

The Meaning-Making of Analog Cameras in the Digital Era in the Representation of Gen Z Identity

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ABSTRACT: Amidst the hegemony of fast, instant, and algorithmic digital culture, an intriguing phenomenon has emerged among Generation Z: the revival of analog cameras. This study explores the social and symbolic meanings of analog cameras as a medium for identity construction and a form of resistance against the homogenization of digital visual culture. Grounded in Symbolic Interactionism, the research analyzes data from in-depth interviews with members of the analog photography community @huntingfullsenyum in Yogyakarta. Findings reveal that analog cameras transcend their technical function as photographic tools; they serve as symbols of uniqueness, authenticity, and emotional engagement in the creative process. Visual imperfections, such as grain and light leaks, are reinterpreted as aesthetic markers of honesty and rawness, contrasting with the curated perfection of digital imagery. Furthermore, analog cameras facilitate mindful resistance to instant culture, fostering self-reflection and collective social interactions that reinforce communal identity. Thus, Gen Z's use of analog cameras represents a complex sociocultural practice embedding symbolic, emotional, and ideological dimensions in response to contemporary digital realities.

KEYWORDS: Analog Cameras, Generation Z, Social Identity, Symbolic Interactionism, Digital Culture Resistance, Photography Communities.

I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of technology has ostensibly threatened the existence of analog cameras in the digital era, particularly as increasingly sophisticated photographic equipment and camera technologies have significantly facilitated documentation and image production for the general public (Adolph, 2016). However, as Darmawan (2018) observes, the revival of analog photography has been bolstered by the emergence of analog photography communities that foster novel social dynamics while sharing education and information about analog cameras and their peripherals. These communities have played a crucial role in maintaining the relevance of analog photography in the digital age. Over time, technological progress has introduced digital cameras as a more efficient alternative. Digital cameras store image data in pixel (picture element) format, allowing users to instantly view their photographs after capture (Latifah, 2023). Paradoxically, despite the numerous conveniences offered by digital photography, analog cameras have experienced a resurgence in popularity and usage, particularly among younger generations (Adnaneswari et al., 2023). This renewed interest in analog photography during the digital age signifies the existence of a youth demographic that consciously chooses to engage with analog photography, despite living in a context dominated by more efficient and accessible digital photographic technologies (M. A. Prasetyo & Kusumandyoko, 2020).

Contemporary youth, commonly referred to as Generation Z (Gen Z), have grown accustomed to a lifestyle characterized by convenience and immediacy. Turner (2015) identifies instant gratification as a defining characteristic of this demographic, manifested in their preference for obtaining desired outcomes without engaging in complex processes or extended timelines (Latifah, 2023). Gen Z's familiarity with technological advancements that simplify daily life has consequently led to a general lack of acquaintance with earlier analog-based technological devices, including analog cameras (Lefi Febryani, 2021).

Analog photography possesses distinct characteristics and unique qualities absent in digital photography, including its signature color tones and the non-instantaneous process of image development (Dipoetra & Kurniadi, 2020). Paradoxically, these very attributes have garnered significant interest among younger generations. This phenomenon presents a striking contrast: youth accustomed to the convenience and immediacy of digital technologies are increasingly drawn to the more complex and labor-intensive practice of analog photography (Ekayulisa et al., 2023). Amidst the rapid, efficiency-driven digital era, where technology facilitates effortless access and instantaneous visual content creation, an intriguing trend has emerged within Generation Z (Sa'adah et al., 2022). Despite their deep immersion in digital culture and its attendant conveniences, many Gen Z individuals are exhibiting a renewed fascination with "traditional" technologies such as analog cameras (Ekayulisa et al., 2023). This phenomenon warrants

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deeper scholarly examination, as it reveals a counterintuitive preference among digitally native youth for slower, more deliberate technological processes that demand greater attention and engagement (Muhammad Fadillah et al., 2022).

