



Redefining the Self through Digital Narratives: Identity Transformation among Postgraduate Students Engaging with YouTube Self-Improvement Content

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ABSTRACT

Digital media plays a pivotal role in shaping identity, especially among young adults undergoing academic and personal transitions. While previous studies have explored the behavioral effects of media use, limited attention has been given to how individuals internalize self-improvement content and derive meaning from it in the context of identity transformation. This study addresses that gap by asking: How do postgraduate students experience and interpret identity transformation after engaging with self-improvement content on YouTube?

Adopting an interpretative phenomenological approach, the study explores the subjective meanings participants attach to their engagement with motivational digital media. Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten postgraduate students who regularly watched self-improvement videos on YouTube.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) revealed four core themes: YouTube as a reflective mirror, internalization of aspirational values, identity realignment, and emotional empowerment. These findings suggest that YouTube serves not only as a source of information or entertainment but also as a framework for reimagining self concept and future direction.

Participants' narratives highlight a transformative relationship between media consumption and personal development, especially during times of academic pressure or self-doubt. This study enhances understanding of digital media's impact by offering a lived-experience perspective, emphasizing the importance of meaning-making in media engagement. It contributes to media and identity studies and opens new avenues for interdisciplinary research on the reflective and emotional roles of digital media.



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INTRODUCTION

In the evolving landscape of digital media, platforms like YouTube have become more than just sources of entertainment or information—they serve as arenas for personal transformation and identity construction. Among its diverse content, self-improvement videos have surged in popularity, promoting strategies for personal growth, productivity, and emotional resilience (Krylova-Grek & Korniyaka, 2023). With global accessibility and algorithmic personalization, this content has a profound influence, particularly on digitally literate groups like postgraduate students.

For individuals navigating transitional life stages, such as postgraduate study, media content often becomes a mirror through which they contemplate their identities and aspirations. This introspective process is highly personal, shaped by cultural narratives around success and self-worth. In academic environments, where students frequently confront intellectual and emotional challenges, exposure to motivational media may deeply intersect with identity development.

Understanding how individuals interpret such media is essential. While past research has largely focused on behavioral or cognitive outcomes, few studies have examined how people

subjectively make meaning from their media interactions, particularly in relation to identity transformation (Lalani & Laine, 2023). This study addresses that gap through a phenomenological lens, prioritizing the lived experiences and internal reflections of media users.

Although interest in media's psychological impact is growing, many existing studies rely on quantitative methods that emphasize observable outcomes. These approaches, while useful for measuring constructs like motivation or self-efficacy, often overlook the complex, emotional, and symbolic processes that underpin identity change. For example, survey-based designs may capture changes in self-perception but fail to uncover the deeper narratives and emotional resonance behind those changes (Lozano-Monterrubio dkk., 2024).

To move beyond surface-level understanding, qualitative methods—especially phenomenology—offer valuable tools for exploring the nuanced experiences of media users. This approach enables researchers to investigate how individuals internalize digital narratives and reconstruct their sense of self through them. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), in particular, allows for in-depth exploration of personal meaning-making.

This study employs IPA to examine how postgraduate students experience transformation through engagement with YouTube self-improvement content. By centering on their subjective accounts, this research seeks to reveal the psychological and emotional processes involved in digital media consumption. This methodology offers a more holistic perspective than traditional outcome-driven models, and it responds directly to the gaps identified in prior work.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: the introduction establishes the study's context and purpose; the methodology outlines the IPA approach, participant recruitment, and data analysis; the results present key emergent themes; and the discussion situates these findings within broader theoretical and empirical contexts. The article concludes with implications for future research in media and identity studies (Pasitselska, 2024; Pereira dkk., 2024).

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of postgraduate students who regularly engaged with self-improvement content on YouTube. Phenomenology, as a qualitative research design, focuses on understanding the meaning individuals assign to their lived experiences. The interpretative branch of phenomenology, rooted in the philosophical traditions of Heidegger, was selected for its emphasis on meaning-making through reflective interpretation (Valasek dkk., 2022). This approach is particularly suited for uncovering how individuals internalize media narratives and reconstruct their identities in dynamic, media-saturated environments. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the study aimed to access deep layers of experiential meaning, revealing how digital media intersects with personal and academic identity formation.

