



Understanding the Lived Experience of Political Narrative Engagement Among Social Media Users

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ABSTRACT

Political communication in the digital age has shifted dramatically, with social media emerging as a dominant space where individuals encounter and interpret political narratives. While prior research has examined media effects on public opinion, little is known about how people emotionally and cognitively experience these narratives in everyday contexts. This study addresses that gap by asking: How do individuals make sense of political narratives on social media, and how does this shape their political perceptions? Using an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), the study explores participants' lived experiences to reveal how political meaning is constructed through personal reflection and emotional engagement. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve social media users, and the data were analyzed thematically. The analysis identified three central themes: emotional resonance as a catalyst for political engagement, cognitive reorientation through narrative internalization, and tension between trust and skepticism in digital discourse. These findings suggest that individuals critically and reflexively interact with political information, reshaping their political identities in the process. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of how political subjectivity is formed in digitally mediated environments and highlights the importance of affective and interpretive dimensions often overlooked in prior research. These insights hold relevance for scholars, educators, and policymakers aiming to foster critical digital citizenship in increasingly polarized media landscapes.



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INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary digital age, social media has become a powerful force in shaping public discourse and political meaning-making (Castells, 2015; Papacharissi, 2016). Political narratives that were once centralized in traditional media are now frequently propagated, contested, and reinterpreted within interactive digital spaces where individuals act as both consumers and content creators. This evolution has redefined political communication, fostering a highly dynamic, emotionally charged, and fragmented media environment.

Beyond institutional politics, this shift influences individuals' everyday experiences. As users navigate algorithm-driven feeds and emotionally salient content, they are not merely informed but are often deeply affected. These engagements influence perceptions of social justice, trust in political figures, and evolving notions of civic belonging (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Rather than serving solely as information transmitters, digital media platforms now function as sites of emotional mediation and identity negotiation within the public sphere.

While media influence on political behavior—such as voting patterns or content virality—has been extensively studied (Stroud, 2014; Tucker et al., 2017), the interpretative and affective dimensions of political engagement remain underexplored. This gap is particularly pronounced in non-Western settings, where political narratives intersect with historical memory, collective trauma, and identity politics. Understanding how individuals emotionally and cognitively engage with these

narratives is essential to unpack the broader implications of political subjectivity in diverse sociopolitical contexts (Abidin & de Seta, 2020). Phenomenological inquiry offers a pathway to illuminate these dimensions by privileging the lived experiences of individuals as they encounter, internalize, and respond to political narratives in digital spaces. Rather than treating media consumption as a passive act, a phenomenological approach emphasizes how individuals construct meaning from their encounters, often in ways that are emotionally layered, contextually situated, and politically consequential. This perspective is vital for capturing the nuanced ways in which political consciousness is formed, disrupted, or reconfigured in everyday life.

Within the broader domain of political communication, research into individuals' lived experiences of media narratives has become an increasingly vital area of inquiry. Scholars have recognized that media effects cannot be fully understood without considering the ways in which individuals interpret, internalize, and emotionally engage with political content¹. This recognition has spurred a shift from purely behavioral or cognitive models to approaches that value the subjective and affective dimensions of political media engagement.

However, the methodological approaches traditionally employed in this field particularly large-scale surveys, content analyses, and experimental designs have often prioritized quantifiable outcomes over the richness of human experience. These methods, while valuable for identifying general trends, tend to abstract individuals from their social and cultural contexts, and thus struggle to capture the depth, nuance, and variability of personal meaning-making processes. As a result, the introspective and interpretive qualities that characterize individuals' engagement with political narratives remain underexplored, especially in the context of social media where meaning is negotiated through fragmented, emotionally infused encounters.

Moreover, in non-Western societies such as Indonesia where political narratives intersect with localized histories, religious identity, and collective memory, understanding the experiential contours of how these narratives are received becomes even more complex. Existing studies in such contexts are largely constrained by their reliance on deductive frameworks and predefined categories, leaving limited room for participants' voices to emerge authentically. As noted by Tandoc et al. (2018), even studies that incorporate digital ethnography often fall short in addressing how users emotionally and reflectively navigate political discourse across platforms.