One significant space facilitating this growing interest is the “Hunting Full Senyum” community, a collective that brings together youth passionate about analog processes while fostering mutual support through shared learning and collaborative photo expeditions. Established in January 2023, the community (@huntingfullsenyum) has amassed 2,005 Instagram followers to date. Its tagline, “Walking, Sharing, Flexing, and Inspiring”, encapsulates its ethos of collaborative expression and inspiration. Notably, the community serves as a platform for members, predominantly Gen Z digital natives, to engage in deliberate creative practices through analog cameras. This choice represents a conscious investment in slower, material-based photography, requiring hands-on involvement at every stage: film selection, manual camera settings, and the anticipatory wait for physical prints. Such practices stand in stark contrast to the immediacy of digital workflows, highlighting a generational negotiation between technological inheritance and intentional media use.

This phenomenon presents a fascinating contradiction to Generation Z's characteristic preference for instant gratification and convenience. Research by Pendalu (December 2024) reveals that despite analog cameras being relatively more expensive and limited in variety, many Gen Z individuals perceive ownership of such equipment as conferring a distinct social status. The unique aesthetic qualities of analog photographs provide a form of satisfaction unattainable through digital cameras or instant photo editing applications (Hariwibowo & Putra, 2019). This trend coincides with the rising popularity of analog style filters in digital photography, which simulate vintage aesthetics while maintaining the speed and convenience of digital technology (Latifah, 2023). However, the persistence of authentic analog camera use among Gen Z suggests that the allure extends beyond mere visual style, encompassing the tangible process and cultural capital associated with traditional photographic methods.

Despite widespread adoption of analog cameras among Generation Z, a fundamental tension persists between their generational characteristics, preference for speed, convenience, and instant gratification, and the meticulous, time-intensive processes inherent to analog photography. This contradiction reveals a deeper conflict between Gen Z's ingrained pursuit of immediate satisfaction and the deliberate, prolonged engagement demanded by film-based photography. Notably, social media influencers have successfully promoted analog camera use among their followers, even as this practice seemingly contradicts Gen Z's core values of practicality and efficiency. For a generation constantly exposed to advanced technologies and rapid digital developments, using analog cameras becomes a distinctive mode of identity expression. The extended process and the delayed gratification of viewing results provide space for reflection, conscious interaction with the world, and the creation of works imbued with deeper emotional and aesthetic value.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the meaning-making of analog cameras in the identity representation of Generation Z in the digital age, focusing on how Gen Z utilizes analog photography as a medium for constructing and expressing identity, even though this practice contrasts with their generational tendencies, which typically prioritize the convenience and flexibility of digital technologies. This indicates that, despite being immersed in a digital-dominated environment, there remains a strong desire among some Gen Z individuals to engage in more manual and reflective creative processes. Based on the background outlined, a compelling phenomenon emerges: the revival of analog camera usage among Generation Z, a generation widely recognized for its digital fluency and preference for instant access and convenience. Analog photography, which involves a slower, more hands-on, and patience-demanding process, has surprisingly become an intentional choice for some Gen Z members, despite the overwhelming dominance of digital technologies in their daily lives. This phenomenon raises important questions regarding the symbolic and experiential meanings behind analog photography in shaping identity. Accordingly, the research problem addressed in this study is: How do members of Generation Z interpret the use of analog cameras in the context of social identity construction in the digital era?

II. METHODS

That knowledge is a construct of the subject's thought process and their experience of facts (Wiwitan & Yulianita, 2017). The researcher employs a constructivist paradigm to understand how a tool used in photography, one that had faded in popularity for years, has managed to persist in the digital era, despite posing potential challenges for its users. Instead, enthusiasts continue to favor it, transforming it into a lifestyle device among aficionados. This aligns with Pilarska's (2021) perspective on the constructivist research paradigm, which emphasizes that knowledge arises from dynamic social constructions between individuals and their environment. The researcher adopts a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach, as this allows for an in-depth exploration of Generation Z's subjective experiences in using analog cameras in the digital age. Phenomenology is particularly relevant to this study's objective of uncovering the meanings embedded in analog camera usage, not merely as photographic tools but also as expressions of identity and social symbols. Through phenomenology, the researcher can examine how Gen Z constructs their experiences through direct interaction with analog photography and how these experiences shape their self-perception and social identity within the fast-paced digital landscape. For data analysis, this study applies the method proposed by Miles & Huberman (2014).

