who they are in the real world, how audiences perceive them, and how the platform's algorithms demand them to perform. Recent scholarship in this field shows that identity is the result of performativity that is constantly adjusted to trends, but still must maintain the roots of authenticity so as not to lose the trust of followers. The latest academic debate emphasizes that for Generation Z, the boundaries between private and public spaces are increasingly blurred, so identity construction becomes an activity that takes place 24 hours a day through uploads on social media such as TikTok.

The application of digital identity is then operationalized through the framework of the Eight Laws of Personal Branding proposed by Peter Montoya (Montoya, 2002). A literature review in this study shows that these eight laws represent a gold standard in managing professional reputation. The Law of Specialization requires nano-influencers to focus on one niche, in this case culinary, in order to build authority. The Law of Leadership requires them to have an opinion that affects their audience's consumption choices. Meanwhile, The Law of Distinctiveness is the main key in dealing with content competition. A unique personality and visual differentiator is what keeps a nano-influencer relevant. Without a clear differentiator, their digital identity will just be noise among millions of competing pieces of content.

The urgency of this research is underscored by multiple converging factors. First, Indonesia's demographic dividend, with a large youth population entering the workforce, creates a pressing need for alternative employment pathways beyond traditional formal sector jobs. The creative digital economy represents one of the most promising sectors for absorbing young workers, yet understanding of how to succeed in this space remains limited. Second, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital transformation and normalized remote work and online entrepreneurship, making digital careers increasingly viable and attractive. Third, TikTok's explosive growth in Indonesia has created new platforms and opportunities for content creators, but also intensified competition and raised the bar for content quality and

authenticity. Fourth, brands increasingly recognize the value of nano-influencers for targeted marketing, creating demand for influencers who can effectively partner with commercial entities while maintaining audience trust. Fifth, the psychological and social implications of constructing public digital identities for young people warrant investigation to understand both opportunities and potential risks.

Furthermore, the aspects of visibility (The Law of Visibility) and constancy (The Law of Persistence) are real challenges for Generation Z. Consistency in producing content in the midst of mental pressure and algorithm fluctuations is a demanding form of digital labor required to sustain their presence. A strong identity construct must also reflect unity (The Law of Unity), where the characters displayed on social media are aligned with the values they hold, in order to build a lasting reputation (The Law of Goodwill). Previous research has often focused only on the effectiveness of marketing by large influencers, but this study provides novelty by dissecting the internal mechanisms of how individuals with limited follower counts (nano-scale) are able to manage their identities into personal brands that have selling value.

In summary, this study fills a gap in the communication literature regarding the construction of digital identity in Indonesia. By combining Hall's identity construction theory and Montoya's personal branding strategy, this study provides a comprehensive picture that personal branding for Generation Z is not just about popularity, but a strategy for survival and professionalism in the new era. Analysis of informants shows that they not only play the role of content producers, but also identity managers who are adept at reading market tastes without having to lose their identity. The results of this study are expected to be a scientific reference for the development of digital communication studies and provide practical guidance for young creative economy actors in managing their symbolic capital in cyberspace. Strengthening digital identity through the eight branding laws is ultimately the main key for nano-influencers to transform from ordinary users to competitive professional actors in the national creative economy arena.

METHOD

This research used a qualitative approach with the constructivist paradigm to understand how individuals interpret their social reality. The method applied is a descriptive case study, which aims to provide an in-depth and detailed picture of the phenomenon of identity construction in the digital space. The design of this study focuses on exploring the subjective experiences of nano-influencer foodies in managing their self-image. The use of the constructivist paradigm is in line with the idea that "reality exists in the form of various mental constructions that are diverse, experiential, and socially constructed" (Patton, 2002). Thus, this method allows researchers to dissect the complexity of dynamic identities in social media. The research subjects consisted of three categories of informants, namely key informants which included 30 Generation Z foodie nano influencers on TikTok with follower criteria below 10,000, supporting informants, namely a Key Opinion Leader (KOL) Specialist who provided a perspective on the digital marketing industry, and expert informants from Communication Science academics specializing in digital communication and personal branding.

