



Love Bombing Communication Style on Instagram among Generation Z in Medan City

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ABSTRACT

This study examines love bombing communication styles on Instagram among Generation Z in Medan City. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, documentation, and source triangulation involving five Generation Z informants who had experienced love bombing in romantic relationships. The findings show that perpetrators do not employ a single communication style, but strategically shift among the Dynamic Style, Equalitarian Style, Controlling Style, and Withdrawal Style. Instagram features such as direct messages, stories, likes, replies, and blocking facilitate rapid intimacy, emotional validation, surveillance, and communication withdrawal among young users. The love bombing process develops through three stages: idealization, devaluation, and discarding, followed in several cases by hoovering through repeated digital contact in online spaces. The study concludes that love bombing is not merely excessive romantic attention, but a manipulative form of digital interpersonal communication that transforms affection into emotional control and weakens victims' relational boundaries.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of love bombing on Instagram has become an important issue in digital communication because Generation Z's romantic relationships are no longer built entirely through face-to-face interaction, but are increasingly mediated by visual features, direct messages, story replies, likes, and public validation on social media. Instagram occupies a strategic position in this context because the number of Instagram users in Indonesia reached 103 million in early 2025, with advertising reach equivalent to 36.3% of the total population and 48.7% of the local internet user base during that period (Khotimah et al., 2026; Suhendar et al., 2023). By the end of 2025, Instagram's reach in Indonesia had increased to 108 million users, making the platform increasingly relevant as a space for social and romantic interaction among young people (Kholil et al., 2024; Maryufani, 2022). Previous research has also shown that Instagram is one of the main platforms used by Generation Z for self-disclosure because social media enables users to build intimacy, manage identity, and share personal information within a digital environment (Rustandi et al., 2024). In the context of this thesis, the main problem arises when the intensity of attention, compliments, rapid responses, and digital intimacy that appear romantic are instead used by perpetrators to create emotional dependence among victims of love bombing in Medan City. Therefore, the reality of communication on Instagram cannot be understood merely as a practice of message exchange, but also as a potential space for emotional manipulation that operates through a communication style that appears intimate, fast, and convincing.

Theoretically, the study of love bombing still leaves room for further exploration because most previous studies have focused more on psychological impacts, relational violence, or toxic relationship behavior, while the mechanisms of perpetrators' communication styles on specific platforms have not been explained in detail. The study by Duman and Nazari shows that love bombing experiences have a negative relationship with self-efficacy in romantic relationships and are associated with ghosting experiences, indicating that love bombing can be understood as a relational pattern that affects individuals' confidence in building relationships (Duman & Nazari, 2024). The study by Biolcati, Pupi, and Mancini also demonstrates that cyber dating abuse and ghosting are interrelated, particularly when technology is used for control, monitoring, direct aggression, and the sudden termination of communication in romantic relationships (Biolcati et al., 2021). Azzahra and Rahmawati further emphasize that love bombing can function as psychological violence that affects victims' interpersonal communication through emotional manipulation, control, dependency, and decreased self-confidence (Annisya & Rahmawati, 2025). However, social penetration theory, which is commonly used to explain relationship development through gradual self-disclosure, has not fully addressed how self-disclosure accelerated by Instagram can be exploited by perpetrators to construct an illusion of intimacy before a relationship reaches stability. This gap makes research on love bombing communication styles on Instagram among Generation Z in Medan City relevant to be developed.

This study aims to analyze the communication styles and communication stages of love bombing perpetrators on Instagram among Generation Z in Medan City, particularly in understanding how digital messages that initially appear romantic can turn into instruments of emotional control. This objective is derived from the research focus of the thesis, which positions love bombing as a phenomenon of digital communication in the romantic relationships of adolescents in Medan City, with the object of study being love bombing communication styles and their communication stages on Instagram. More specifically, this study seeks to identify how perpetrators use The Dynamic Style, The Equalitarian Style, Controlling Style, and The Withdrawal Style in forming, maintaining, controlling, or terminating relationships with victims. This study also aims to explain how the stages of idealization, devaluation, and discarding occur in victims' experiences, including when perpetrators attempt to elicit responses again through repeated communication patterns such as hoovering on Instagram. This objective has scientific urgency because love bombing is not only related to the intensity of communication, but also to how messages, timing, medium, and shifts in communication style are used to create emotional ambiguity. Thus, this study seeks to provide a more communicative, contextual, and victim-experience-based explanation of how romantic manipulation operates within Generation Z's digital space.