These limitations underscore the need for a research design capable of revealing the essence of individual experiences and the meanings attached to them. Phenomenology particularly in its interpretative form offers the conceptual and methodological tools to fill this gap. By centering human experience as the object of inquiry, phenomenological research allows for an in-depth exploration of how individuals live through and make sense of political realities as mediated by social media narratives.

While the influence of media on political perception has been widely acknowledged, prevailing research strategies have largely relied on pragmatic approaches that emphasize measurable behaviors, such as media consumption patterns, sharing practices, or shifts in public opinion indexes¹. These strategies have generated valuable insights into the scope and spread of political narratives but remain insufficient for capturing the personal, affective, and interpretive dimensions of how these narratives are experienced and internalized by individuals.

The dominant reliance on quantitative instruments surveys, polling, and big data analytics tends to simplify complex human encounters into statistical patterns, thereby limiting access to the depth and nuance of subjective meaning-making. Even when qualitative elements are incorporated, such as in digital ethnography or structured interviews, the focus often leans toward content categorization or media effects, rather than a sustained engagement with the lived experience of political media interaction². As a result, existing models are unable to adequately address the emotional resonance, internal conflicts, and interpretive negotiations that individuals undergo as they engage with politicized content online.

This limitation is particularly salient in culturally diverse and politically dynamic societies, where media narratives intersect with historical, religious, and social complexities that shape

individual responses. Current research often fails to account for how these contextual layers inform the personal significance of media narratives and the formation of political consciousness. What remains underexplored is how users of social media particularly laypersons not professionally engaged in politics make sense of the narratives they consume, and how these narratives influence their evolving perceptions, beliefs, and identities.

A more suitable and insightful approach, therefore, lies in adopting phenomenological methodology, which privileges personal experience as a primary source of knowledge. By focusing on how individuals perceive, interpret, and emotionally engage with political narratives, phenomenology enables a holistic and grounded understanding of the phenomenon that transcends superficial behavioral indicators. This methodological shift is crucial for addressing the experiential core of political engagement in the digital age.

Previous studies have explored how media influences political attitudes, often using theories such as agenda-setting, framing, or cultivation. While these approaches explain the media's structural power, they frequently overlook how individuals personally interpret political messages in everyday life. Some recent research has begun to recognize the role of emotion and subjective engagement, such as Papacharissi's (2015) work on affective publics, which highlights how digital content provokes political feeling and belonging. However, studies focusing on the lived experiences of ordinary social media users remain limited, particularly in regions where political discourse is shaped by local history and identity. This study builds on that emerging recognition by focusing on meaning-making as an experiential and emotional process.

To explore this dimension, the study adopts Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This method enables a deep understanding of how participants interpret and assign meaning to their encounters with political narratives on social media. IPA is chosen because it aligns with the aim of uncovering emotional resonance, internal reflection, and subjective transformation elements often missed by quantitative models. By centering participants' own words and perspectives, the study responds directly to the knowledge gap identified earlier. The phenomenological lens helps reveal how media experiences shape political identity at the personal level.

The structure of this article begins with an introduction that outlines the problem and theoretical context. It continues with a section detailing the methodological foundations of phenomenology and how they were applied. This is followed by a description of data collection and the step-by-step analysis process using IPA. The results section presents three main themes that emerged from participant narratives, supported by direct quotations. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings and suggestions for future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of individuals engaging with political narratives on social media. The phenomenological design was selected due to its emphasis on understanding how people make sense of their subjective experiences within a particular social and cultural context. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was deemed appropriate as it facilitates an in-depth examination of the meanings that participants ascribe to complex, emotionally laden phenomena such as political discourse based on their personal reflections.

Unlike descriptive phenomenology, which aims to bracket preconceptions, the interpretative variant acknowledges that understanding is co-constructed through a double hermeneutic process: participants make sense of their experiences, and the researcher interprets that sense-making. This epistemological stance was aligned with the research objective of uncovering how individuals internalize, respond to, and derive meaning from political narratives encountered in digital spaces.

Participants

Participants in this study consisted of twelve adult individuals (7 females, 5 males), aged between 22 and 38 years (mean age: 29.4), all of whom were active users of social media platforms with regular exposure to political content. Selection followed a purposive sampling strategy, focusing on individuals with diverse political orientations and demonstrated engagement with political discourse online.

