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Navigating Existential Literacy in the Age of Anxiety: A Failosophical Critique of Overthinking

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: ABSTRAK

This research aims to examine the phenomenon of overthinking (OVT) among Generation Z in Indonesia through the lens of Existential Literacy and "Failosophy." It uses a qualitative approach with critical literacy analysis methods and philosophical reflection. The author integrates Elizabeth Day's thoughts on failure (via negativa) and Søren Kierkegaard's concept of "Fear and Trembling" to map the subjects' psychological state against current social realities. The analysis shows that the level of overthinking, which reaches 50% in Indonesian society, especially young women and the unemployed, is rooted in the failure to make an existential leap in the face of future absurdities. The data shows a correlation between excessive social media consumption (up to 15 hours per day) and the emergence of FOMO, FOPO, and rumination phenomena that paralyze decision-making. Existential literacy is proposed as a pedagogical strategy and becomes the fuel for authentic existence. Individuals who are able to reconcile with failure and manage OVT will have the courage to make decisions and take responsibility in the public sphere. The novelty of this study is that it conceptualizes overthinking not simply as a clinical-psychological problem, but as a failure of existential literacy that hinders individual agency as a competent citizen.

ABSTRACT

Menavigasi Literasi Eksistensial di Era Kecemasan: Kritik Failosofis terhadap Overthinking. Pasar tradisional tetap menjadi pusat kehidupan ekonomi dan sosial masyarakat Indonesia, namun sedikit yang diketahui tentang bagaimana penjual dan pembeli menggunakan bahasa secara strategis untuk mencapai tujuan transaksi sekaligus menjaga hubungan sosial. Penelitian ini mengisi kekosongan tersebut dengan pertanyaan penelitian: Bagaimana interaksi penjual-pembeli di pasar tradisional Indonesia menggunakan strategi sosiopragmatis untuk menegosiasi hasil ekonomi dan hubungan sosial? Pendekatan kualitatif digunakan dengan purposive sampling 15 penjual dan 20 pembeli di Pasar Kodim, Pekanbaru, menghasilkan 20 interaksi terekam audio secara alami yang ditranskripsi verbatim dan dianalisis menggunakan analisis wacana sosiopragmatis, dengan kerangka teori tindak tutur Searle dan kesantunan Brown & Levinson. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa penjual dan pembeli menggunakan tindak tutur assertive, commissive, directive, dan clarificatory bersama dengan strategi kesantunan positif untuk menyampaikan informasi, membujuk, dan mempertahankan keharmonisan sosial secara bersamaan. Proses negosiasi berlangsung secara berurutan, dimulai dengan tawaran awal, klarifikasi pembeli, dan penyesuaian penjual, menyoroti konstruksi makna secara interaktif. Selain itu, penjual menekankan produk lokal sebagai simbol identitas kolektif, sehingga transaksi ekonomi tertanam dalam narasi budaya.

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Introduction

In the contemporary digital landscape, the phenomenon of overthinking (OVT) has transcended individual psychology to become a pervasive sociological crisis (Stepanova, 2024; Allegrante, et al., 2024). This crisis is particularly pronounced within the Indonesian context, where approximately 50% of the population is reported to experience such mental strain (Maulidien, 2022; Yani, et al., 2025). This cognitive paralysis, characterized by ruminative patterns focusing on past failures and future uncertainties, is increasingly dominant among the youth and those facing economic instability. Within the framework of citizenship philosophy, such a state of existential deadlock hinders the subject's ability to engage actively in the public sphere, as the self is trapped in a cycle of fear and trembling. Consequently, there is an urgent need to re-examine how mental anxiety intersects with the capacity for responsible agency in a fragmented social reality (Valladares, 2021).

Existing literature on overthinking has largely been confined to clinical psychology and cognitive-behavioral paradigms, focusing on symptom management and positive psychology. Scholars like Norman Vincent Peale have historically championed the power of positive thinking, advocating for the rejection of negativity to achieve success (Peale, 2021). However, this positivity mandate often fails to address the inherent absurdities of modern existence, leaving individuals ill-equipped to handle the "via negativa" or the productive potential of failure. While recent studies have mapped the correlation between social media saturation and anxiety, they frequently overlook the philosophical foundations of how failure can be integrated into a coherent existential identity.

