



# Exploring the Lived Experiences of Social Media Communication: A Phenomenological Study of Identity Construction and Trust among Digital Users

Wardah

Universitas Muhammadiyah Makassar, Indonesia

[wardah@unismuh.ac.id](mailto:wardah@unismuh.ac.id)

## Article Info

### Article history:

Received 27-01-2025

Revised 26-02-2025

Accepted 17-03-2025

### Keyword:

Social Media, Communication, Identity Construction, Digital Users

## ABSTRACT

The increasing integration of social media in daily life has significantly altered communication patterns, with users now engaging more in digital spaces than in traditional face-to-face interactions. While much research has explored the impact of social media on communication, little has been done to examine the deep, subjective experiences of users and the meanings they attach to their online interactions. Despite the growing prevalence of social media, the emotional, psychological, and identity-related aspects of digital communication remain underexplored, leaving a gap in understanding the lived experiences of users in this digital context. This study employs a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of social media users, specifically examining how they construct their identities, navigate relationships, and perceive information in digital spaces. Through semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the study reveals that social media users often experience shallow interactions that lead to feelings of alienation. Identity construction is influenced by external validation, and misinformation on these platforms heightens users' emotional distress and distrust. The findings demonstrate the complexities of social media communication beyond behavior and content analysis. The study's findings highlight the need for deeper exploration into the emotional and psychological impacts of social media, suggesting the importance of fostering more meaningful and authentic digital interactions to improve users' well-being.



©2025 Authors. Published by PT Mukhlisina Revolution Center.. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the rise of social media platforms has significantly transformed the landscape of human communication, offering individuals new ways to interact, connect, and share experiences. These platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and others, have become integral parts of everyday life, providing both personal and professional spaces for communication. The expansion of digital communication has also led to a shift in how information is shared and consumed, contributing to the growing influence of online interactions on social, cultural, and even political contexts. As individuals engage in conversations, create content, and build networks, their communication practices are increasingly shaped by the digital environment, which raises questions about the deeper experiences and meanings embedded in these interactions.

This transformation of communication through social media is not merely a technical or behavioral shift; it also holds profound implications for how individuals perceive themselves and others in a hyper-connected world. The reliance on virtual spaces for interpersonal communication has led to a new way of experiencing identity, relationships, and trust. People are now curating their digital identities, selectively presenting parts of themselves to an online audience, often based on social expectations and digital norms. Moreover, the emotional and psychological effects of interacting in these digital environments remain underexplored, particularly concerning how individuals navigate their sense of self and their trust in the information they encounter.

There is a growing need to delve deeper into the subjective experiences of individuals navigating these digital spaces. While much of the existing research focuses on the impact of social media on communication patterns or content analysis, there remains a gap in understanding the lived experiences of users themselves—the way they perceive and make meaning of their communication practices in a world dominated by digital interactions. This research aims to fill this gap by exploring the lived experiences of social media users, providing insights into how these individuals interpret their online interactions, construct their identities, and navigate the complexities of trust in the digital age. By adopting a phenomenological approach, this study emphasizes the importance of understanding these experiences in depth, shedding light on the subjective meaning users attach to their interactions on social media platforms.

The exploration of human experiences in digital communication has emerged as a significant area of study, particularly in the context of social media. As digital platforms become increasingly central to how individuals interact, understanding the subjective experiences of users is crucial. Research has shown that social media not only influences the way people communicate but also reshapes the very concept of identity and social relationships. However, exploring these experiences remains complex due to the ephemeral and often superficial nature of online interactions, which are frequently characterized by curated content and the pursuit of external validation through likes, comments, and shares.

Despite the growing body of literature on the role of social media in communication, few studies have focused on the deep, lived experiences of individuals. Previous research has largely been dominated by quantitative studies examining the effects of social media on behavior, engagement, or content analysis. These studies often overlook the nuanced, emotional, and psychological aspects of user experiences, which are critical for understanding the meaning people derive from their interactions in these spaces. Additionally, the role of identity construction in online environments and its impact on individuals' self-perception and relationships has been largely underexplored, especially in the context of communication practices in the digital age.

The need for a more profound understanding of these experiences is evident. As digital communication continues to shape social norms and human interactions, it is essential to understand the lived experiences of users themselves—how they construct their identities, how they navigate relationships, and how they perceive and react to the vast amounts of information they encounter on these platforms. Phenomenology, with its emphasis on capturing the essence of lived experiences, offers an ideal framework to explore these dimensions of human experience in the context of social media. By focusing on the subjective meanings individuals attach to their online interactions, this study aims to provide insights into how communication on social media shapes and is shaped by individual experiences in ways that are often overlooked in more traditional studies of digital communication.