The main argument of this study is that love bombing on Instagram should be understood as a manipulative communication style that operates gradually through a combination of message intensity, emotional validation, relational control, and communication withdrawal. This argument is strengthened by the preliminary findings of the thesis, which show that five Generation Z informants in Medan City experienced harm due to love bombing on Instagram and encountered communication patterns involving idealization, devaluation, discarding, and repeated communication through Instagram features such as Direct Messages, Instagram Stories, and likes on old posts. Academically, this phenomenon is important because research on digital communication shows that self-disclosure on social media can strengthen interpersonal intimacy, but it can also create risks when personal information is used within unequal relationships (Choi & Toma, 2026; Dalimunthe, 2022). Findings on cyber dating abuse also indicate that technology can be used for control, monitoring, communication termination, and psychological aggression in romantic relationships (Biolcati et al., 2021; Sikumbang et al., 2024). Therefore, this study is important because it can expand the study of digital interpersonal communication from merely discussing intimacy and self-disclosure toward a critical analysis of how digital affection can be constructed as a tool of domination. This study is also expected to provide practical contributions to Generation Z's digital relationship literacy so that they can recognize the boundary between healthy romantic attention and harmful manipulative communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Love bombing can be understood as a manipulative communication pattern in romantic relationships characterized by excessive attention,

compliments, affection, and communication intensity during the early phase of intimacy (Duman & Nazari, 2024; Ritonga et al., 2023). This concept does not merely refer to intense expressions of love, but to actions directed at accelerating the victim's emotional attachment before the relationship develops in a healthy and gradual manner (Annisya & Rahmawati, 2025; Rambe et al., 2023). In the context of digital relationships, love bombing operates through messages that appear supportive, romantic, and empathetic, while behind them lies a tendency to create dependency and weaken the victim's personal boundaries (Syam et al., 2024; Wulan et al., 2026). Love bombing is also associated with a decline in individuals' confidence in romantic relationships because victims often experience confusion between sincere attention and control wrapped in affective language (Duman & Nazari, 2024). Among young people, this practice becomes increasingly complex because social media enables message intensity to occur rapidly, repeatedly, and in ways that are difficult to distinguish from common romantic expressions in digital relationships (Dalimunthe et al., 2023). Thus, love bombing in this study is positioned as a concept of manipulative communication that places digital affection as an entry point for emotional control.

The manifestation of love bombing can be categorized through communication patterns that move from idealization, dependency, and control to the sudden termination or withdrawal of the relationship (Winstone, 2025). At the idealization stage, perpetrators use compliments, intense attention, romantic promises, and rapid responses to create the impression that the victim is highly valued and emotionally understood (Annisya & Rahmawati, 2025). In the next stage, this pattern may shift into control when perpetrators begin to regulate the victim's responses, activities, social relationships, or decisions through emotional pressure that does not always appear as direct violence (Biolcati et al., 2021). Another manifestation appears in ghosting, or the sudden termination of communication, which causes victims to lose relational certainty after previously receiving excessive validation (Duman & Nazari, 2024). In some cases, perpetrators may also engage in repeated communication to draw the victim's attention back after the relationship has weakened, thereby keeping the victim within an unstable emotional cycle (Khan & Akram, 2025; Kurniawati et al., 2025). Therefore, the manifestation of love bombing does not stand as a single act, but rather as a series of communicative actions that shape, dominate, destabilize, and maintain control over the victim.

Communication style refers to an individual's distinctive way of conveying messages, displaying intentions, building relationships, and managing the communicant's responses within a social interaction (Saraan et al., 2024). In interpersonal communication, communication style is not only related to message content, but also includes delivery patterns, language choices, intensity, communication direction, and the power position between communicator and communicant (Roongruangsee et al., 2022). In Generation Z's digital relationships, communication style is increasingly influenced by message rhythm, interaction consistency, response speed, and the alignment between online self-image and offline behavior (Roongruangsee et al., 2022). Communication style can also indicate whether a relationship is dialogical, open,

dominant, passive, or manipulative, particularly when messages are not only intended to convey meaning but also to influence the recipient's emotional state (Troussas et al., 2025). In the context of digital romantic relationships, communication style becomes important because victims often assess the sincerity of a relationship through message frequency, affective tone, and the attention given by perpetrators through social media (Annisya & Rahmawati, 2025). Thus, communication style in this study is understood as a pattern of message delivery that reveals how perpetrators build intimacy, regulate relationships, and influence victims' emotional experiences.

The categorization of communication styles in this study is based on the classification of communication styles that includes the controlling style, equalitarian style, structuring style, dynamic style, relinquishing style, and withdrawal style (Cherfan & Allen, 2022). In the context of love bombing, the dynamic style appears when perpetrators encourage fast, intense, and action-oriented communication, making victims feel that the relationship is progressing rapidly within a short period of time (Walsh, 2026). The equalitarian style may emerge through an impression of equality, openness, and two-way intimacy, which makes victims feel heard, valued, and personally understood (Rozanova-Smith et al., 2025). The controlling style is evident when perpetrators begin to restrict, regulate, or pressure victims through dominant messages, demands for responses, activity monitoring, or the creation of guilt (Biolcati et al., 2021). The withdrawal style appears through the weakening of communication, withdrawal, ignoring messages, or termination of interaction, which causes victims to experience emotional uncertainty after previously receiving excessive attention (Duman & Nazari, 2024). In love bombing relationships, these four styles may operate tactically because perpetrators do not always appear dominant from the beginning, but may shift from being warm, equal, and controlling to withdrawing according to their manipulative needs.