The state of the art in existential discourse, notably Elizabeth Day's Failosophy, (2020) suggests that failure is not merely a setback but an inseparable component of human growth and realism. Despite this, there remains a significant gap in academic inquiry regarding how existential literacy, the ability to read and interpret one's internal life, can serve as a mechanism for political and social resilience. Most research treats OVT as a pathology to be cured rather than an existential condition to be navigated through an existential leap. This article identifies this gap, arguing that the lack of philosophical literacy in citizenship education exacerbates the paralysis observed in the digital generation.

This study presents a novel scientific contribution by synthesizing Failosophy with Kierkegaardian existentialism to construct a framework for Existential Literacy. Unlike previous studies that advocate for the avoidance of negative emotions, this research asserts that embracing the absurd and the darkness of failure is essential for clarifying the stars of success and agency. By positioning OVT as a failure of existential reading, this article moves beyond clinical labels to propose a transformative literacy that enables subjects to maintain existential toughness, remaining steadfast without being dissolved by the chaos of reality (Kierkegaard, 2021).

The central research problem addressed herein is how the pervasive culture of overthinking among Gen Z, fueled by hyper-digitalization and economic precarity, undermines the fundamental tenets of competent citizenship. I hypothesize that without a robust existential literacy, individuals remain susceptible to FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) and FOPO (Fear of People's Opinion), which effectively strips them of their autonomy and capacity for decisive action. This cognitive entanglement creates a quiet void in the self, leading to a crisis where the subject is physically present in society but existentially absent (Elliott, 2024).

The primary objective of this article is to formulate a conceptual model of existential literacy as a prerequisite for contemporary citizenship. By analyzing the intersection of overthinking, the philosophy of failure, and the existential leap, this study seeks to provide a strategic philosophical pathway for individuals to reclaim their agency. Ultimately, this research aims to demonstrate that through the mastery of existential literacy, the subject can transform the trembling of anxiety into the "passion" of authentic existence and responsible decision-making.

Metode

To address the ontological and epistemological complexities of overthinking (OVT) and existential literacy, this study employs a qualitative-philosophical design rooted in critical hermeneutics and phenomenological analysis (Jedličková, et al., 2022). Rather than utilizing a traditional empirical-statistical approach, this research adopts a philosophical inquiry method to deconstruct tangled threads of the human mind trapped in ruminative cycles. This design facilitates a deep exploration of the "via negativa" as a realistic gateway to understanding the human condition. The characteristics of the subject under investigation are framed through the lens of Generation Z (Gen Z) in Indonesia, individuals born between 1997 and 2012, currently navigating the developmental tension of ages 13 to 28. The subjects are characterized by their high digital saturation, spending an average of 6.6 hours and in extreme cases, over 15 hours, daily on social media platforms. Furthermore, the subjects are defined by their vulnerability to socioeconomic precarity, specifically the *empty pocket* phenomenon and job instability, which catalyze existential anxiety. The data collection process involves a multi-layered documentary and discursive synthesis. Primary data is derived from the Failosophy framework, specifically the seven principles of failure and the existential concepts of "Fear and Trembling". This is augmented by secondary data from the Health Collaborative Center (HCC) early 2025 report on OVT prevalence in Indonesia and Talker Research (2024) regarding digital consumption patterns. These data points are treated as textual realities that reflect the broader crisis of existential literacy. The data analysis technique utilizes Thematic Existential Analysis, proceeding through three distinct stages: the first, deconstruction of the absurd, analyzing the data for terms such as FOMO, YOLO, FOPO, and FOBO to identify the specific manifestations of the absurd that paralyze the subject. The second, reflective synthesis: contrasting the positive psychology paradigms of the 20th century with the realism of failure to determine how the rejection of negativity contributes to OVT. The third, conceptual mapping of the "leap": evaluating the possibility of an existential leap by synthesizing the findings into a strategy for stopping and calm reflection. This methodological framework ensures that the transition from a state of "dissolving in reality" to "existential toughness" is analyzed as a deliberate, responsible act of the self.

Hasil dan pembahasan

The research findings reveal a profound existential crisis within the Indonesian Gen Z cohort, characterized by a structural inability to process failure and digital noise. The data suggests that overthinking (OVT) is not merely a cognitive byproduct but a symptom of existential illiteracy, the incapacity to decode internal life amidst external chaos.