Inclusion criteria required participants to: (1) be active on at least one major social media platform (e.g., Twitter/X, Instagram, Facebook); (2) report exposure to political narratives over the past 12 months; and (3) be able to articulate their experiences in a reflective and descriptive manner. Individuals with professional affiliations to political parties, government institutions, or media organizations were excluded to maintain focus on lay users' experiences. The final sample represented a mix of educational and occupational backgrounds, contributing to a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, guided by a flexible protocol that allowed for probing and elaboration based on participants' responses. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in quiet, neutral locations or via secure video conferencing platforms, depending on participant preference and logistical feasibility. Each session lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, and all interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The interview guide was designed to elicit reflections on participants' encounters with political content, emotional and cognitive responses, and perceived shifts in political perception. The guide was reviewed by two qualitative research experts for clarity and alignment with the study objectives. Efforts were made to ensure a comfortable, non-judgmental atmosphere, allowing participants to freely articulate their experiences. Notes on nonverbal cues and contextual elements were documented to support interpretation during analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), following a systematic, multi-stage process to capture the depth and complexity of participants' meaning-making. Transcripts were read and re-read to facilitate immersion in the data. Initial coding involved the identification of significant phrases and expressions, which were organized into meaning units. These were subsequently clustered into emergent themes, capturing shared and unique dimensions of experience.

Themes were refined through iterative comparison across cases, preserving both individual nuance and cross-participant patterns. NVivo software was utilized to support data organization and enhance analytical rigor, though thematic interpretation remained grounded in manual, close textual engagement. The analytical process sought to illuminate the essence of participants' lived experiences, contextualized within broader sociopolitical dynamics.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from a recognized institutional review board, ensuring compliance with accepted standards for research involving human subjects. All participants were provided with detailed information regarding the study's aims, procedures, and ethical safeguards. Written informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained, with pseudonyms used in all transcripts and reporting. The study adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and followed applicable national research ethics regulations..

RESULTS

This section presents the thematic findings derived from an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of the participants' lived experiences with political narratives encountered on social media. The analysis identified three central themes that encapsulate the transformative influence of

media narratives on political perception: (1) Emotional Resonance as a Catalyst for Political Engagement, (2) Cognitive Reorientation Through Narrative Internalization, and (3) Tension Between Trust and Skepticism in Digital Political Discourse. Each theme is supported by rich, descriptive excerpts from participants' reflections, illustrating the personal and situated nature of their experiences.

Emotional Resonance as a Catalyst for Political Engagement

Participants frequently described moments when media content triggered strong emotional reactions, which became pivotal in shaping or reaffirming their political stances. Emotional resonance especially content that evoked anger, empathy, or fear was identified as a key mechanism through which political messages penetrated personal belief systems.

“I wasn't even following politics much. But when I saw that video about the protests... it felt personal. I was angry, and I started to read more, share more, get involved. It pulled me in.” (Participant 4)

Such emotional encounters often led to sustained engagement with political topics, sometimes even altering pre-existing apathy. Participants emphasized the affective power of visual and narrative elements in media, especially those shared through viral formats such as short videos and memes.

“One story about a family losing their land because of a new regulation it haunted me. Suddenly, the policy wasn't abstract anymore. It was real.” (Participant 9)

Emotions thus served not only as reactions but as gateways to deeper political interest and active participation.

Cognitive Reorientation Through Narrative Internalization

Beyond emotional responses, participants reported undergoing cognitive shifts changes in how they understood political issues and redefined their ideological orientations after repeated exposure to persuasive narratives on social media. These narratives often provided simplified explanations that resonated with participants' lived realities.