Instagram can be defined as a visually centered social media platform that enables users to construct identity, share experiences, interact, and maintain social relationships through features such as photos, videos, stories, comments, likes, and direct messages (Suhendar et al., 2024). As a visual platform, Instagram is not only a space for content dissemination, but also a space for self-representation because users can manage their image, select audiences, and regulate how they are perceived by others. For Generation Z, Instagram has a strong interpersonal function because self-disclosure can be carried out selectively through posts, close friends, second accounts, or direct messages, which provide a sense of safety in sharing personal information (Suhendar et al., 2023). Studies on social media also show that platform affordances such as visibility, persistence, connectivity, and response features can shape how users evaluate relationships and express intimacy. In digital romantic relationships, Instagram becomes a space that enables affection to be displayed both privately and publicly, so that attention can be perceived as interpersonal and social recognition. Therefore, Instagram in this study is positioned as a communication medium that shapes how Generation Z interprets intimacy, validation, and personal boundaries in digital relationships.

The manifestation of Instagram in the phenomenon of love bombing can be seen through the use of features that enable perpetrators to create intensity, intimacy, surveillance, and emotional ambiguity simultaneously (Burrell, 2026). The direct message feature facilitates private communication that allows perpetrators to continuously send attention, compliments, promises, or personal questions without being visible to other audiences. Story, reaction, and reply features allow perpetrators to demonstrate a quick and consistent digital presence, leading victims to interpret these responses as a form of special attention. Likes, comments, tagging, and public posts can strengthen the impression of social validation because the relationship appears to be acknowledged before a digital friendship network. At the same time, these features can also be used to monitor the victim's activities, read changes in online behavior, or elicit responses again after communication has weakened (Biolcati et al., 2021). In this context, Instagram is not merely the background in which love bombing occurs, but a communication infrastructure that enables affective manipulation to take place rapidly, visually, privately, publicly, and repeatedly.

METHODOLOGY

The object of this study is the phenomenon of love bombing in digital communication that occurs in Generation Z's romantic relationships in Medan City through Instagram. This phenomenon was selected because love bombing does not only emerge as a psychological experience of victims, but also as an interpersonal communication practice that takes place through messages, responses, signs of attention, and visual interactions within social media spaces. In communication studies, an object of this kind is relevant to be approached qualitatively because qualitative research is used to understand experiences, perceptions, behaviors, and social meanings that cannot be reduced merely to numerical measurements (Pilcher & Cortazzi, 2024). The main focus of this study is directed at two aspects, namely the communication styles of love bombing perpetrators on Instagram and the communication stages experienced by victims in digital relationships. Love bombing is positioned as a relational practice involving the intensity of affection, the creation of attachment, the possibility of emotional control, and communication withdrawal that may be related to ghosting in romantic relationships (Duman & Nazari, 2024). Thus, the object of this study is not only the victims' experiences, but also message patterns, shifts in communication styles, and relationship dynamics formed through Instagram features.

This study employs a qualitative research type with a descriptive orientation, because its main purpose is to describe and deeply understand the communication styles and communication stages of love bombing perpetrators based on informants' experiences. A descriptive qualitative design is commonly used when researchers seek to present accounts that remain close to participants' experiences, particularly to answer questions about who, what, how, and in what context a phenomenon occurs (Creswell, 2021). The primary data in this study were obtained from in-depth interviews and observations of informants' experiences of love bombing on Instagram. These primary data serve as the center of analysis because victims provide direct narratives regarding changes in

messages, the intensity of attention, forms of control, communication withdrawal, and the relational impacts they experienced. Secondary data were obtained through documentation and literature study, which were used to strengthen the conceptual understanding of love bombing, digital communication, communication styles, and self-disclosure. This distinction between primary and secondary data is important so that the analysis does not rely solely on empirical experience, but is also connected to academic literature that explains the phenomenon of digital interpersonal communication.

The sources of information in this study consist of five main informants from Generation Z who reside in Medan City and have experience as victims of love bombing through Instagram. The informants were selected purposively because qualitative research does not position informants as statistical representations of a population, but as rich, relevant, and purposefully selected sources of information in accordance with the objectives of the study. The criteria for informants include adolescents or young adults within the Generation Z category, active Instagram users, individuals with a high intensity of digital interaction, individuals who are aware of or recognize their experience as victims of love bombing, residents of Medan City, and individuals who have shared personal information in digital relationships. The main informants in this study are anonymized using the initials MNS, KKJ, NAK, AKL, and NYJ to protect participants' privacy, safety, and comfort. In addition to the main informants, this study also involves a triangulation source from an academic in the field of communication studies to strengthen the interpretation of victims' data. With this composition, the research data sources are directed at capturing victims' empirical experiences while also obtaining conceptual confirmation from the perspective of communication studies.