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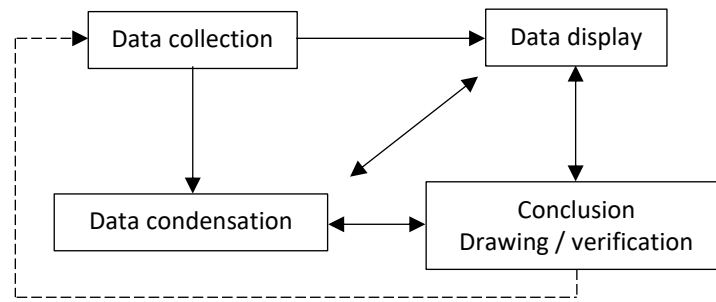


Figure 1.1 Miles and Huberman's Interactive Model of Data Analysis

Source: Sugiyono (2018)

Data validity in qualitative research is a crucial aspect of ensuring the credibility of findings. Triangulation is defined as a data collection technique that cross-verifies existing data (Sugiyono, 2018). In this study, data validation is achieved through source triangulation, which involves gathering data from diverse sources using the same method (Alfansyur & Mariyani, 2020). Specifically, source triangulation here entails integrating data obtained from observations, interviews, and documentation to enhance the robustness and reliability of the findings.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Amidst the dominance of instant, algorithmic digital visual culture, an intriguing phenomenon has emerged among Generation Z: the revival of analog camera use. This practice transcends mere retro trends or aesthetic nostalgia, instead embodying deeper layers of meaning as a form of identity representation and cultural expression. This study aims to uncover how Generation Z ascribes meaning to analog cameras as symbolic media in constructing both personal and collective identity within the rapid currents of digital technology. Through the lens of Symbolic Interactionism, our findings explore how social interactions, symbolic language, and community practices shape the meaning of analog cameras while revealing forms of resistance against digital cultural homogenization. The results demonstrate that analog cameras serve as spaces for articulating values such as authenticity, process awareness, and personal meaning-making - qualities increasingly elusive in contemporary digital photography practices.

Motives and Meanings: Analog Cameras as Symbols of Social Identity in the Digital Age

The use of analog cameras among Generation Z can be understood as more than a mere photographic tool. Based on interviews with members of the analog photography community, analog cameras carry deeper meanings as symbols of individuality, authenticity, and social identity, distinct from the fast-paced and instant nature of digital culture. In this context, the analog camera serves not only as a medium of visual output but as a form of creative expression intrinsically tied to the process itself. For Generation Z, the analog camera represents a deliberate act of resistance to the perfectionism and immediacy associated with digital technologies. It becomes a social identity marker, chosen to differentiate themselves from the dominance of polished, algorithm-driven digital aesthetics. The careful and time-consuming nature of analog photography provides an emotionally resonant experience that adds depth to the images produced.

Many members of the analog photography community, such as Ade Alvian (leader of the @huntingfullsenyum community), have expressed that the appeal of analog cameras lies in their uniqueness and the influence of public figures they admire. These cameras become tools of self-expression that allow users to project a more authentic identity, in contrast to the curated perfection often seen on social media. For example, Aulia (22) shared that she feels a stronger emotional connection to analog photographs due to the slower, more intentional process. Meanwhile, Andra (21) noted that the imperfections in analog photos reveal a truer, more genuine version of herself.

The aesthetic qualities of analog photography, such as the grainy texture and light leaks, are often perceived as possessing a deeper artistic value. Many users, including Jihaan Nadhiya and Andri, appreciate these imperfections as integral to the beauty that distinguishes their work from digitally produced images, which are often overly regulated by technological precision. Analog cameras, with all their unpredictability, offer a space for artistic exploration and provide a more personal and immersive creative experience. Within a digital culture saturated by instant gratification and filtered perfection, analog photography becomes a symbol of authenticity. For individuals like Jihaan Nadhiya, the extended process of shooting and developing film imbues the final image with stronger emotional resonance, rendering it more honest and original. Moreover, Generation Z perceives analog photography as a form of resistance to the accelerated and homogenized culture of digital media. As Iar Aemid Pratama emphasized, despite living in an environment dominated by instant digital technologies, they consciously choose to engage with a slower, more meaningful creative process. This choice represents not only a rejection of digital conformity but also an affirmation of intentionality, reflection, and individuality in self-expression.

