



## Digital Self-Reconstruction: Postgraduate Reflections on YouTube's Role in Identity Formation

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### ABSTRACT

In the digital era, motivational content on YouTube has transcended its entertainment role to become a profound influence on personal development and identity formation. This study investigates how postgraduate students reflect upon and reinterpret their self-concept through sustained engagement with self-improvement videos. Using a qualitative design grounded in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the research employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten postgraduate students who regularly consumed motivational content. Findings reveal that YouTube serves as more than a passive medium—it functions as a virtual mirror, a source of emotional support, and a space for aspirational alignment. Participants reported significant shifts in self-perception, including greater self-awareness, emotional regulation, and reevaluation of academic and life goals. These narratives suggest that digital content plays a substantial role in shaping identity, particularly during periods of academic uncertainty and personal transition. The study highlights four emergent themes: reflective media engagement, internalization of productivity values, self-realignment, and psychological empowerment. By emphasizing meaning-making over behavioral metrics, this research contributes to media and identity scholarship by illuminating how personal narratives are actively reconstructed through digital interaction. The findings propose a nuanced understanding of YouTube as an agent of psychological and emotional transformation in educational contexts, offering insights for educators, counselors, and media literacy initiatives.



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## INTRODUCTION

In the evolving landscape of digital media, platforms such as YouTube have emerged not only as tools for entertainment and information but also as spaces of personal transformation and self-construction. Among various types of content, self-improvement videos have gained immense popularity, offering audiences strategies for personal growth, productivity enhancement, and emotional resilience. These videos often feature motivational speeches, life coaching advice, and success stories, all of which are designed to inspire individuals to reevaluate and restructure their lives (Krylova-Grek & Korniyaka, 2023). The global accessibility and algorithmic personalization of such content contribute to its pervasive influence, especially among digitally literate populations such as postgraduate students.

The relevance of this phenomenon extends beyond media consumption into the realm of identity and self-perception. For many individuals, particularly those navigating transitional life stages, media content becomes a mirror through which they reflect on who they are and who they aspire to be. This process is inherently subjective and deeply embedded in cultural narratives about success, self-worth, and personal fulfillment. In academic contexts, postgraduate students are frequently engaged in introspective processes concerning their intellectual, emotional, and social development. Consequently, exposure to ideologically charged media—such as self-improvement videos—can significantly intersect with these developmental journeys, influencing the way individuals interpret their roles and capabilities.

Understanding how individuals experience and interpret such media is essential for comprehending the broader psychosocial effects of digital communication. While previous studies have addressed media effects from behavioral or cognitive perspectives, fewer have explored how individuals personally make meaning from their interactions with media, especially in ways that influence identity (Lalani & Laine, 2023). This study addresses that gap by applying Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which is well-suited to uncovering the lived meanings and identity-related implications of such engagement. Unlike outcome-driven approaches, IPA focuses on subjective experiences, enabling a deeper understanding of the psychological and emotional processes through which individuals integrate motivational narratives into their evolving sense of self.

Traditional quantitative approaches—such as surveys and experiments—offer valuable metrics but often fail to capture the nuanced, internal dialogues that shape identity transformation. Existing research tends to emphasize observable changes in motivation or behavior, overlooking how and why individuals resonate with certain narratives or reinterpret their aspirations through media engagement. A phenomenological approach provides the necessary depth to reveal these processes, offering a more holistic perspective on identity as a lived and socially mediated phenomenon. Previous studies have explored how digital media influences motivation, behavior, and academic performance, particularly among students and young adults. Research in this area has often drawn from theories of media effects, self-determination theory, and identity development. However, most of these studies focus on observable outcomes, overlooking the subjective experiences and meaning-making processes of individuals (Oliveira dkk., 2024). A few qualitative studies have attempted to understand media reception, but they typically stop short of deeply analyzing how individuals internalize and reconstruct their identities through media engagement. Therefore, a more immersive and participant-centered approach is needed to reveal the internal dynamics of identity transformation in the context of media use.

This study uses an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore how postgraduate students experience personal transformation through YouTube's self-improvement content. Phenomenology is chosen because it allows for a deeper understanding of how individuals interpret and find meaning in their experiences. Specifically, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) supports the investigation of lived experiences, focusing on how participants construct meaning from their digital encounters (Pasitselska, 2024). This approach directly responds to the knowledge gap identified earlier, where previous methods failed to capture the complexity of identity reconstruction. By engaging participants in reflective dialogue, this study aims to uncover the psychological and emotional processes involved in digital media engagement.

This article is structured as follows. The introduction presents the background and motivation for the study, establishing the significance of the phenomenon. The methodology section details the phenomenological approach, participant selection, data collection, and analysis procedures. The results section presents key themes derived from participant narratives, emphasizing emotional, cognitive, and identity-related experiences (Pereira dkk., 2024). The discussion interprets these findings in light of relevant theories and previous research. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the study's contributions and implications for future research in media and identity studies.

## **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-Berrocso 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.

### **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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