The research process was carried out through several stages, beginning with proposal preparation, determination of the research focus, identification of informant criteria, field data collection, data verification, and formulation of findings. Data collection techniques included non-participant observation, documentation, literature study, and in-depth interviews. Non-participant observation was used so that the researcher could maintain analytical distance from the love bombing experiences being examined, allowing the observation to focus on information provided by the victims without the researcher being involved in the relational events. In-depth interviews became the main technique because this method enables researchers to obtain detailed narratives regarding informants' perceptions, experiences, behaviors, and meanings constructed from the events they experienced. During the interview process, the researcher used an interview guide while still allowing room for follow-up questions to develop according to the flow of each informant's story. Documentation and literature study were used to trace supporting materials, strengthen the context of the phenomenon, and compare field findings with relevant concepts. These stages enabled the data collection process to proceed flexibly, ethically, and remain directed toward the focus of the study.

The data analysis technique in this study was carried out through three main stages, namely data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing.

Data condensation was conducted by selecting, focusing, simplifying, grouping, and transforming raw data from interviews, observations, and documentation into categories aligned with the research focus. In qualitative research, data analysis requires a reflective process to systematically understand patterns, meanings, relationships between categories, and the depth of participants' experiences. After the data were condensed, data display was carried out in the form of thematic narratives that organized informants' experiences based on the perpetrators' communication styles and the communication stages of love bombing. Data display helped the researcher identify the relationship between perpetrators' actions, victims' responses, changes in communication intensity, and emotional consequences that emerged in digital relationships. The conclusion-drawing stage was conducted by rereading the patterns of findings, comparing data across informants, checking the consistency of categories, and linking them with the results of source triangulation. Through this technique, the analysis does not stop at describing victims' experiences, but moves toward a scientific interpretation of how love bombing operates as a manipulative communication style on Instagram.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Characteristics of Informants and the Digital Context of Love Bombing Experiences

The findings of this study indicate that the experience of love bombing among Generation Z in Medan City does not occur within a uniform social space, but emerges among informants with different ages, social statuses, and levels of social media use. The five main informants were between 17 and 26 years old, consisting of two high school students, two university students, and one teacher, all of whom resided in Medan City. This diversity shows that love bombing is not only experienced by school-age adolescents but also by young adults who have entered the workforce. Although their social statuses differed, all informants shared a close relationship with Instagram as a space for communication, entertainment, and interpersonal relationship formation. Their social media usage duration, ranging from two to six hours per day, indicates that Instagram is one of the important media in their daily lives. Therefore, the love bombing experiences they encountered cannot be separated from Instagram's character as a communication space that enables romantic messages, attention, surveillance, and withdrawal to occur rapidly.

Table 1. Profile of Key Research Informants

No	Informant's Initials	Age	Domicile	Status	Duration of Social Media Use
1	MNS	26	Medan Denai	Mahasiswa	2-3 Jam
2	KKJ	20	Medan Timur	Mahasiswa	2-4 Jam
3	NAK	18	Medan Amplas	Pelajar	4-5 Jam

4	AKL	17	Medan Denai	Pelajar	4-6 Jam
5	NYJ	26	Medan Sunggal	Guru	2-3 Jam

Based on Table 1, love bombing in this study can be understood as existing at the intersection of romantic experience, digital culture, and the emotional vulnerability of young people. Student informants such as NAK and AKL used Instagram for longer durations than MNS and NYJ, making them more frequently exposed to interactive features such as stories, reels, likes, comments, and direct messages. Meanwhile, informants who were university students and a teacher experienced love bombing in more complex contexts because they had to balance academic or professional life with personal relationship dynamics. This is evident in NYJ's experience of love bombing in a long-distance relationship with religious nuances and marriage-oriented promises, while MNS experienced it in a short courtship process that moved very quickly from Instagram interaction to claims of serious commitment. Thus, the characteristics of the informants show that Instagram is not merely a technical medium, but a social space where perpetrators can adjust communication strategies according to the victim's age, status, relational experience, and emotional needs.

Communication Styles of Love Bombing Perpetrators on Instagram

The findings show that love bombing perpetrators did not use a single fixed communication style, but combined several communication styles tactically according to the phase of the relationship and the victim's response. Four communication styles appeared in the informants' experiences: The Dynamic Style, The Equalitarian Style, The Controlling Style, and The Withdrawal Style. The Dynamic Style appeared when perpetrators moved quickly by flooding victims with messages, calls, compliments, invitations to meet, or future-oriented promises. The Equalitarian Style emerged when perpetrators presented themselves as equal, understanding, value-aligned, and emotionally safe listeners. The Controlling Style was seen when attention turned into demands, surveillance, interrogation, unilateral rules, and restrictions on the victim's social relations. The Withdrawal Style appeared when perpetrators reduced communication, disappeared, ghosted, blocked accounts, or placed victims in emotional uncertainty. This shift in communication style is the core of love bombing manipulation because early affection does not stand alone, but becomes an entry point toward control.