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Figure 1.2 Activities of the Hunting Full Senyum Community

Source: Instagram's Screenshot (2025)

This form of resistance does not signify a rejection of technology per se, but rather a deliberate choice to decelerate the pace of life and imbue the creative process with deeper meaning. The use of analog cameras fosters patience, attentiveness, and intentionality, reinforcing the identity of Generation Z as a cohort that prioritizes quality, depth, and personal experience over instant, standardized outcomes. In this sense, analog photography is not merely a fleeting trend, but a culturally relevant symbol for a generation seeking meaning amid the visual noise of the digital age. It becomes a medium through which they construct a more authentic identity and articulate a desire to slow down, reflect, and assign significance to each moment of their lives.

No.	Theme	Subtheme / Category	Key Findings / Interview Excerpts	Social Meaning / Symbolic Interactionism Interpretation
1	Analog Camera as Identity Marker	Expression of Uniqueness and Authenticity	Analog cameras are chosen for their distinctiveness and divergence from digital norms	Identity is constructed through symbolic differentiation from mainstream digital culture.
2	Process Over Outcome	Emotional Value and Engagement with Process	Photos developed through longer processes carry stronger emotional narratives and personal bonds	Symbol of meaningful engagement and depth through creative practice.
3	Aesthetic of Analog	Imperfection as Beauty	Blur, grain, and unpredictability are perceived as aesthetically pleasing and original.	A visual language symbolizing collective identity and authenticity.
4	Resistance to Instant Culture	Mindful Resistance & Slow Living	Gen Z intentionally slows down life's pace through analog practices.	Symbolic resistance to the dominance of instant gratification and digital visual homogenization.
5	Camera as Medium for Social Reflection	Communal Process and Shared Meaning-Making	Communities like @huntingfullsenyum serve as spaces to share meanings and symbols collectively.	Social interactions shape and reinforce the symbolic role of analog cameras in identity formation.

Based on interviews with members of the analog photography community (@huntingfullsenyum), it was found that analog cameras are perceived not merely as technical instruments for image-making, but as symbolic representations of uniqueness, authenticity, and resistance to the fast-paced, algorithm-driven digital culture. The analog camera serves as a medium for self-expression that emphasizes the process over the final outcome. The slower, imperfect, and non-instant photographic process provides Generation Z with a reflective space to construct a more honest, personal, and introspective self-narrative. Visual elements such as grainy textures,

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light leaks, and blurs are reinterpreted as aesthetic markers of sincerity, reinforcing their social identity. Furthermore, the analog camera functions as a social symbol within the community, fostering emotional attachment, patience, and a deep appreciation for creative processes. This phenomenon illustrates a form of mindful resistance against the dominance of social media algorithms and standardized visual culture.

Analyzing the Analog Camera as a Symbol of Generation Z's Identity and Resistance to Digital Culture

The use of analog cameras by Generation Z can be more deeply understood through the lens of Symbolic Interactionism, a theoretical framework developed by George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer. This theory emphasizes that meaning is not inherently attached to objects but is constructed dynamically through social, symbolic, and reflective interactions. In this context, the analog camera is no longer seen merely as a technological tool for visual capture but as a symbol imbued with cultural, emotional, and social significance for its users.

For Generation Z, analog cameras represent aesthetic values such as authenticity, patience, and emotional involvement. In communities like @huntingfullsenyum (HFS), analog photography becomes a medium for identity expression and social connection through various collective practices. Visual imperfections, such as grainy looks, light leaks, and unpredictable outcomes, are embraced as symbols of authenticity and self-expression. This aligns with Blumer's (1969) assertion that meaning emerges from continuous social interaction. Activities within the HFS community, such as sharing photo results, participating in photo hunts, and organizing workshops, create a social space where the meaning of analog photography is co-constructed. Values like patience in waiting for film development and active engagement in the manual shooting process are integral to the experience and are collectively understood as meaningful.

Furthermore, the technical language used in the community, terms like grainy look, manual focus, and expired film, serves not only to describe photographic techniques but also to construct a shared identity and sense of belonging among members. This language functions as a cultural symbol that reflects the philosophy and aesthetic values embraced by the community. Similar findings were presented by Jermias and Rahman (2020) in their research on the Cinema Appreciator Makassar community, where specific terminology helped shape a shared identity and strengthen social bonds among members. The same phenomenon is evident in analog photography communities, where technical language becomes a tool for experience-sharing and community cohesion.

