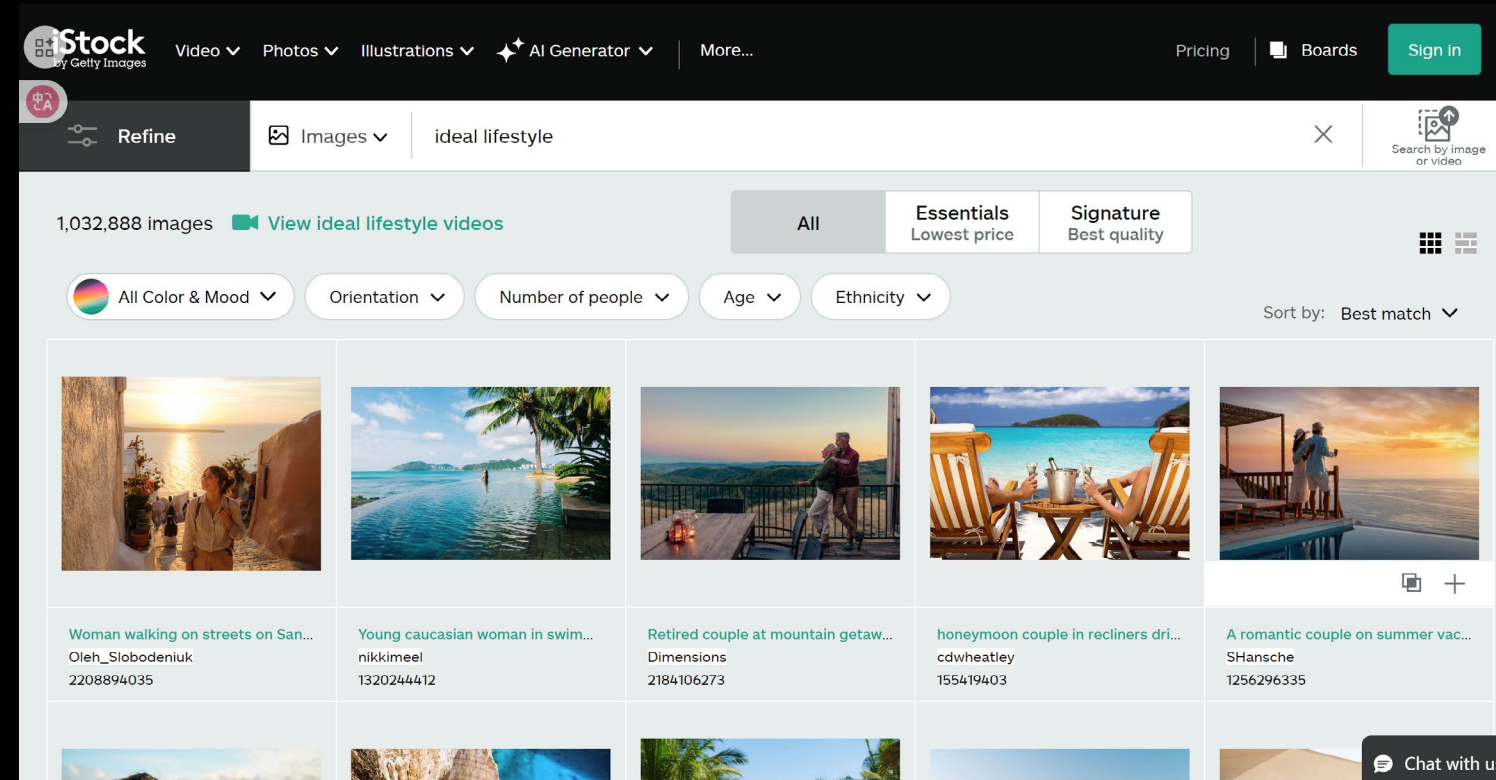


What is the **Ideal** Lifestyle?

Brief 2_cataloguing stock images from iStockPhoto

Searching 'Ideal Lifestyle' on iStock

How the Project Started



This project began with a simple yet revealing question: What does the internet imagine an 'ideal lifestyle' to look like, and who is **included—or excluded**—in that imagination?

To explore this, I searched the keyword **'ideal lifestyle'** on iStockPhoto, expecting to find diverse representations of life across cultures, ages, and social groups.

Instead, what appeared in the first 100 results was far narrower and far more repetitive than anticipated, revealing not just aesthetic preference but a **deeper, systemic pattern**.