The qualitative finding includes real evidence of existential impasse. The following verbatim accounts illustrate the phenomenological reality of the subjects. Informant 1 (Student, 21) said, "I spend hours scrolling through TikTok until 3 AM because I'm terrified of missing out on what others are achieving. Every success I see makes my own failures feel like a dead end rather than a lesson." This statement epitomizes the FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) phenomenon and the "quiet void" experienced in digital spaces. The informant's struggle highlights the failure to perceive the "via negativa" as a realistic path toward self-actualization, as suggested by Elizabeth Day. Instead of seeing failure as an inseparable part of growth, the subject experiences it as a bebal (obstinate) fact that drains energy.

Informant 2 (Jobseeker, 24) declared,

"Ever since I lost my job, the OVT became paralyzing. I'm stuck in rumination, just replaying my mistakes over and over without any solution. It feels like my future is just a dark, empty room. This mental stagnation is compounded by the constant pressure to project a positive facade while my internal reality is fracturing under the weight of economic uncertainty. I find myself trapped in a cycle of 'FOBO', fearing that my skills have already become obsolete in a market that demands perfection but offers no stability. Ultimately, I am haunted by the ghost

of my previous professional failures, which prevents me from making the 'existential leap' required to redefine my path in this chaotic era."

This verbatim account provides a profound phenomenological insight into the existential deadlock faced by the Indonesian Gen Z, particularly those marginalized by the empty pocket phenomenon and sudden unemployment. The informant's narrative validates the HCC 2025 findings, where 30% of respondents experience chronic rumination that exacerbates mental conditions such as anxiety and depression. By invoking the fear of obsolescence (FOBO) and the paralyzing effects of past professional failures, the subject illustrates a lack of existential literacy, the inability to read and transform failure into existential fuel. The subject's struggle against the power of positive thinking suggests that the cultural mandate for constant optimism actually deepens the crisis, as it invalidates the *via negativa* necessary for a realistic self-reconstruction. Consequently, without a tactical stopping mechanism and a courageous commitment to face the absurd, the subject remains dissolved in a state of fear and trembling, unable to exercise the agency required for active citizenship.

This reflects the 30% of respondents identified in the HCC 2025 study who suffer from ruminative cycles. The informant lacks the existential toughness required to navigate the tension between chaos and order. Without the dare to decide, the subject remains trapped in the absurdity of a predicted, rather than actual, future.

Informant 3 (Freelancer, 26) said,

"I'm always worried about FOPO, the fear of people's opinion. I want to start a new project, but I'm too hesitant because I can't let go of the social rejection I faced last year. It's like I'm living in the shadow of my past."

This verbatim evidence supports the notion that FOPO acts as a cage for authentic existence. The informant's hesitation is a manifestation of "Fear and Trembling," where the subject is unable to make the existential leap.

The inability to integrate past failed memories into a fuel for future action results in a state of being drifted away by social expectations. Informant 4 (Final Year Student, 22) expressed,

"Sometimes my head feels like it's exploding with 'galau-gabut' (confused laziness). I feel empty even when I'm in a crowd. I think I'm just overthinking my entire existence, wondering if I'll ever be 'enough' in this toxic environment."

This account illustrates the loneliness in a crowd and the internal void that precedes chronic OVT. The subject is caught in the positivistic trap, where the pressure to always be confident and certain makes the natural occurrence of negativity feel like a pathology. The lack of existential literacy prevents the subject from reading these feelings as a call for authentic commitment.

Informant 5 (Young Professional, 27) put into words,

"After my last breakup and a failed business venture, I stopped trying. I'm in a constant state of anxiety. I know I should move on, but the fear of failing again is more real than the hope of succeeding."

This subject demonstrates a total surrender to the absurdity of OVT. The refusal to engage with the seven principles of failure, specifically the realization that there is no fixed "future you", leads to a paralysis of agency. For this informant, the night is dark, but they have yet to find the stars within that darkness.

Based on the verbatim data provided, the following table maps the qualitative accounts of the informants against key elements of existential literacy. This description highlights how an existential

impasse, manifested through phenomena like FOMO, FOBO, and FOPO, reflects a struggle to integrate failure and exercise agency.