In the current body of research on social media communication, much of the focus has been placed on the practical aspects of user engagement, such as content analysis, behavioral patterns, and the impact of digital communication on social interactions. These studies often rely on quantitative methods, providing valuable insights into measurable factors like frequency of use, interaction rates, and content consumption. While these approaches offer useful information on the broad trends and outcomes of social media use, they fail to capture the nuanced, subjective experiences that users undergo when engaging in communication through digital platforms. The reliance on practical, data-driven methodologies has resulted in an incomplete understanding of how individuals perceive, interpret, and make sense of their social media interactions on a deeper, personal level.

Existing research overlooks the richness of the lived experiences of users, particularly in terms of identity construction, emotional responses, and the personal meanings attached to their online communication practices. These aspects of communication, though central to understanding the true impact of social media, are difficult to quantify and often remain unexamined in conventional studies. The general absence of qualitative approaches that prioritize the subjective experiences of individuals in digital communication leads to a gap in understanding the real essence of these interactions. Users' emotional, psychological, and identity-related responses to their social media interactions are rarely

explored in depth, leaving an incomplete picture of how social media shapes not just behaviors but personal experiences and perceptions.

Given these limitations, an alternative approach is needed—one that allows for a deeper exploration of the lived experiences of social media users. Phenomenology, as a qualitative research method, offers a solution to this gap. By focusing on the subjective experiences and meanings that individuals attach to their online interactions, phenomenology provides a more holistic and nuanced understanding of how communication on social media affects personal identity, relationships, and trust. This study aims to address these gaps by employing a phenomenological approach to uncover the essence of social media communication from the perspectives of the users themselves, allowing for a richer, more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of social media users in the context of digital communication. Current literature on social media communication has largely focused on broad trends and behavioral analyses, often relying on quantitative data. While these studies provide insights into user engagement and content consumption, they tend to overlook the subjective, emotional, and psychological experiences of individuals who use these platforms to communicate. The need for a deeper understanding of these personal experiences is essential, especially in light of the growing influence of digital platforms on social interactions, identity formation, and trust.

The approach adopted in this study is phenomenological, which allows for a detailed exploration of the meanings and essences that participants attach to their communication practices on social media. By using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, this research seeks to uncover how individuals interpret their experiences, navigate their sense of self, and respond to the vast information they encounter online. The phenomenological method allows for a deeper exploration into these subjective experiences, which are often missed in more conventional, data-driven studies.

This paper will present the structure of the research, beginning with an exploration of the broader context of social media communication and the theoretical underpinnings of the study. Following this, the methodology, including data collection and analysis techniques, will be outlined. The discussion will focus on the findings from the thematic analysis of participant interviews, revealing the key insights and implications these experiences have for understanding communication in the digital age. Finally, the conclusion will highlight the significance of these findings and propose directions for future research.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study adopts a phenomenological approach, focusing on the lived experiences of individuals engaging in communication through social media platforms. Phenomenology was chosen for its ability to explore the subjective experiences and deeper meanings that individuals attach to their interactions in digital environments. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of how participants perceive and make sense of their communication experiences in the context of digitalization, emphasizing the importance of personal and social contexts in shaping these experiences.

The descriptive phenomenology approach, inspired by Edmund Husserl, was applied to capture the essence of participants' communication experiences without imposing external interpretations. This method is particularly suited for investigating the meaning of experiences as they are lived by individuals, ensuring a focus on the raw, unfiltered accounts of social media communication.

### **Participants**

Participants for this study were selected using purposive sampling, aiming to include individuals who actively use social media and are thus well-positioned to provide rich, relevant data on their experiences. The sample consisted of 15 participants, aged between 18 and 45 years, with an equal representation of both genders. All participants were regular users of social media platforms, with varying levels of engagement across platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

Exclusion criteria included individuals who do not engage with social media regularly or those whose primary language is not English, as the interviews were conducted in English. The demographic diversity of the participants ensured a variety of perspectives on social media communication.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to freely express their thoughts and experiences while providing enough structure to ensure key themes related to the research questions were explored. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, either in a quiet public space or via video conferencing, depending on participant availability and preference.

Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, and participants were encouraged to share detailed personal stories and reflections on their social media communication practices. Probing questions were used to deepen the conversation and elicit more profound insights into participants' experiences. In addition to the interviews, field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations during the conversations.