Table 2. Matrix of Love Bombing Perpetrators' Communication Styles Based on Informants' Experiences

Informant	Dominant Communication Style	Manifestation on Instagram/Digital Relationship	Impact on Informant
MNS	Dynamic Style and Controlling Style	Reacting to stories, liking feeds, intensive DMs, quick	Feeling uncomfortable, pressured, and rejecting

		compliments, uploading screenshots of chats, prohibiting replies to other men's messages	premature commitment
KKJ	Equalitarian Style, Dynamic Style, Controlling Style	Mirroring hobbies, praising family background, intensive chatting, daily attention, forced pick-up attempts	Initially emotionally moved, later realizing the relationship was manipulative
NAK	Dynamic Style, Equalitarian Style, Controlling Style	Asking for Instagram under the pretext of school matters, physical compliments, story replies, morning greetings, rules for quick replies	Feeling cared for, then uncomfortable and disappointed
AKL	Dynamic Style, Equalitarian Style, Controlling Style	Liking photos, replying to highlight stories, quick flirtation, early loyalty promises, motorcycle flexing, demands for quick responses	Becoming suspicious, keeping distance, and cutting communication
NYJ	Equalitarian Style, Controlling Style, Withdrawal Style	Religious greetings, Qur'anic voice notes, marriage promises, video calls with family, reduced communication, account blocking	Feeling emotionally carried away, hurt, then realizing the manipulation

The Dynamic Style was most strongly visible in the experiences of MNS, NAK, and AKL because the perpetrators in these three cases accelerated intimacy from the beginning of Instagram interaction. MNS stated that the perpetrator started by reacting to and liking her stories, then within less than three days began giving compliments, reminding her to eat, reminding her to rest, and even publicly posting screenshots of their conversation on Instagram Story. This pattern shows that the perpetrator used a rapid communication tempo to make the victim feel prioritized before she had the opportunity to evaluate the sincerity of the relationship. In NAK's case, the perpetrator started the relationship through school-related reasons, but soon shifted formal communication into intense and familiar Instagram interaction. In AKL's case, the perpetrator used photo likes and highlight story replies as an entry point to create instant closeness. These three cases indicate that The Dynamic Style works as a relational accelerator, pushing victims into emotional intimacy before a healthy understanding of the perpetrator's character can be formed.

The Equalitarian Style appeared when perpetrators created the illusion of compatibility so that victims felt the relationship was safe and emotionally aligned. In KKJ's case, the perpetrator pretended to have the same hobby of reading books, praised the victim's personality, and linked her family background to the image of a good woman. In NAK's case, the perpetrator combined physical and personality-based compliments through statements such as "You are kind, you are beautiful," making the victim feel valued and cared for. In NYJ's case, the perpetrator used religious greetings, the image of a mosque-going man, recordings of Qur'anic recitation, and marriage promises to build the impression that he was a serious partner. These patterns show that The Equalitarian Style in love bombing does not always appear as healthy equal communication. In a manipulative context, this style is used as a social mask to create false similarity, lower vigilance, and accelerate the victim's self-disclosure. Therefore, the equality displayed by the perpetrator is more appropriately understood as a mirroring strategy rather than authentic interpersonal dialogue.

The Controlling Style becomes a turning point when attention that was initially interpreted as affection changes into unilateral regulation. MNS experienced control when the perpetrator prohibited her from replying to messages from male friends and felt threatened by male accounts she followed on Instagram. NAK experienced control through demands to reply quickly, accompanied by interrogation such as, "Why did you take so long to reply? Who are you chatting with?" AKL experienced control when the perpetrator forced her to be picked up in front of the school gate, demanded quick responses, and repeatedly called her name in chat to pressure her to reply immediately. NYJ experienced control in the form of demands to report her activities and conduct video calls, wrapped in the language of future commitment. These findings show that control in love bombing often appears after the victim has become accustomed to intense attention. In other words, the perpetrator first builds emotional dependency, then uses that dependency to normalize surveillance, jealousy, and restrictions on the victim's freedom.

The Withdrawal Style was visible when the perpetrator stopped or reduced communication as a form of emotional punishment or as a way to detach after the manipulative goal had been achieved. In NYJ's case, the perpetrator, who had previously promised family visits and marriage, suddenly became cold, limited phone calls, and ended the relationship by claiming that he was unable to make the victim happy. Afterward, he still asked that their relationship not be completely cut off, but later blocked NYJ's Instagram and mutual accounts so that his marriage plan with another woman would not be discovered. In NAK's case, the perpetrator suddenly ended the relationship after less than one month of dating, then quickly appeared with a new partner. In KKJ's case, after the relationship ended, the perpetrator still reappeared through messages expressing longing and asking to get back together. These findings indicate that withdrawal does not always mean a clean ending. In some cases, withdrawal opens the possibility of hoovering, namely the perpetrator's effort to pull the victim's attention back after the relationship has weakened.