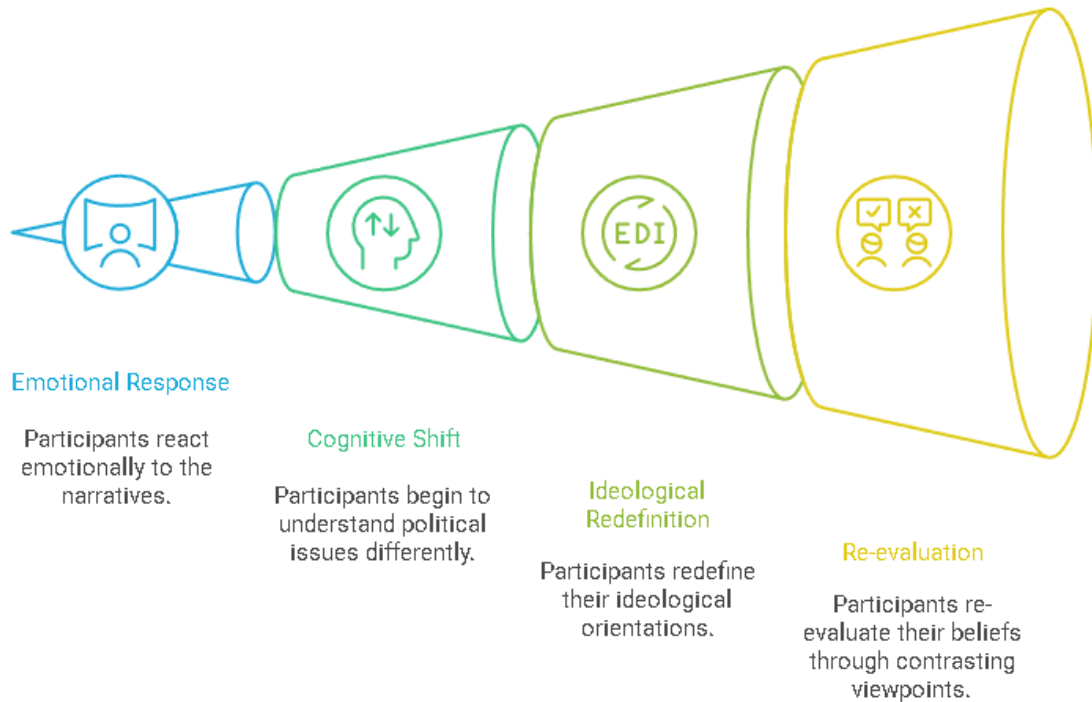
“Before, I thought corruption was just about money. But after reading threads on Twitter explaining how media covers up scandals... it changed the way I see the entire system.” (Participant 2)

This internalization process was gradual and introspective. Several participants acknowledged moments of re-evaluation, often prompted by engaging with contrasting viewpoints presented through personalized media algorithms.

“I started following accounts with opposing views just out of curiosity. I didn't expect it, but over time, I began to understand their logic. It was uncomfortable at first, but it made me question things I took for granted.” (Participant 7)

These narratives acted as frameworks for interpreting reality, shaping participants' understanding of social justice, nationalism, governance, and democratic values.

Cognitive Reorientation Process



Tension Between Trust and Skepticism in Digital Political Discourse

Participants expressed a persistent ambivalence regarding the credibility of political content encountered on social media. While narratives were powerful and emotionally engaging, they often generated doubt and confusion, particularly when participants encountered conflicting versions of the same event.

“Sometimes I really want to believe what I read, especially when it matches how I feel. But then, another post says the opposite and both look convincing. I don’t know what to trust anymore.” (Participant 6)

This tension was particularly evident when participants described navigating media echo chambers, acknowledging the risk of bias while simultaneously relying on familiar sources for information.

“I follow certain influencers not because I believe everything they say, but because they explain things in a way that makes sense. I’m aware it might be one-sided, but at least I can make sense of things.” (Participant 3)

The interplay of trust and skepticism contributed to a more self-reflexive form of political literacy, where participants became critically aware of the constructed nature of media narratives.

In sum, participants’ lived experiences revealed that political narratives on social media are not passively received but are actively felt, interpreted, and negotiated. Emotional resonance initiated political curiosity, internalized narratives reshaped understanding, and skepticism fostered critical awareness. These findings underscore the complex interplay between media discourse and political subjectivity in the digital age.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed that participants’ engagement with political narratives on social media is profoundly shaped by emotional resonance, cognitive reorientation, and a dynamic tension between trust and skepticism. These themes reflect the lived complexity of interpreting political content in digital spaces and provide essential insight into how such narratives shape political perception a core concern raised in the introduction.