What I Found on iStock



The first 100 results were surprisingly **homogeneous**:

- (1) **Mostly young white women**
- (2) Frequently alone
- (3) Almost always at a **beach or in nature**
- (4) Soft lighting and pastel tones
- (5) Relaxed, carefree poses
- (6) Strongly Western and consumerist aesthetics

The images did not present real lifestyles but rather a **commercial fantasy** coded as 'happiness.'

Why This Discovery Matters

This discovery matters because it shows that the idea of an 'ideal lifestyle' online is not natural or neutral. It is something that is **built, repeated, and spread by image platforms**.

The search results tell us: A small group of people (young white women) is used to represent **'happiness'** for the whole world.

Many real ways of living — different races, ages, bodies, and daily environments — **are pushed aside or made invisible**.

The images create a very narrow picture of what a "good life" should look like. This narrow picture is then copied by advertising, social media, and global culture. In other words, these images do more than show life — **they shape what we believe life should be**.

This finding became the reason for looking deeper into the images. If the search results are already so narrow, then how exactly are these images built?

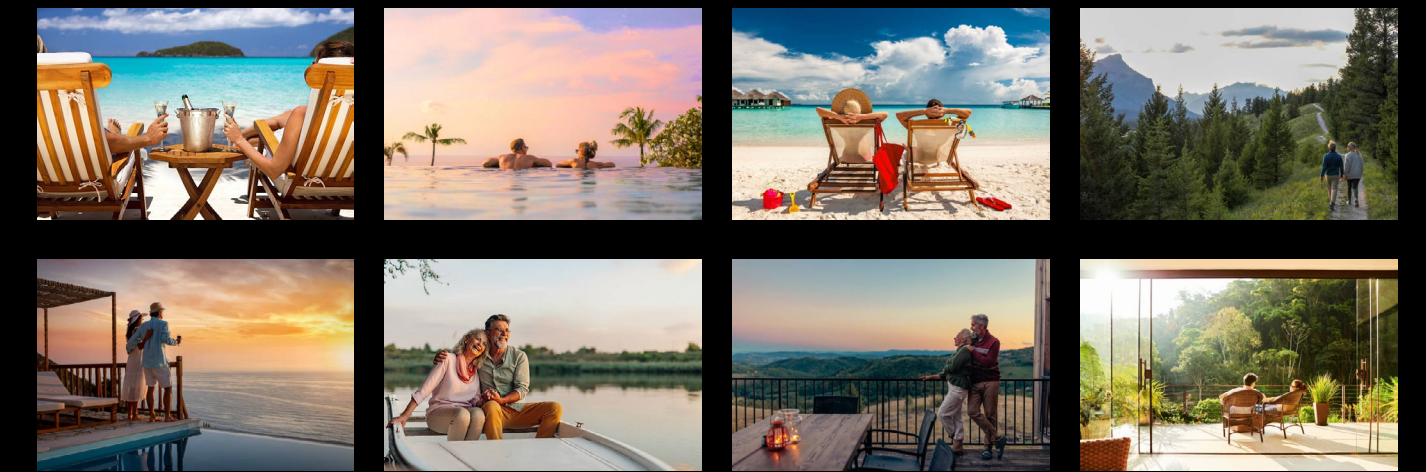
Three Ways of Classification

1. By Subject & People

(1) Majority: **women** alone at the beach, smiling or relaxing



(2) Others: **heterosexual couples** also at the beach



(3) Small numbers: **families** enjoy holidays in nature



(4) Small numbers: **men** alone



(5) Small numbers: **friends** enjoy holidays in nature

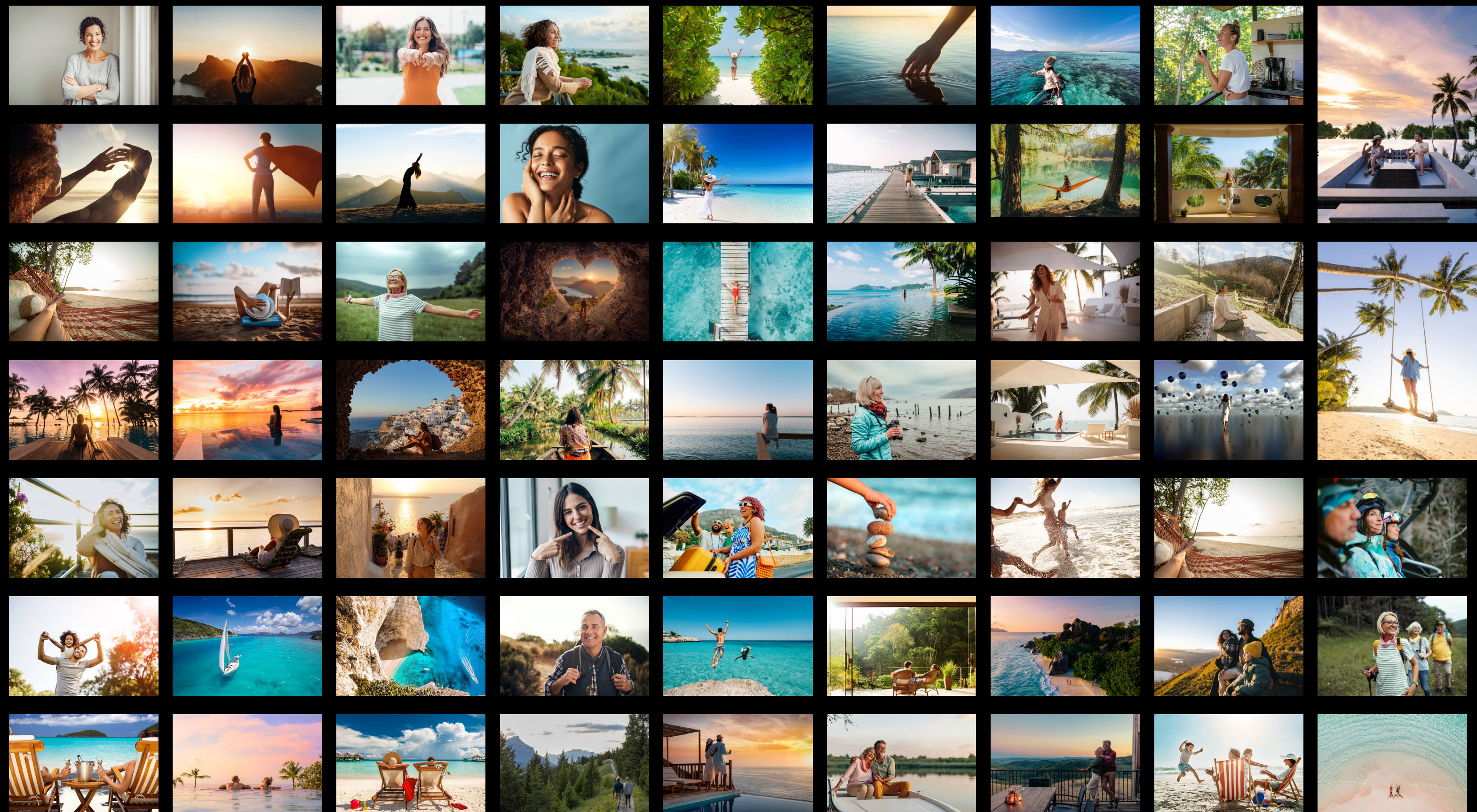


Sorting by people shows a very limited idea of who represents an 'ideal life.'
Most images focus on young white women, while many other groups are missing.

Three Ways of Classification

2. By Setting / Environment

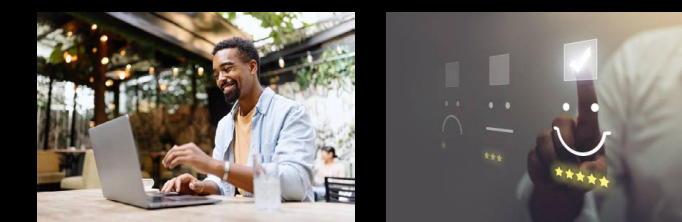
(1) Majority: **Beach** / Nature



(2) Others: **Home** / Interior



(3) Small numbers: Urban / **Work spaces**



Most 'ideal' scenes take place on beaches or in polished natural locations. Everyday, messy, or urban environments rarely appear, narrowing what counts as a good life.