Communication Stages of Love Bombing on Instagram

The communication stages of love bombing in this study moved through three main phases: idealization, devaluation, and discarding. In the idealization phase, the perpetrator presented himself as attentive, quick to respond, complimentary, and seemingly serious about the relationship. In the devaluation phase, communication began to shift into pressure, demands, regulation, or the lowering of the victim's value through jealousy, accusations, and interrogation. In the discarding phase, the perpetrator withdrew, ended the relationship unilaterally, disappeared, blocked accounts, or replaced the victim with a new partner. Although the five informants had different relationship endings, the transition pattern they experienced was relatively similar, moving from validation to control, then from control to withdrawal or termination. This stage pattern shows that love bombing is not merely a matter of excessive attention at the beginning of a relationship, but a gradual communication process that transforms the victim's sense of security into dependency, anxiety, and relational uncertainty.

Table 3. Matrix of Love Bombing Communication Stages and Styles on Instagram

Stage	Communication Style	Instagram Features/Behaviors	Meaning of Findings
Idealization	Dynamic Style and Equalitarian Style	Fast responses in DMs, likes on stories/feeds, story replies, complimentary comments, verbal validation, mirroring hobbies and values	The perpetrator creates instant intimacy and makes the victim feel special
Devaluation	Controlling Style	Interrogating activities, demanding quick responses,	Attention changes into control and emotional pressure

		monitoring following lists, jealousy over comments from the opposite sex, limiting interaction	
Discarding	Withdrawal Style	Ghosting, silent treatment, unfollowing, blocking accounts, ignoring messages, moving to a new partner	The perpetrator withdraws after the victim's emotional stability has been disrupted
Repeated cycle	Hoovering	Replying to stories, sending messages of longing, liking old posts, viewing stories, asking to meet again	The perpetrator provokes the victim's response after the relationship weakens

In the idealization phase, Instagram functions as an arena for creating a powerful first impression. Perpetrators used DM, stories, likes, comments, and calls to display attention that seemed personal and exclusive. MNS experienced this stage when the perpetrator quickly gave compliments, reminded her to eat, reminded her to rest, and posted parts of their conversation as a form of public validation. NAK experienced idealization through compliments portraying her as a beautiful and kind senior, morning greetings, attention to breakfast, and the delivery of food to school. AKL experienced idealization through flirtation after photo likes, loyalty promises within a few days, and expressions of impatience to meet. NYJ experienced idealization through religious greetings, physical compliments, Qur'anic voice notes, and marriage promises. These patterns show that idealization does not always use the same language, but it consistently works through a similar logic: building the impression that the victim is special and that the relationship is developing extraordinarily fast.

The devaluation phase emerged when romantic messages began to lose their supportive character and turned into instruments of pressure. At this stage, the perpetrator no longer merely asked about the victim's well-being, but began demanding rapid responses, checking digital activity, suspecting communication with the opposite sex, and forcing the victim to follow relationship standards determined unilaterally. MNS experienced devaluation when the perpetrator prohibited her from replying to messages from other men and felt threatened by male accounts she followed on Instagram. NAK experienced devaluation when the perpetrator became angry because she replied late, then accused her of chatting with another man. AKL experienced devaluation when the perpetrator began forcing physical closeness, demanding responses, and ignoring her request not to be picked up in front of the school. NYJ experienced devaluation when the perpetrator, who was initially religious and full of promises, became cold, limited communication, and used the excuse of being unable to make her

happy as a justification for leaving. This phase shows that love bombing creates a relationship that seems sweet at first, but becomes fragile when the victim begins to establish boundaries.

The discarding phase shows how perpetrators end, weaken, or blur the relationship after the victim has developed emotional attachment. In MNS's case, discarding occurred after the victim rejected premature commitment, resulting in total communication breakdown, after which the perpetrator quickly moved to another woman within the same friendship circle. In NAK's case, discarding was seen when the perpetrator ended the relationship unilaterally by claiming he wanted to focus on school, yet one week later was found to have a new girlfriend. In NYJ's case, discarding was more painful because the perpetrator not only cut communication, but also hid his relationship with another woman by blocking the victim's Instagram account and mutual accounts. In AKL's case, the discarding pattern was unique because the victim took control after receiving information about the perpetrator's bad reputation from school friends. Therefore, discarding is not always carried out by the perpetrator; in certain situations, the victim can reclaim the withdrawal style by cutting communication access to protect herself from further manipulation.