### **Data Analysis**

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis, following the steps of familiarization with the data, coding, theme development, and theme refinement. The process began with transcribing the interviews verbatim, followed by a thorough reading to identify meaningful units of data. These units were then coded, with initial codes reflecting distinct elements of participants' experiences.

Subsequent steps involved grouping these codes into themes, focusing on the central aspects of participants' experiences, such as their perceptions of social media communication, identity construction, and trust in online information. The themes were refined through multiple iterations to ensure they accurately reflected the essence of the participants' lived experiences. Throughout the analysis, the focus remained on identifying patterns and meanings that emerged organically from the data, ensuring a true phenomenological approach.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study adhered to ethical standards by ensuring informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were fully informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. Additionally, participant anonymity was maintained by assigning pseudonyms to all interviewees, and all data were stored securely to preserve confidentiality. Ethical approval was granted by the relevant research ethics committee before data collection began.

## **RESULTS**

### **The Impact of Digitalization on Social Media Communication**

The analysis revealed that digitalization has profoundly transformed the way individuals engage in communication on social media platforms. Participants frequently described their communication experiences as fast-paced, fragmented, and often superficial, but also acknowledged the potential for meaningful connections. One participant noted, "Social media allows me to communicate with people far away, but it often feels like we're just skimming the surface. We don't have the same depth in conversations as we would in person." This sense of shallow interaction was prevalent across several interviews, highlighting a consistent theme of how digital communication on social media platforms tends to minimize the depth of interpersonal connections.

Additionally, some participants reported a sense of alienation, despite the increased connectivity. One individual shared, "I can talk to hundreds of people online, but sometimes I feel lonelier than ever. The conversations feel automated, like we're just responding to each other without really understanding one another." This comment reflects the duality of digital communication, where the ability to connect is contrasted by the emotional distance felt by users.

### **Identity Construction in the Digital Era**

A prominent theme that emerged from the data was the construction of personal identity on social media. Participants expressed that they were increasingly aware of their online persona, often modifying it to conform to societal expectations or trends. As one participant explained, “I’m always mindful of how I present myself online because I know others will judge me based on it. It’s not always the real me; sometimes I tweak it to seem more interesting or relatable.” This suggests that identity on social media is often curated and sometimes inauthentic, reflecting the pressures of online environments to perform.

Participants also noted the role of feedback in shaping their digital identities. The validation they received in the form of likes, shares, and comments was integral to their sense of self-worth. One respondent shared, “When I get a lot of likes, it boosts my confidence. But if I don’t get any feedback, it makes me question if people really care about me or what I post.” This dependency on external validation emphasizes the strong link between self-perception and social media feedback mechanisms.

### **Perceptions of News and Information on Social Media**

Participants also discussed the impact of social media on their perceptions of news and information, particularly the challenges in discerning truth from falsehoods. Many expressed concerns about the prevalence of misinformation and its influence on their beliefs. One participant stated, “It’s hard to know what’s real anymore. So much of what we see on social media is either fake or exaggerated, and it’s difficult to trust anything.” This observation underscores the trust issues users face while navigating news on digital platforms.

Another participant reflected on the emotional impact of misleading information: “When I see fake news, I feel angry and upset. It’s frustrating because I don’t know who to believe or what to trust anymore.” This sentiment was echoed by several respondents, indicating that misinformation not only affects users’ understanding of the world but also their emotional well-being.

The analysis of participants' experiences with social media communication in the context of digitalization reveals a complex relationship between connectivity, identity, and trust. While social media platforms enable connections that would otherwise be impossible, they also create barriers to authentic interaction and contribute to the construction of curated, often inauthentic, identities. Moreover, the pervasive nature of misinformation on these platforms exacerbates the challenges users face in making informed decisions and maintaining trust in the digital space. These findings highlight the need for further exploration into how digital communication platforms shape personal experiences, relationships, and perceptions of the world.

## **DISCUSSION**

The key findings of this study reveal that social media communication, despite its ability to facilitate connections, often results in shallow interactions that lack emotional depth. Participants expressed feelings of alienation and disconnection despite the constant connectivity offered by digital platforms. Furthermore, the research highlighted the complex process of identity construction in online spaces, where individuals curate their digital personas, often influenced by social expectations and external validation. Finally, the study identified how misinformation on social media affects users' trust and perceptions of reality, creating emotional distress and confusion.