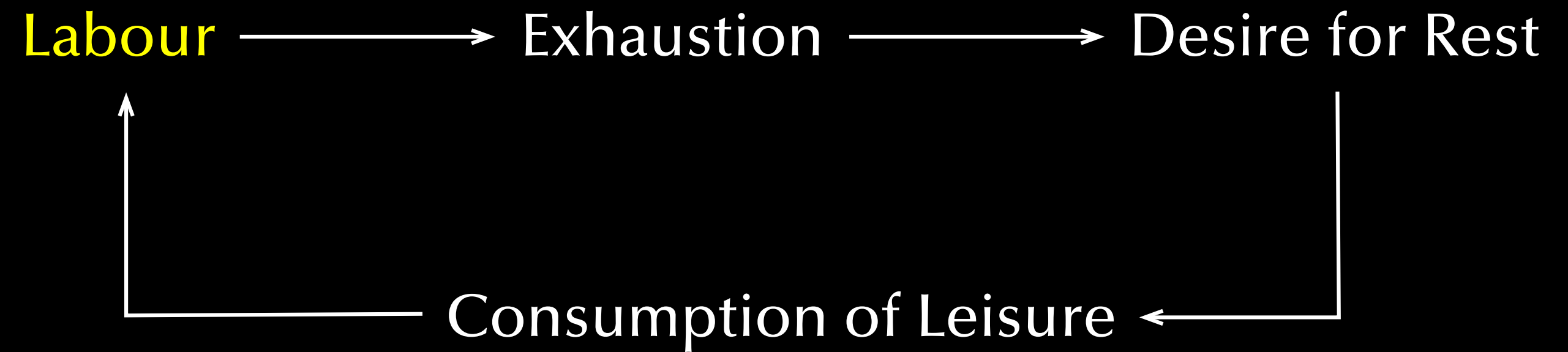
The Capitalist Loop: Labour–Leisure Cycle

After looking at who appears in these images, where they are placed, and which identities repeat, a clear pattern emerges: the ‘ideal lifestyle’ **is not just a visual preference** but part of a system that defines a very narrow version of happiness.

Capitalism sells rest so that we can work again. The same system that exhausts us also turns recovery into a product—vacations, retreats, self-care, and weekend escapes. **Rest becomes something we buy** after being worn out by work.

In this cycle, happiness functions as a tool that keeps the system running. We work to afford rest, and rest prepares us to return to work. What looks like ‘leisure’ is actually part of the same mechanism, **reinforcing rather than breaking the loop.**

This becomes even clearer when ‘ideal lifestyle’ is paired with different jobs. Searches like ‘**nurse,**’ ‘**farmer,**’ ‘**cleaner,**’ or ‘**factory worker**’ show that happiness is unevenly assigned—some jobs fit easily into the fantasy, while others do not fit at all.



The Möbius strip visualizes the capitalist labour–leisure cycle

How does image search define 'ideal lifestyle' for different occupations or social groups?

I searched iStock for terms such as

1. ideal lifestyle of a **factory worker**
2. ideal lifestyle of a **office worker**
3. ideal lifestyle of a **farmer**
4. ideal lifestyle of a **teacher**
5. ideal lifestyle of a **cleaner**
6. ideal lifestyle of a **nurse**
7. ideal lifestyle of a **doctor**

When I searched for 'ideal lifestyle' combined with different professions, most images showed people smiling at work — except for factory workers, whose smiles were almost absent.