The research procedure began with the pre-field stage, where researchers conducted initial observations on TikTok nano-influencer foodies accounts from Generation Z who met the criteria for the number of followers between 1,000 and 10,000. After determining the key

informants, the research continued with the field implementation stage through in-depth interviews and digital content documentation. During this process, the researcher acted as the main instrument to collect qualitative data. The procedure continued with the data processing stage, where all information obtained was verified for validity using the source triangulation technique. This entire series of procedures was carried out systematically to ensure that the resulting narrative is able to answer research problems regarding personal branding strategies and identity construction accurately.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews and literature studies to get a comprehensive perspective. The data analysis in this study was carried out with the help of NVivo 15 software to improve the accuracy in managing and categorizing complex qualitative data. The analysis process begins with data cleaning and importing interview transcripts into the system. Next, a coding process was carried out to identify the main themes based on the eight laws of personal branding by Peter Montoya and Stuart Hall's theory of identity. Through the nodes feature and data visualization through word frequency query and word cloud in NVivo 15, the researcher organized the data systematically to find patterns of relationships between the observed phenomena (Hartono et al., 2025). Qualitative data analysis is a continuous and iterative process, which in this study is strengthened by the efficiency of digital data processing to ensure the objectivity of the findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Finally, the results of the analysis were synthesized with Stuart Hall's identity construction theory and Peter Montoya's personal branding to produce the final conclusion of the study.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study uses a qualitative approach with a data collection methodology through in-depth interview activities, and literature studies. This section outlines the findings of the research processed based on the results of online interviews through the WhatsApp Call platform with 30 key informants, supporting informants, and expert informants. Data analysis is carried out systematically using NVivo 15 software to ensure objectivity and depth of interpretation. The researcher presented the results of the study in several stages of analysis for each observation unit.

In the first stage, the researcher presented a coding reference table describing the frequency and percentage of occurrence of the main themes based on Peter Montoya's eight laws of personal branding and Stuart Hall's theory of identity construction. In the second stage, the researcher presented the results of the research narratively through mapping the relationship between codes (maps) and the contribution of the informants' answers to each unit of analysis to see the digital behavior patterns of the Generation Z foodie nano-influencers. In the last stage, the researcher presented a data visualization in the form of a word cloud that reflected the most dominant keywords that emerged from the informants' answers. All results are presented in order according to the unit of analysis of this study to provide a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon being studied.

Personal Branding

Based on the results of the analysis using NVivo 15, the researcher obtained data related to the personal branding strategy in the Coding Reference from all the answers submitted by key informants as reflected in Table 1.

Table 1. Personal Branding Coding Reference

<i>Codes</i>	<i>Number of Coding References</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Codes\Personal Branding\The Law of Persistence</i>	89	26%
<i>Codes\Personal Branding\The Law of Visibility</i>	63	19%
<i>Codes\Personal Branding\The Law of Specialization</i>	49	15%
<i>Codes\Personal Branding\The Law of Unity</i>	42	12%
<i>Codes\Personal Branding\The Law of Leadership</i>	32	10%
<i>Codes\Personal Branding\The Law of Goodwill</i>	32	10%
<i>Codes\Personal Branding\The Law of Distinctiveness</i>	29	8%
	336	100%

(Source: Researcher's Processed Results, 2025)

The Law of Persistence (*Keteguhan*)

Coding The Law of Persistence is present as the largest contribution with 30 contributions from 30 key informants in this study. All key informants provide their statements and are supported by supporting informants and experts. The largest coding result in The Law of Persistence is the Challenge of Building Personal Branding with 52 references as shown in Figure 1.

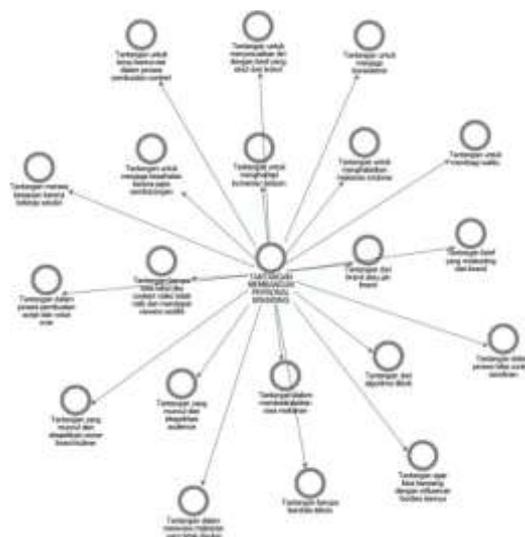


Figure 1. Coding Results of the Challenge of Building Personal Branding
 (Source: Researcher's Processed Results, 2025)

The informant's contribution to each coding comes from the answers provided as data. The results of the study focused on coding The Law of Persistence because this coding is the largest percentage in this unit of analysis. The informant's answers related to the coding of The Law of Persistence were generated by the researcher through word cloud as shown in Figure 2.



Figure 8. Word Cloud The Law of Unity
(Source: Researcher's Processed Results, 2025)

In Figure 8, it can be seen that the words that often appear in coding The Law of Unity are place, food, and branding. Specifically, "place" indicates that a comfortable atmosphere and an attractive interior design will be a plus that makes customers feel at home and tend to come back.