The use of analog cameras demands a more reflective thought process, where users are more engaged in every stage of capturing an image, from selecting the film to developing the photo. This contrasts with digital photography, which tends to be more instant. Analog cameras encourage users to savor each step as a deeper creative experience. This aligns with the principle of "mind" in symbolic interactionism, where individuals respond to the world not automatically, but through interpretation and personal meaning. The thought process involved in using an analog camera reveals a contemplative practice that strengthens the personal connection to the work. From another perspective, this also intersects with John Dewey's aesthetic theory, which views art as an experience, rather than just an object. Analog cameras, with their lengthy process, become a medium for creating this experience. The use of analog cameras requires a more reflective and profound thought process. Andrian Wikayanto and Yurif Setya Darmawan (2018) noted that analog camera users tend to enjoy the process of shooting and value every step, from choosing the film to printing the photo. This indicates that analog photography invites users to be more mindful and engaged in the creative process, unlike digital photography, which tends to be more instantaneous.

Analog cameras provide space for individuals to interact with themselves and the world around them, strengthening the personal connection with the objects being photographed and the creative process. This interaction also enriches self-awareness and personal reflection. Within the analog photography community, members are encouraged to pay closer attention to the details of their surroundings and engage in a deeper creative process. Research by Emanuel Omedetho Jermias and Abdul Rahman (2020) shows that film communities in Makassar serve as spaces for individuals to share experiences and learn together, which in turn enriches social interactions and self-development. Similarly, the analog photography community offers a platform for its members to share perspectives and enrich personal experiences through social interaction.

In this community, the analog camera becomes a collective symbol representing social identity and values such as authenticity and appreciation for the creative process. Through shared activities like photo hunting and exhibitions, members reinforce a collective meaning that emphasizes aesthetic values and embraces imperfection. These findings align with previous research by Kozinets (2010) in the context of online communities, which argues that communities generate collective meaning through recurring and reinforcing symbolic practices. The analog camera functions as a symbol that strengthens this shared meaning within the community. Andrian Wikayanto and Yurif Setya Darmawan (2018) observed that analog photography communities in Indonesia use instant cameras as tools to share moments and build a collective identity. This supports the notion that objects like analog cameras hold not only individual meaning but also collective significance shaped through social interactions and shared experiences within the community.

Overall, the use of analog cameras by Generation Z goes beyond technical aspects, encompassing social and emotional dimensions formed through community interaction, symbolic language, and reflective experiences. The analog camera serves as a symbol that reinforces social identity and an alternative culture that values authenticity and emotional engagement. The motives and meanings

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behind analog camera usage among Generation Z are not purely individual or technical, but are socially constructed through interaction, symbolic language, and deep reflection within community practices. The analog camera represents alternative values such as authenticity, emotional involvement, and appreciation of process. Communities like HFS play a central role in reinforcing these meanings, providing a social space where the visual and cultural identities of this generation are formed and expressed. Thus, the use of analog cameras by Generation Z can be understood as a complex social phenomenon, where the object functions as a symbol carrying profound meaning through social interaction, symbolic language, reflective thinking, and the formation of collective identity within analog photography communities.

Although analog cameras may appear outdated amidst rapid digital advancements, they have evolved into symbols of resistance against the fast-paced, instant gratification culture of the digital age. Generation Z, who have grown up immersed in digital environments, are now seeking ways to return to slower, more authentic processes, where analog photography serves as a medium to express aesthetic values, patience, and authenticity. This "analog revival" reflects a growing desire to appreciate the creative process and engage in deeper experiences that contrast sharply with a digital culture focused on efficiency and immediate results. In this context, the analog camera functions not merely as a tool for taking photos but as a symbol of defiance against consumerism and the dominance of instant visual culture in the digital world. Research by Rayya et al., (2023) confirms that while Generation Z is highly dependent on digital technology, they also exhibit a longing to reconnect with more traditional and authentic tools and values. Rayya highlights that Gen Z is not solely interested in producing artistic works, but also in immersing themselves in a more meaningful and authentic creative process. In other words, despite growing up in the digital era, they seek spaces where self-expression can be more tangible and real.