(1) factory worker



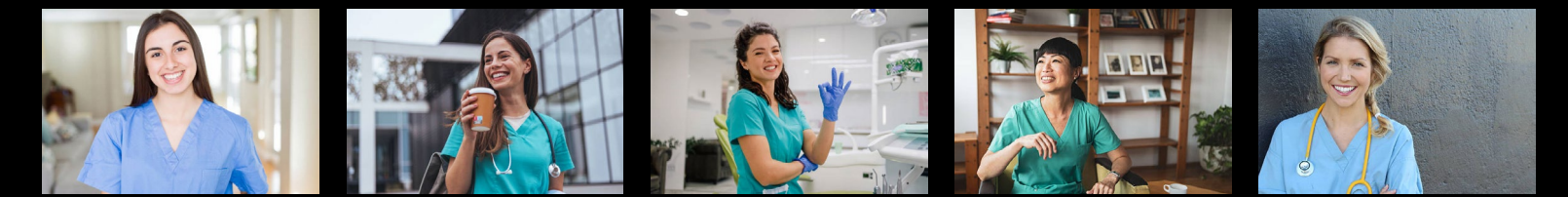
(5) cleaner



(2) office worker



(6) nurse



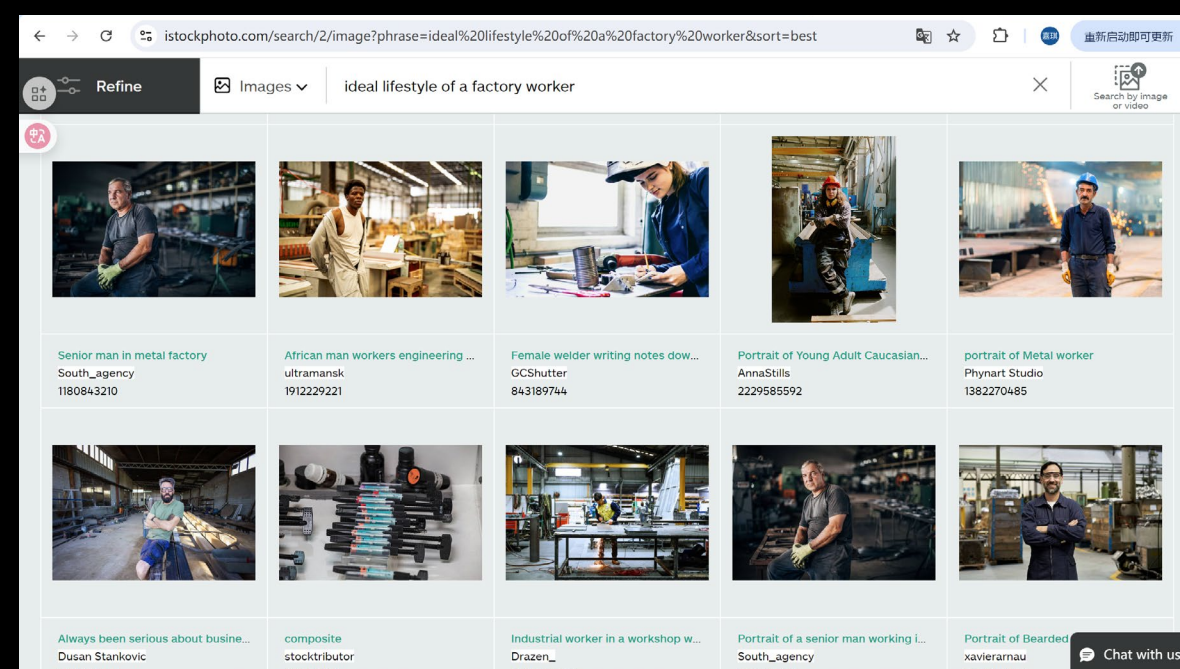
(3) farmer



(7) doctor



(4) teacher



Who Is Allowed to **Smile**?

When I searched 'ideal lifestyle' with different professions, happiness became a requirement — everyone was smiling at work. The **same smile moves from beach to office**, appearing in both **leisure and labour**. It's a repeated image that makes every kind of life look desirable.

But not everyone smiles in the same way. Cleaners and farmers smile to please others — their faces become part of the service. In stock photos, farmers often smile not while working, but while showing their harvest, as if their joy could prove the value of their labour. Their smiles don't belong to them; they are made to **comfort the viewer**.

Factory workers, however, rarely smile. Their work isn't meant to be seen, and their reality doesn't fit the fantasy of 'happy work'. **Capitalism sells rest** so we can keep working, and along the way, it decides who is allowed to look happy. Some smiles are shown; others are hidden. Even happiness becomes **part of the machine** that keeps everything moving.

Data Results: Smile Frequency

I counted how often people smiled in each profession. Some jobs demand smiles; others erase them.

Search Term	Images	Total Images	With Smiling Faces	Without Smiles
Ideal lifestyle		100	95	5
Ideal lifestyle + teacher		100	91	9
Ideal lifestyle + nurse		100	88	12
Ideal lifestyle + office worker		100	86	14
Ideal lifestyle + doctor		100	83	17
Ideal lifestyle + farmer		100	72	28
Ideal lifestyle + cleaner		100	68	32
Ideal lifestyle + factory worker		100	27	73

Conclusion: The Four Smile Types & Final Reflection

1. Four Types of Smiles:

- (1) Leisure Smile — tourists, beaches, relaxation
- (2) Service Smile — teachers, cleaners, nurses
- (2) Success Smile — farmers showing harvest
- (4) Invisible Smile — factory workers with no visible emotion

2. Conclusion:

The “ideal lifestyle” is a visual script built through repetition.
It:

- (1) Normalises Western consumerist happiness
- (2) Idealises certain bodies while erasing others
- (3) Beautifies some labour (service)
- (4) Hides other labour (industrial)
- (5) Uses emotion (smiles) as a visual tool to sell desire



Plan to make a book