Hoovering and Repeated Communication Loops after Discarding

An important finding beyond the main focus of this study is the emergence of hoovering or repeated communication after the relationship weakens or ends. Hoovering appeared when perpetrators attempted to provoke the victim's response through story replies, messages expressing longing, invitations to meet, likes on certain posts, or digital appearances that seemed accidental. KKJ experienced hoovering when the perpetrator still sent messages saying he missed her, asked to get back together, and invited her to meet, even while he was posting another woman on his Instagram Story. NAK experienced hoovering when her former perpetrator returned to reply to her Instagram Story with sweet compliments after previously ending the relationship and appearing with a new partner. AKL experienced a lighter form of hoovering when the perpetrator occasionally still replied to her stories after being ignored. In this context, hoovering is not merely post-breakup behavior, but a communication strategy that preserves the possibility of the victim re-entering the idealization cycle. This pattern shows that discarding is not always the end, because perpetrators can use Instagram features to test whether the victim still gives an emotional response.

The hoovering cycle shows that love bombing on Instagram is repetitive, fluid, and difficult to break if the victim has not built firm digital boundaries. Instagram allows perpetrators to reappear without starting a long conversation, simply by viewing a story, giving a like, replying to a post, or sending a brief nostalgic message. For victims who still have emotional attachment, such small signals can be interpreted as signs of regret, attention, or a chance to repair the relationship. However, the informants' experiences show that breaking the cycle occurs when victims begin to recognize the manipulation pattern and take clear digital action. KKJ chose to block all the perpetrator's social media accounts, NAK chose to ignore story replies, AKL stopped responding after receiving

warnings from her friends, and NYJ realized the perpetrator's lies after discovering his marriage to another woman. Thus, victim awareness and the courage to limit digital access become important factors in stopping looping communication in love bombing.

DISCUSSION

Love Bombing as Affective Manipulation in Digital Interpersonal Communication

The discussion of this study confirms that love bombing on Instagram needs to be understood as affective manipulation that operates through a combination of intensity, false similarity, control, and withdrawal (Goulden-Markusson, 2025). Duman and Nazari's study shows that love bombing experiences are related to ghosting and self-efficacy in romantic relationships, making the findings of this study relevant because all five informants experienced changes in confidence, vigilance, and emotional security after facing manipulative communication (Duman & Nazari, 2024). In the early stage, perpetrators built affection through rapid messages, intense compliments, validation, and future promises. However, this affection did not develop into healthy intimacy because it was not accompanied by a reasonable process of getting to know each other. Instead, digital affection was used to accelerate the victim's attachment, lower caution, and pave the way for control. In this context, love bombing differs from ordinary romantic attention because communication intensity is not intended to build relational balance, but to produce an unequal emotional position. Victims are made to feel chosen, understood, and prioritized, then gradually conditioned to obey the perpetrator's rules.

These findings also strengthen studies on cyber dating abuse, which explain that technology can be used to monitor, control, intimidate, and punish partners through digital communication. In the cases of MNS, NAK, AKL, and NYJ, control occurred through message monitoring, following-list surveillance, demands for quick responses, and interrogation of daily activities. In NYJ's case, control was even extended through demands for video calls and narratives of future commitment. This pattern shows that Instagram does not merely mediate romantic communication, but also provides affordances for relational control. The story feature allows perpetrators to monitor victims' activities; DM enables private personal pressure; likes and comments provide public validation; while blocking and unfollowing allow discarding to be carried out without clarification. Therefore, communicative violence in love bombing does not always appear as direct threats, but can emerge as subtle demands, excessive attention, false seriousness, and deliberate communication withdrawal intended to make the victim anxious.

From the perspective of communication style theory, this study shows that communication style cannot be read only as an expression of personality, but also as a strategic instrument in manipulative relationships. The Dynamic Style is used to accelerate the relationship and prevent victims from having enough time to assess reasonable boundaries. The Equalitarian Style is used to build a sense of safety through shared values, hobbies, religion, experiences, or emotional needs. The Controlling Style is used when the victim begins to feel attached,

allowing the perpetrator to demand compliance under the guise of attention or commitment. The Withdrawal Style is used to punish, suspend, or discard the victim after control is no longer effective. This configuration shows that love bombing perpetrators are able to shift communication styles situationally. The change from warm messages to controlling messages becomes an important indicator that romantic communication has shifted into emotional domination. Therefore, the contribution of this study lies in mapping communication styles as the working mechanism of love bombing, not merely as variations in ways of speaking within romantic relationships.

Triangulation with a communication expert strengthened the understanding that love bombing cannot be immediately labeled manipulative solely based on excessive attention at the beginning of a relationship. At the initial stage, excessive attention may be read as impression management or an early mask commonly used by individuals to present their best image. However, such behavior becomes manipulative when it is followed by emotional exploitation, control, inconsistency, lies, or unilateral abandonment. This view is important because it helps distinguish sincere attention from love bombing as a destructive communication pattern. Sincere attention usually gives space, respects boundaries, and develops gradually. In contrast, love bombing accelerates intimacy, demands early commitment, blurs personal boundaries, and pressures victims to follow the perpetrator's will. In the informants' experiences, this difference was clearly visible when early compliments and attention changed into prohibitions, surveillance, demands, ghosting, or account blocking. Thus, the main indicator of love bombing is not merely the number of messages, but the shift in message function from affection to control.