Analog cameras help address this need by offering a slower, more reflective process that allows individuals to re-experience the act of creation. Furthermore, Sulistyaningtyas et al. (2012) suggest that in the face of a consumerist system driven by digital technology, individuals who turn to analog tools are often attempting to reclaim a more personal and authentic sense of aesthetic and artistry. This finding resonates with the researcher's observations within the @huntingfullsenyum community, where analog photography is seen as a form of resistance to the fast-paced, consumption-oriented culture. This study extends previous research by not only acknowledging the Gen Z desire for authenticity, as noted by Pilarczyk, but also exploring how the symbolism of analog cameras functions as an act of resistance against digital culture's emphasis on speed and results. Socially, this resistance can also be interpreted as a pushback against a consumerist system propelled by digital technology.

Communities such as @huntingfullsenyum in Yogyakarta play a crucial role in shaping and reinforcing the social identities of their members. This community offers a space for individuals to express their values, embrace slower creative processes, and share more authentic experiences. Arindita et al., (2021) highlight that interest-based communities provide essential social support in the formation of collective identities, an idea highly relevant to the @huntingfullsenyum community, where members receive not only technical guidance but also emotional support in their creative journeys. Their engagement in this community fosters a sense of togetherness and solidarity that is increasingly rare in today's fast-paced, superficial digital world. Importantly, the externalization of identity in such communities occurs not only at the individual level but also through the strengthening of a collective identity. As explained by Adnaneswari et al., (2023), interest-based communities, such as analog photography groups, shape and reinforce social identities through shared experiences grounded in technical knowledge and aesthetic values. Within @huntingfullsenyum, this collective identity is expressed through activities like discussions, workshops, and photowalks, which unite members in their pursuit of a deeper, shared sense of self.

Here, the analog camera becomes a symbol of resistance against the dominance of digital culture, where members value reflective processes over instant results. The community also reinforces collective identity through deeper social interaction, fostering a sense of connection that is often lacking in the rapid pace of digital life. By engaging with analog photography, community members not only exchange technical knowledge but also explore aesthetic values on a deeper level, strengthening their social bonds and enriching their creative processes. In sum, the use of analog cameras among Generation Z represents more than just a technical choice, it is a form of identity assertion that rejects the instant, result-driven nature of digital culture. Interest-based communities like @huntingfullsenyum offer an alternative space for individuals to respond to their dependence on technology and social media, cultivating more authentic experiences and emotional connections among members.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the use of analog cameras among Generation Z is more than just an aesthetic trend or a wave of nostalgia. Through the lens of Symbolic Interactionism, the research finds that analog cameras function as powerful symbols imbued with deep social, emotional, and cultural meanings, particularly as a form of resistance to the fast-paced and instant nature of digital culture. The analog camera is not merely a tool for producing images; it serves as a medium for expressing values such as authenticity, patience, and emotional engagement throughout every stage of the creative process. The use of analog photography by Generation Z carries strong social dimensions, particularly within communities such as @huntingfullsenyum. Within these groups, social interactions, the sharing of experiences, and the formation of symbolic language strengthen the collective identity of members. Visual imperfections commonly found in analog photography, such as graininess or light leaks, are embraced as symbols of

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authenticity and personal identity, standing in contrast to the perfectionist visual standards that dominate digital culture. These imperfections signify a deeper resistance to digital uniformity and consumerism.

By embracing a slower, more involved process, analog photography offers Generation Z a space to seek deeper meaning, decelerate their pace of life, and revive more reflective aesthetic values. This suggests that although they have grown up in the digital age, many Gen Z individuals still place value on authentic creative experiences, with the analog camera emerging as a symbol of resistance to consumerist and homogenized digital visual culture. Overall, this research demonstrates that the resurgence of analog photography among Generation Z is not simply about photographic technique, it is a deeper quest for social and cultural identity. Communities like @huntingfullsenyum play a vital role in shaping this collective identity, offering a space for individuals to immerse themselves in meaningful and authentic creative experiences. The “analog revival” phenomenon highlights Gen Z’s desire to balance their digital engagement with a renewed appreciation for slower, more intentional, and reflective creative processes.

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