Participants

Participants consisted of postgraduate students who reported regular consumption of self-improvement content on YouTube and reflected on its influence on their self-concept and daily life. Selection was conducted using purposive sampling to ensure participants possessed firsthand, rich experiences relevant to the studied phenomenon. Inclusion criteria included current enrollment in a postgraduate program, a minimum of six months' engagement with self-improvement content, and willingness to articulate personal reflections (Valverde-Berrocoso dkk., 2022). Individuals with no exposure to motivational or self-development content on YouTube were excluded. A total of 10 participants (6 females, 4 males), aged between 24 and 32 years (mean age: 28.1), from various academic disciplines were involved, providing a diverse yet focused perspective on the identity transformation process.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews designed to elicit detailed narratives of participants' experiences with self-improvement content on YouTube. An interview guide containing open-ended prompts facilitated the exploration of participants' reflections, emotional responses, and perceived shifts in identity (Ventsel dkk., 2024). Each interview was conducted in a quiet, comfortable setting—either in person or via secure video conferencing platforms—based on participant preference. Interviews lasted between 45 to 70 minutes and were audio-recorded with consent. A supportive environment was ensured to encourage openness and authenticity during data sharing. All interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis. The interview protocol was developed based on existing IPA guidelines and was adapted iteratively based on preliminary data insights to enhance relevance and depth.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was guided by the principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Transcripts were first read repeatedly to ensure familiarity and immersion. Meaningful statements were identified and segmented into initial codes, which were then clustered into emergent themes. These themes were examined across participants to detect patterns, divergences, and convergences in their experiences (Asfahani, 2024). The coding and thematic structuring were supported by NVivo software, which facilitated data organization without dictating interpretive decisions. Throughout the analytic process, efforts were made to preserve the idiographic nature of each participant's narrative while also constructing a coherent thematic synthesis. The final themes represented the essence of participants' lived experiences, grounded in both their narratives and the contextual interpretation of those narratives.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional ethics review board. Written informed consent was secured from all participants prior to data collection, with detailed explanations of the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Participants' identities were anonymized through pseudonyms, and all personal information was kept confidential. The study adhered to internationally accepted ethical standards for research involving human subjects, including the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and applicable national guidelines.

RESULTS

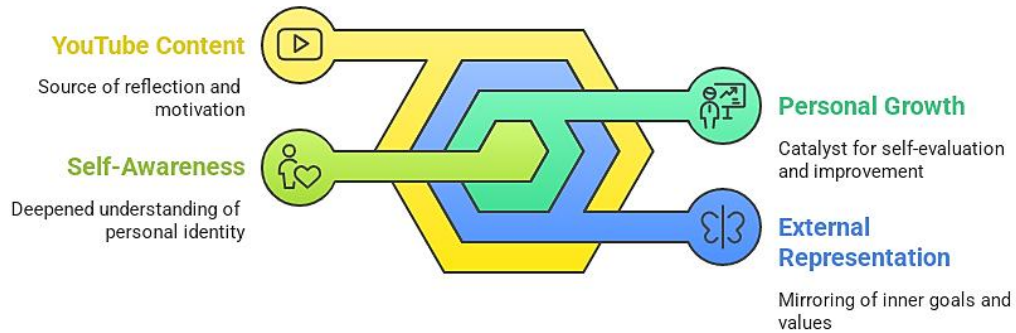
YouTube as a Reflective Mirror of the Self

Many participants described YouTube content not merely as a source of passive consumption, but as a reflective space that resonated with their personal aspirations, struggles, and self-perception. Motivational videos, in particular, acted as a catalyst for self-evaluation and personal growth.

“Each time I watch those success stories, I feel like it's talking directly to me—like someone finally understands my doubts and pushes me forward.” (P4)

Participants emphasized that YouTube content served as an external representation of their inner goals and values. The video narratives often mirrored their own journey and struggles, creating a reflective feedback loop that deepened their self-awareness.

YouTube as a Reflective Mirror



Internalization of Self-Improvement Discourses

Another dominant theme revealed how participants internalized the values and ideologies embedded in self-improvement content, especially messages about productivity, resilience, and self-discipline.

“I used to procrastinate a lot, but after consistently watching content about morning routines and discipline, I started to feel guilty whenever I wasted time. It slowly changed how I planned my days.” (P7)

These internalizations were not superficial. Instead, they gradually influenced participants' daily routines, decision-making processes, and academic ambitions. They often referred to specific YouTube personalities as “virtual mentors,” indicating the depth of personal engagement and perceived guidance.

Identity Realignment and Self-Reconstruction

Exposure to curated narratives of success led several participants to reconsider their current identity and future trajectory. YouTube became a platform where they experimented with new self-concepts and life goals.

“I started to realize I could become someone entirely different. These videos made me believe I didn't have to stay in the same role I was in last year.” (P2)

Participants reported undergoing a process of identity realignment, where they redefined who they were and who they aspired to become. This reconstruction was not immediate but evolved through repeated exposure and reflection.

Emotional Empowerment and Psychological Shifts

Participants also highlighted the emotional support derived from self-improvement videos, particularly during periods of academic stress or self-doubt. These videos provided a sense of comfort, companionship, and emotional validation.