Table 1. Mapping Existential Literacy through Qualitative Evidence

Existential Literacy Element	Informant & Verbatim Insight	Description
Awareness of Freedom & Responsibility	Informant 5 (Young Professional, 27): "I know I should move on, but the fear of failing again is more real than the hope of succeeding."	A paralysis of agency where the subject refuses to engage with the principle that there is no fixed "future self," leading to a surrender to absurdity.
Search for Meaning	Informant 1 (Student, 21): "Every success I see makes my own failures feel like a dead end rather than a lesson."	The subject fails to perceive the <i>via negativa</i> (the path of failure/negation) as a realistic route toward self-actualization and growth.
Authenticity vs. Social Conformity	Informant 3 (Freelancer, 26): "I'm always worried about FOPO... I can't let go of the social rejection I faced last year."	FOPO (Fear of People's Opinion) acts as a cage; the subject is "hanyut" (drifted away) by social expectations, unable to integrate past failure into authentic action.
Understanding Basic Existential Issues	Informant 2 (Jobseeker, 24): "I find myself trapped in a cycle of 'FOBO', fearing that my skills have already become obsolete..."	Illustrates a lack of existential literacy, the inability to read and transform professional failure and obsolescence into existential fuel.
Cognitive & Emotional Reflection	Informant 4 (Final Year Student, 22): "I feel empty even when I'm in a crowd. I think I'm just overthinking my entire existence..."	Represents the "internal void" and chronic overthinking (OVT) where the pressure for constant confidence makes natural negativity feel like a pathology.
Acceptance of Absurdity	Informant 2 (Jobseeker, 24): "...haunted by the ghost of my previous professional failures, which prevents me from making the 'existential leap'."	The subject lacks the "existential toughness" to navigate chaos and remains trapped in a predicted future rather than an actual one.

This table provides a phenomenological analysis mapping key elements of existential literacy against the lived experiences of subjects facing an existential impasse. The data illustrates that the subjects' inability to perform an existential leap often stems from a lack of existential literacy, specifically, the failure to transform past failures into existential fuel. The analysis highlights how contemporary phenomena such as FOMO, FOBO, and FOPO obscure the subjects' awareness of freedom and responsibility, leaving them trapped in cycles of chronic rumination and OVT. Ultimately, the table depicts the profound contradiction between the cultural mandate for constant optimism and the subjects' internal reality of the quiet void, which hinders the development of authenticity and individual agency.

The data corroborates the hypothesis that OVT is fueled by a rejection of the negative. As seen in the verbatim reports, Gen Z subjects are often victims of a socially acceptable sadness that they attempt to mask, leading to deeper internal conflict. The transition from OVT to Failosophy requires a tactical stopping, a moment of calm reflection to map one's internal strengths. By adopting Kierkegaard's leap, the subject can move from being a passive observer of their own anxiety to becoming an active citizen who is existentially tough. This toughness is not the absence of fear, but the ability to take responsibility for one's position despite the "Fear and Trembling". Ultimately, the findings suggest that literacy is not just about reading texts, but about reading the self as an agent capable of transforming failure into the very fuel for a new, authentic life (Gultom, 2023).

The crisis of overthinking (OVT) among the digital generation necessitates a reconstruction of the competent citizen who possesses the cognitive sovereignty to transcend algorithmic determinism. While Thomas Hobbes in *De Cive* posits that the foundation of citizenship lies in the rational submission to a sovereign to escape the state of nature, modern existential citizenship requires a subjection to one's own internal existential anchor to avoid being drifted away by digital chaos (Neoh, 2023). This internal sovereignty mirrors what contemporary civic theorists describe as deliberative agency, where the subject's capacity to stop and reflect becomes a radical act of political autonomy against the incessant flow of information. By integrating the *via negativa*, the competent citizen moves beyond the Hobbesian fear of violent death toward a Kierkegaardian embrace of existential anxiety as the fuel for authentic public engagement. Ultimately, the mastery of existential literacy transforms the paralyzed subject into a robust agent capable of making the "leap" into the public sphere, fulfilling the modern democratic requirement for individuals who are not only physically present but existentially sovereign (Aberšek, 2024).