Instagram, Self-Disclosure, and Digital Relational Literacy among Generation Z

Instagram is highly significant in this study because its features accelerate the process of self-disclosure and intimacy formation (Suhendar et al., 2023). Studies on Generation Z self-disclosure show that Instagram is often used to share personal information selectively through private features such as close friends, second accounts, and direct messages. The findings of this study show that self-disclosure can become vulnerable when the perpetrator appears as a safe listener, an equal partner, or a religious figure who promises a future. In KKJ's case, shared hobbies and compliments toward her family background made the victim open up to intense communication. In NYJ's case, religious image and marriage promises made both the victim and her family begin to place trust in the perpetrator. In NAK's and AKL's cases, daily attention and physical compliments made the victims feel cared for, although discomfort later emerged. Therefore, self-disclosure in digital relationships is not merely the practice of sharing information, but a process of opening personal boundaries that strongly depends on the perceived safety of the communication partner.

Practically, the findings of this study indicate the importance of digital relational literacy for Generation Z. Such literacy should not only discuss account security, privacy, or social media ethics, but also include the ability to recognize manipulative communication patterns. Generation Z needs to understand that

fast responses, intense compliments, quick marriage promises, public validation, and daily attention are not always indicators of a healthy relationship. Instead, warning signs emerge when attention is accompanied by demands for quick replies, excessive jealousy, monitoring of following lists, prohibitions against interacting with friends, ignoring messages as punishment, or blocking without explanation. This study also shows that peer networks can function as a protective factor, as seen in AKL's case, where she was able to leave the relationship more quickly after receiving information from her school friends. Therefore, the findings of this study emphasize that the prevention of love bombing should be carried out through education on digital interpersonal communication, strengthening personal boundaries, and developing the courage to cut communication access when a relationship begins to show patterns of emotional control.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that love bombing on Instagram among Generation Z in Medan City operates as a manipulative communication pattern that develops through shifting communication styles rather than through a single fixed form of interaction. The findings show that perpetrators use The Dynamic Style to accelerate intimacy through rapid responses, intensive messages, excessive compliments, and direct engagement with Instagram features such as stories, likes, and direct messages. The Equalitarian Style is used to create an illusion of similarity, emotional safety, and relational compatibility, making victims feel understood, valued, and personally chosen. After emotional attachment begins to form, the communication pattern shifts into The Controlling Style through demands for quick replies, monitoring of social media activity, jealousy, interrogation, and restrictions on the victim's social interactions. In several cases, the relationship then moves into The Withdrawal Style, marked by reduced communication, ghosting, blocking, or sudden emotional distance. These patterns demonstrate that love bombing is not merely excessive romantic attention, but a strategic form of digital interpersonal communication that transforms affection into emotional control.

The communication stages experienced by the informants reveal a recurring pattern of idealization, devaluation, and discarding. During the idealization stage, perpetrators construct an image of sincerity, commitment, and emotional closeness through compliments, attention, religious expressions, future promises, and visible digital validation. During the devaluation stage, the same communication that initially appears caring begins to function as pressure, regulation, and emotional dominance. Victims are placed in a confusing position because the attention they previously interpreted as affection gradually becomes a tool for controlling behavior, limiting interaction, and creating dependency. The discarding stage occurs when perpetrators withdraw, end the relationship unilaterally, replace the victim with another partner, or cut off access through digital features. However, this stage does not always mark the end of the manipulation, because several informants also experienced hoovering through story replies, nostalgic messages, likes, or renewed attempts to reconnect. This finding shows that Instagram enables love bombing to operate cyclically, where

digital traces and platform features allow perpetrators to return and test the victim's emotional availability.

Overall, this study confirms that Instagram is not only a medium where love bombing occurs, but also a digital infrastructure that facilitates affective manipulation through visibility, immediacy, private messaging, public validation, and surveillance. The experiences of the five informants show that Generation Z's openness in digital relationships can become vulnerable when self-disclosure is met with excessive attention, false similarity, premature commitment, and relational pressure. At the same time, the findings also indicate that victims can break the cycle when they recognize manipulative patterns, establish boundaries, ignore repeated digital approaches, block perpetrators, or rely on peer support. Therefore, the study contributes to digital interpersonal communication studies by explaining how love bombing works through communication styles, relationship stages, and Instagram-based interaction patterns. Practically, the findings emphasize the need for digital relational literacy among Generation Z, especially the ability to distinguish healthy romantic attention from manipulative communication that gradually turns intimacy into control.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

Future research should expand this study by employing longitudinal and cross-platform approaches to examine how love bombing evolves across different social media environments and over time. Integrating psychological, behavioral, and computational analyses could further identify early indicators of manipulative communication, assess its long-term impact on Generation Z's well-being and relationship quality, and support the development of digital literacy and intervention strategies for preventing online emotional abuse.

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