“There were nights when I felt I wasn't good enough for grad school. But listening to motivational speeches made me cry—yet also made me believe I was capable.” (P6)

The psychological shift was evident in their enhanced sense of agency and resilience. The videos contributed to emotional regulation and promoted optimism, which participants linked to improved academic engagement and personal well-being.

The core essence of the participants' experience lies in their active engagement with YouTube as a space of meaning-making, where self-improvement content functioned not only as motivation but as a transformative influence on personal identity. This transformation unfolded through reflection, emotional engagement, and internalization of motivational narratives, ultimately reshaping their perception of self in both personal and academic realms.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that postgraduate students experience self-improvement content on YouTube as a transformative medium that facilitates identity reflection, emotional empowerment, and internalization of aspirational values (Bijlsma dkk., 2022). These experiences, interpreted through an interpretative phenomenological lens, offer nuanced insight into how digital media engagement contributes to the construction and realignment of personal and academic identities. These results directly respond to the central research question: How do postgraduate students experience and interpret identity transformation after exposure to self-improvement content on YouTube?

This study contributes to the understanding of identity formation by illuminating how participants do not merely consume content passively but actively engage with it as a tool for self-definition and motivation. The transformative impact of YouTube content lies in its perceived authenticity, relatability, and emotional resonance, allowing individuals to see their aspirations reflected in others' narratives. These processes foster self-efficacy, renewed life direction, and a sense of agency, particularly during moments of doubt or academic stress. Importantly, the findings highlight the role of digital content in filling gaps traditionally occupied by in-person mentors or structured support systems, especially in the context of postgraduate life, where autonomy and uncertainty coexist.

The current findings are consistent with and extend previous research on media-mediated self-concept development. For instance, (Biney & Azaglo, 2024) identified that motivational media can influence personal discipline and self-perception, yet they did not explore how users internalize such messages within evolving identity frameworks. Similarly, (Cado, 2020) emphasized digital media's role in value alignment but lacked depth in interpreting participants' lived meanings. This study complements and deepens these perspectives by offering a phenomenological account of the subjective experiences behind identity realignment. Drawing on self-determination theory and media identity construction frameworks, these results underscore that digital platforms are not only behavioral influencers but also existential arenas in which identity is reimagined, negotiated, and reshaped.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry meaningful implications for both scholarly and practical domains, particularly within higher education and digital media literacy. From a sociocultural perspective, the role of YouTube as a reflective space highlights the evolving nature of media consumption—shifting from passive viewing to active self-construction. The participants' engagement with self-improvement content underscores a broader cultural trend toward individualized, media-facilitated identity formation, particularly in contexts where formal mentorship or psychosocial support may be lacking. For educators and mental health practitioners, understanding these dynamics can inform more responsive support structures for students navigating academic and personal challenges. Furthermore, these insights may be useful in designing interventions or platforms that integrate motivational content with reflective practices to enhance student well-being and self-development.

Study Limitations

Despite the richness of the data, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The sample size was intentionally small, as typical in interpretative phenomenological analysis, which limits the generalizability of the findings (Chatpibal dkk., 2024). All participants were postgraduate students from similar educational backgrounds, potentially narrowing the range of perspectives captured. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported experiences introduces the possibility of memory bias or selective disclosure. The study focused exclusively on YouTube as the media platform, which may not account for the influence of other digital or social media channels that contribute to identity formation. These limitations do not undermine the value of the findings but highlight the importance of contextual interpretation and the need for further exploration in diverse settings.

Future Research Directions

Future studies could extend this line of inquiry by examining similar identity transformation processes among undergraduates, working professionals, or individuals from non-academic backgrounds. Comparative phenomenological studies involving different media platforms—such as TikTok, podcasts, or Instagram—may provide broader insight into how digital content shapes self-concept across demographic and cultural contexts. Longitudinal research could also explore how sustained exposure to self-improvement narratives influences identity over time. Moreover, integrating phenomenological findings with psychological or sociological models could enrich interdisciplinary understanding of digital media's impact on human development. By continuing to investigate the subjective experience of media engagement, future research can contribute to more holistic theories of identity in the digital age.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how postgraduate students experience identity transformation through their engagement with self-improvement content on YouTube. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research revealed that participants internalize motivational narratives, reflect on their personal aspirations, and reconstruct their self-concept in response to digital media exposure. The findings highlighted four essential themes: self-reflection, value internalization, identity realignment, and emotional empowerment. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of how media can shape identity beyond behavior, offering a rich, experience-based perspective that previous quantitative studies have overlooked. This research addresses a critical gap by revealing the internal, meaning-making processes individuals undergo when engaging with digital content. Future studies could expand this work by exploring similar phenomena across diverse populations or media platforms to enrich our understanding of digital identity formation.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest. This research was conducted independently, and the findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not reflect the views of the funding organization.

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