By focusing on subjective experiences, the study responds directly to the central research question: How do individuals interpret and internalize political narratives encountered on social media, and how does this influence their political perception? The results demonstrate that participants are not passive recipients of media content; rather, they actively negotiate meaning through affective and reflective processes. Emotional responses serve as entry points into political awareness, while ongoing exposure encourages re-evaluation of long-held beliefs. Moreover, the tension between belief and doubt highlights a critical literacy that participants bring to their digital environments. These findings contribute uniquely to the discourse by emphasizing how emotional and interpretive engagements shape political identity at a personal level, particularly in politically plural and media-saturated societies.

This study's conclusions align with prior research emphasizing the role of affect in political communication, such as Papacharissi's (2015) concept of affective publics, which describes how emotion mediates civic participation in digital contexts¹. However, unlike prior studies that focus on collective sentiment or viral mobilization, this research delves into individual interpretative processes, revealing how personal histories and social contexts influence meaning-making. The findings also complement Couldry's (2012) view of media as a space where social reality is constructed, while extending it by showing how individuals navigate this construction critically and emotionally. Importantly, the theme of negotiated trust complicates earlier media effects models, suggesting that users simultaneously rely on and resist the narratives they encounter a dynamic not often captured in traditional frameworks.

Implications of the Findings

The insights generated from this study hold both theoretical and practical significance. On a social level, the findings illuminate how digital political narratives are not merely consumed but are experienced in ways that deeply influence individuals' self-understanding and sense of political agency. The affective and interpretive nature of this engagement suggests that political communication strategies particularly in multicultural and transitional democracies like Indonesia must consider the emotional and narrative dimensions of message reception, not merely their informational content. Culturally, the study underscores the importance of considering local values, historical memory, and personal identity in understanding how political messages are internalized. For educators, journalists, and civic organizations, these findings suggest a need to foster media literacy programs that go beyond critical thinking to also include emotional awareness and reflective interpretation of content. Thematically, the research contributes to the growing discourse on how political subjectivities are shaped within fragmented, algorithmically curated media environments.

Limitations of the Study

While the study provides rich, nuanced insights into the lived experiences of social media users, it is not without limitations. The purposive sample, while appropriate for phenomenological research, restricts the breadth of representation and does not capture the full diversity of demographic, ideological, or technological experiences that may exist in broader populations. The study's reliance on self-reported narratives may also be influenced by participants' memory, introspective capacity, or social desirability biases. Additionally, the interpretative nature of IPA requires careful reflexivity, as the researcher's own lens inevitably shapes the analysis. These limitations do not undermine the study's value but rather underscore the importance of viewing the findings as contextually grounded rather than universally generalizable. They also point to the importance of triangulating qualitative insights with other methods in future research.

Directions for Future Research

Building on the current findings, future studies may explore how specific political events or crises further shape the emotional and interpretive engagement of citizens with media narratives. Comparative studies across different cultural or political contexts would help identify whether the themes uncovered in this study are consistent across environments or uniquely shaped by local dynamics. Longitudinal research could also offer insight into how individuals' interpretations of political content evolve over time, especially in response to shifting media landscapes or

sociopolitical changes. Moreover, integrating phenomenological methods with digital trace data may offer a richer understanding of the relationship between online behavior and internal meaning-making processes. Ultimately, this research contributes a foundation for deeper inquiry into the personal dimensions of political communication in the digital age.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated how individuals experience and interpret political narratives on social media by foregrounding lived experience as a key analytical lens. It identified three interrelated dynamics—emotional resonance, cognitive reorientation, and negotiated trust—as central mechanisms through which users engage with politicized content in digital environments. Rather than merely absorbing political information, participants actively reframed narratives through affective and reflective processes.

These findings extend prior research by foregrounding the subjective and affective layers of media interaction, dimensions that have often been treated as peripheral or anecdotal. Through the use of an interpretative phenomenological approach, this study underscores the generative role of personal meaning-making in the formation of political identity in the digital age. More critically, the study suggests that digital political engagement is not simply a function of exposure or algorithmic influence, but a continuous negotiation of belief, identity, and emotional coherence. This has profound implications for how we conceive media literacy—not merely as a set of cognitive skills, but as an embodied, emotionally situated practice.

Future research should investigate how these interpretative dynamics evolve across different cultural and ideological contexts, especially in environments marked by disinformation, political repression, or democratic backsliding. Longitudinal and cross-platform analyses would also help trace the durability and transformation of political meaning over time, offering a richer understanding of how digital publics are formed and sustained.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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