The Law of Leadership

Coding The Law of Leadership comes with 28 contributions from 30 key informants in this study. All key informants provide their statements and are supported by supporting informants and experts. The largest coding result in The Law of Leadership is the impact of becoming a Nano Influencer Foodies with 32 references as shown in Figure 9.

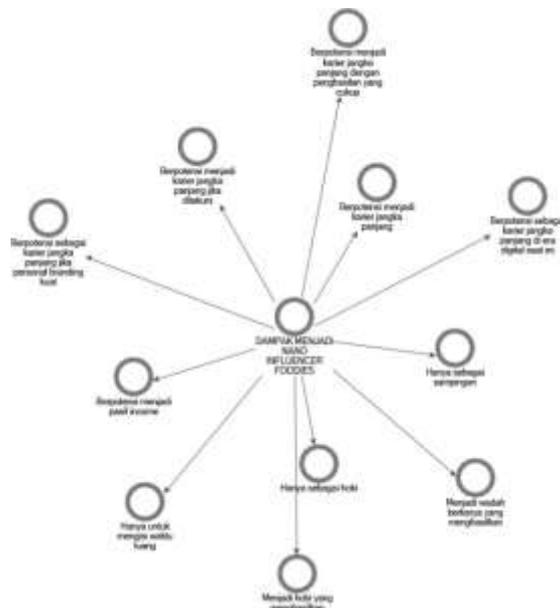


Figure 9. Coding Results: Impact of Becoming a Nano-Influencer Foodie
(Source: Researcher's Processed Results, 2025)

The informant's contribution to each coding comes from the answers provided as data. The results of the study focused on coding The Law of Leadership because this coding is the fifth largest percentage in this unit of analysis. The informant's answers related to the coding of The Law of Leadership were generated by the researcher through word cloud as shown in Figure 10.



Figure 10. Word Cloud The Law of Leadership

(Source: Researcher's Processed Results, 2025)

In Figure 10, it can be seen that the words that often appear in coding The Law of Leadership are influencers, jobs, and side jobs. Specifically, "influencer" signifies individuals who have the ability to influence the audience through the content they produce on social media. With a loyal follower base, they act as a bridge between brands and consumers, transforming traditional marketing into more personalized and interactive. Influencers are not only promoters, but also trendsetters who are able to shape public perception of products and services.

The Law of Goodwill (*Nama Baik*)

The Law of Goodwill coding comes with 28 contributions from 30 key informants in this study. All key informants provide their statements and are supported by supporting informants and experts. The largest coding result in The Law of Goodwill is the Impact of Personal Branding on Collaboration Opportunities with 32 references as shown in Figure 11.

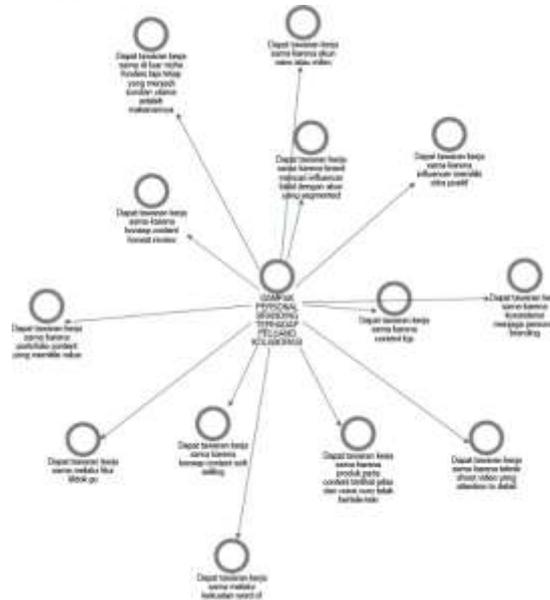


Figure 11. Coding Results of the Impact of Personal Branding on Collaboration Opportunities

(Source: Researcher's Processed Results, 2025)

The informant's contribution to each coding comes from the answers provided as data. The results of the study focused on coding The Law of Goodwill because this coding is the sixth largest percentage in this unit of analysis. The informant's answers related to the coding

of The Law of Goodwill were generated by the researcher through word cloud as shown in Figure 12.



Figure 12. Word Cloud The Law of Goodwill
(Source: Researcher's Processed Results, 2025)

In Figure 12, it can be seen that the words that often appear in The Law of Goodwill coding are collaboration, trust, and followers. Notably, "collaboration" represents the core of the interaction that is built between various parties. Collaboration not only includes working together to achieve common goals, but also creating synergies that drive innovation and growth.