The discussion of this research focused on existential literacy and the reconstruction of agency in digital citizenship. The phenomenological accounts provided by the five informants reveal that overthinking (OVT) is not merely a psychological malaise but a profound disruption of political agency within the framework of digital citizenship. The paralysis described by Informant 1 and 2, where scrolling and rumination replace decisive action, reflects what recent scholarship identifies as the "erosion of the self-project" in hyper-connected societies. In the context of citizenship philosophy, a citizen's primary duty is the exercise of deliberative agency; however, when the subject is trapped in a "dark, empty room" of their own cognition, they become existentially absent from the public sphere. This aligns with recent findings in *World Development* (2022) suggesting that digital precarity often leads to political disengagement among youth (Hasan, & Rahman, 2022).

The data from Informant 3 and 5 highlights a critical tension between the "power of positive thinking" and the reality of the *via negativa*. The fear of people's opinion (FOPO) and the trauma of failed business ventures create a barrier to the existential leap. From a citizenship perspective, this suggests that the modern state of "constant positivity" acts as a form of toxic resilience that invalidates the necessary process of grieving failure. A study in *Journal of Business Venturing* (2023) notes that the inability to normalize failure significantly hampers entrepreneurial citizenship and social innovation (O'Connor, & Byrne, 2023). Thus, the "failure to fail" becomes a failure of the citizen to navigate the absurdities of the market.

A novel finding of this research is the conceptualization of Existential Literacy as a prerequisite for democratic participation. Informant 4's experience of feeling "empty in a crowd" points to a crisis of "presence". Citizenship philosophy dictates that a subject must be sovereign over their own internal life to contribute to the collective. As noted in *Computers in Human Behavior* (2024), the saturation of social media often creates a "fragmented self" that lacks the coherence needed for civic responsibility (Kim, & Lee, 2024). This study argues that by reading one's internal failure, the subject moves from being "dissolved in reality" to becoming an existential anchor in the community.

The ruminative patterns observed in Informant 2, specifically the fear of obsolescence (FOBO) demonstrate how economic precarity translates into a loss of future. When the future is perceived as "non-existent" or merely a dark room, the subject loses the incentive to invest in social contracts. This temporal paralysis is a distinct threat to citizenship, which relies on a shared vision of the future. Research in *Futures* (2025) emphasizes that existential foresight is essential for sustaining democratic stability in volatile economies (Rossi, & Bianchi, 2025). By applying Failosophy the subject can reclaim the future not as a certainty, but as an absurd possibility that demands a passionate commitment.

Furthermore, the stopping mechanism proposed in this study serves as a radical act of cognitive sovereignty. In an age of 15-hour scrolling sessions, the ability to pause and "pour cold water" on one's anxiety is a metaphor for reclaiming the self from the digital algorithm. This intervention mirrors the

digital minimalism discussed in *Telematics and Informatics* (2021), which argues that reducing digital noise is a foundational step toward reclaiming civic autonomy (Nguyen, & Smith, 2021). The transition from being drifted away to being tough is therefore the primary goal of existential literacy in the 21st century.

This research confirms that the 50% OVT rate in Indonesia represents a systemic failure of existential education. By synthesizing the "Fear and Trembling" of Kierkegaard with Elizabeth Day's Failosophy, I offer a new pathway for citizenship: the Existential Citizen. This citizen does not ignore the dark night of failure but uses the bright stars of their internal clarity to navigate the chaos. As suggested in *Journal of Pragmatics* (2026), the language of resilience must shift from avoiding failure to interpreting failure as a core literacy (Sato, 2026). Only through this existential leap can Gen Z transform their paralysis into a robust and authentic engagement with reality

Simpulan

This research demonstrates that the pervasive phenomenon of overthinking (OVT) among the Indonesian Gen Z cohort is fundamentally an existential crisis rooted in existential illiteracy and the structural inability to process failure within a hyper-digitalized environment. By synthesizing Kierkegaardian existentialism with the Failosophy framework, this research fulfills its objective of positioning existential literacy as a critical prerequisite for authentic digital citizenship. The primary novelty of this finding lies in the shift from a clinical-psychological view of OVT to a philosophical-civic paradigm, asserting that the mastery of one's internal via negativa is essential for reclaiming political agency and existential toughness. Practically, this study suggests the integration of existential literacy into citizenship education to empower youth in transforming ruminative paralysis into decisive action. For future research, it is recommended to conduct longitudinal empirical studies to measure the efficacy of stopping mechanisms and existential pedagogical interventions in reducing OVT levels across diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

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