The Law of Distinctiveness

The Law of Distinctiveness coding comes with 21 contributions from 30 key informants in this study. All key informants provide their statements and are supported by supporting informants and experts. The largest coding result in The Law of Distinctiveness is Characteristics as an Influencer with 29 references as shown in Figure 13.

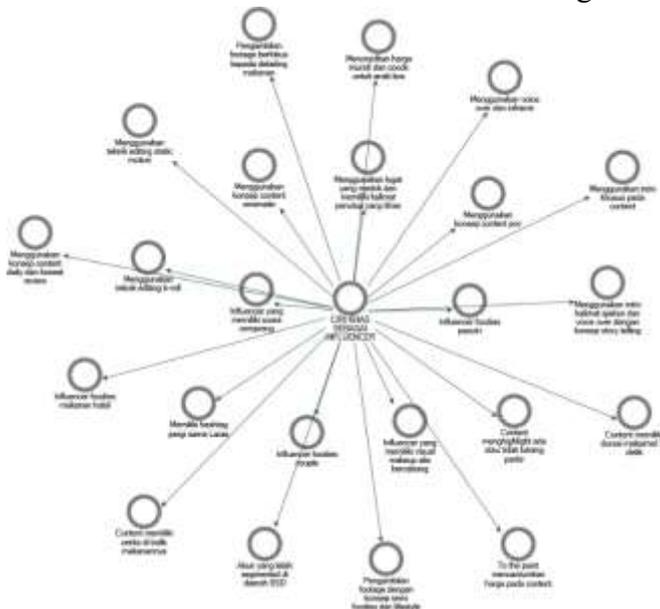


Figure 13. Coding Results: Characteristics as an Influencer
(Source: Researcher's Processed Results, 2025)

The informant's contribution to each coding comes from the answers provided as data. The results of the study focused on coding The Law of Distinctiveness because this coding is

the smallest percentage in this unit of analysis. The informant's answers related to the coding of The Law of Distinctiveness were generated by the researcher through word cloud as shown in Figure 14.



Figure 14. Word Cloud The Law of Distinctiveness
(Source: Researcher's Processed Results, 2025)

In Figure 14, it can be seen that the words that often appear in coding The Law of Distinctiveness are food, differentiation, and content. Notably, "food" underscores the importance of quality and specific content in collaboration between brands and influencers. Focusing on the food on offer creates a strong identity and captivates the audience. By putting food at the heart of the content, influencers can attract more followers and build a strong community, which in turn opens up opportunities for collaborations with food brands.

Identity Construction

Table 2. Identity Construction Coding Reference

<i>Codes</i>	<i>Number of Coding References</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Codes\Identity Construction\Dynamic Identity</i>	141	100%
	141	100%

(Source: Researcher's Processed Results, 2025)

Dynamic Identity

Coding Dynamic Identity comes with 30 contributions from 30 key informants in this study. All key informants provide their statements and are supported by supporting informants and experts. The largest coding result in Dynamic Identity is Communication Style with 60 references as shown in Figure 15.

branding is an inseparable process from online activities in shaping public perception (Labrecque et al., 2011). This consistency has to do not only with the intensity of the upload, but also includes uniformity of visual style, theme, and way of delivering the message to keep the brand image coherent. These findings support the concept of personal branding as a strategic and sustainable effort to stand out in the midst of competition (Shepherd, 2010) and are in line with impression management theory that emphasizes the role of individuals in consciously constructing audience perceptions (Mohammed & Steyn, 2016). By maintaining this consistency, nano-influencer foodies are able to increase credibility and build stronger relationships with their followers.

The Law of Specialization in personal branding emphasizes the importance of focusing on one specific field or niche so that individuals can build clear and prominent skills. The results of the study show that interest and love for the culinary world are the main motivations of nano-influencer foodies in building their personal branding, which is in line with the view that mastery of one specific field is an effective strategy to stand out in the midst of intense competition (Peters, 1999). The focus on niche foodies also makes it easier for influencers to determine their target audience and create content that is relevant and in accordance with the interests of followers, as emphasized in the concept of niche marketing which prioritizes clearly defined market segmentation (Situmorang, 2017). Overall, these findings confirm that specialization underpinned by passion, expertise, and the right strategy plays an important role in building credibility, expanding audience reach, and achieving personal and financial goals on social media.

The Law of Unity in personal branding emphasizes the importance of harmony between the various elements that make up the image of a nano-influencer foodie, such as the harmony between place, food, and brand identity. The results of the analysis showed that the informants consciously maintained a match between the content displayed and their personal branding values to create an authentic experience for the audience, in line with the theory of self-congruity that emphasizes the compatibility between self-identity and perceived perception (Xi et al., 2022). The selection of collaboration brands and visit locations is done selectively to align with the audience's lifestyle and preferences, so that the authenticity of the content is maintained. In addition, efforts to create real and relevant culinary experiences demonstrate an understanding of the importance of brand experiences in building loyalty and a positive image (Wintermantel, 2023). By maintaining this unity, nano-influencer foodies are able to build a cohesive identity, increase audience satisfaction, and increase collaboration opportunities with various brands.

The Law of Leadership in personal branding shows the role of nano-influencers, foodies, as digital opinion leaders who have the ability to influence audience preferences and consumption decisions through their knowledge and experience in the culinary field. This is in line with the view that influencers function as opinion leaders because of their credibility and expertise on certain topics (Ki & Kim, 2019). This research also reveals the existence of flexibility in the influencer profession, where most informants view the activity as a hobby or side job, but still realize its potential as a source of income. These findings are relevant to the concept of adaptive digital leadership, which emphasizes the importance of the role of leadership in facing digital transformation, especially in the creative economy sector (Tulungen

et al., 2022). By developing the right strategy, nano-influencer foodies have the opportunity to strengthen their role as opinion leaders and build sustainable digital careers.

The Law of Goodwill in personal branding shows that a positive and consistent image is the main foundation in building trust and attracting collaborations with various brands. Strong personal branding can increase audience engagement, expand reach, and drive the effectiveness of product promotion on social media (Ananda & Matondang, 2024). This study confirms that trust between influencers and brands is a crucial factor in the success of collaboration, because influencer credibility also influences consumer perception of the brand being promoted (Adrianto & Kurnia, 2021). In the digital context, goodwill is built through authentic interaction, transparency, and the presentation of quality content that is relevant to the audience (Kholik & Budianto, 2021). By choosing a brand that aligns with their personal values, nano-influencer foodies can maintain the trust of the audience while creating a sustainable and mutually beneficial cooperative relationship.

The Law of Distinctiveness in personal branding shows the efforts of nano-influencer foodies to create distinctive traits that differentiate them from other influencers through a unique content strategy. The results show that the use of special intros, voiceovers, food detailing, and cinematic shooting techniques are common strategies to improve the visual appeal and effectiveness of content communication (Hamdi et al., 2025). In addition to the visual aspect, the informants also emphasized the importance of including personal experiences and stories behind the food to build emotional closeness with the audience. This differentiation is key to increasing visibility, audience trust, and attractiveness in the eyes of brands (Anggarani et al., 2024). Overall, these findings confirm that the implementation of a consistent and authentic differentiation strategy allows nano-influencer foodies to build a strong and competitive personal branding in the competitive culinary industry.

Dynamic identity in the identity construction of foodie nano-influencers reflects the flexibility in shaping their image on social media. Adaptive communication styles are key, where influencers tailor messages and deliverables to align with the expectations of the audience and the brand's brief, creating relevant and engaging content. This not only increases consumer engagement, but also builds trust through credibility and authenticity (P. P. Sari, 2023). The use of platforms like TikTok allows them to produce educational and entertaining content, which strengthens the relationship with the audience. Active involvement in the foodie community also contributes to loyalty and advocacy, supporting the formation of a strong dynamic identity. Overall, dynamic identity is the result of a complex interaction between customization and influence, where influencers adapt to meet audience and brand expectations, maintain authenticity, and achieve success in the world of digital marketing.

CONCLUSION

This research aims to understand the phenomenon of nano-influencer foodies among Generation Z and how they build their identity and personal branding strategies in the digital era. Using an in-depth methodological approach, including interviews with key informants and experts, the study managed to identify the dynamics that shape the identities of influencers. The results show that dynamic identities allow them to adapt to audience expectations through relevant and engaging content. Consistency in posting schedules and a cohesive delivery style are proven to be key elements in increasing audience engagement. Additionally, the study

emphasizes the importance of specialization in culinary niches, which helps influencers build credibility, attract loyal audiences, and differentiate themselves from others. Through collaboration with various brands, nano-influencer foodies are able to build strong goodwill, opening up opportunities for cooperation. Although many informants consider this activity a hobby, the potential for sustainable income is increasingly visible. However, they are also faced with challenges in managing audience expectations and changes in social media algorithms, such as TikTok. The adjustments to content strategies made by the informants show their ability to adapt to the ever-changing needs of the digital world. Overall, the study provides valuable insights into the identity and personal branding of nano-influencer foodies, with the emphasis that despite the various challenges, the prospects for success in this career remain considerable.

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