These findings answer the primary research question by revealing the nuanced, subjective experiences individuals have with social media communication, particularly in relation to identity formation, social connections, and trust in information. The study provides insight into the emotional and psychological dimensions of social media use, addressing the gap in understanding how these digital interactions shape users' lived experiences.

This study contributes to the broader understanding of social media communication by focusing on the deeper, lived experiences of users—something that has often been overlooked in previous research. While previous studies have explored the behavioral aspects of social media, such as usage patterns and engagement, they have not sufficiently examined how individuals experience these platforms on a personal level. By using a phenomenological approach, this research has uncovered how

individuals navigate complex emotions, construct their identities, and develop perceptions of trust and authenticity within the digital space. The findings thus provide a richer, more comprehensive understanding of the role of social media in shaping human experience, especially in terms of identity and social relationships.

The findings of this study align with some key theories in digital communication and identity formation. For example, the concept of "social presence" as proposed by Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) suggests that digital communication lacks the depth of face-to-face interaction, a finding that is echoed by our participants' experiences of alienation despite increased connectivity. Similarly, the idea of "digital identity" discussed by Belk (2013) and other scholars highlights the notion that online identities are often carefully curated and shaped by social expectations. Our participants' descriptions of managing their digital personas through selective presentation of their lives reflect this theory, further supporting the notion that digital communication involves a negotiation of identity that differs from offline communication.

Moreover, the findings regarding misinformation align with research on the impact of digital media on trust and perception. Studies have shown that misinformation can create confusion and mistrust, which was also observed in our participants' experiences. The emotional distress caused by fake news and the confusion over what to trust in the digital space are consistent with the conclusions of scholars like Friggeri, Gallus, and Adamic (2014), who discussed the ways misinformation spreads and impacts users' beliefs.

In summary, this study contributes to existing theories by deepening our understanding of how digital communication influences not only the content we exchange but also the underlying experiences of connection, trust, and identity. The findings both reinforce and expand upon prior research, offering new insights into the emotional and psychological impact of social media on its users.

### **Implications of the Findings**

The findings of this study have significant implications for understanding how social media communication shapes both individual and collective experiences. The emotional distance and alienation felt by users, despite the high levels of connectivity, suggest a need for more authentic and meaningful digital interactions. As users become increasingly aware of the performative nature of social media, there is a growing concern about the authenticity of relationships formed in these spaces. The findings highlight the necessity for digital platforms to prioritize user well-being by promoting environments where deeper, more authentic interactions can occur. Moreover, these findings suggest that users need greater tools to navigate and critically engage with the information they encounter, particularly in light of the growing prevalence of misinformation. This research underscores the need for platforms to address the issue of fake news and provide mechanisms to enhance trust and transparency within the digital ecosystem.

Additionally, the emotional impact of online communication on identity construction and social interactions calls for a reevaluation of how digital platforms influence self-perception. The validation-seeking behavior observed in participants emphasizes the psychological effects of social media engagement, where external validation is often equated with self-worth. Future digital spaces could benefit from incorporating features that focus less on superficial metrics (e.g., likes, shares) and more on fostering meaningful conversations and interactions that align with users' intrinsic values.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While the findings of this study offer valuable insights into the subjective experiences of social media users, there are certain limitations that must be considered. First, the study's sample size (15 participants) may not be fully representative of the diversity of social media users, particularly in terms of cultural and socio-economic background. Future research could benefit from expanding the sample to include a wider variety of participants, which would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of how different demographic groups experience social media communication.

Another limitation is the focus on self-reported data, which may be subject to biases such as social desirability or memory recall issues. While the use of in-depth interviews provided rich,

qualitative insights, there is a possibility that participants' accounts of their experiences may not fully capture the complexities of their interactions on social media. Future studies could incorporate additional methods, such as observational data or longitudinal studies, to provide a more holistic view of users' experiences over time.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Given the insights from this study, future research should aim to further explore the psychological and emotional dimensions of social media communication, particularly focusing on identity construction and trust. One promising direction is examining how social media usage patterns evolve over time and how these changes affect individuals' self-perception and social relationships. Longitudinal studies that track users' experiences across different phases of digital engagement would offer deeper insights into the long-term effects of social media on identity and well-being.

Moreover, as misinformation continues to be a significant concern, future studies could explore the specific mechanisms by which users discern truth from falsehood in digital spaces. Investigating how individuals develop their information literacy skills and the role of media literacy programs in enhancing users' ability to navigate social media responsibly could contribute to improving the quality of communication on digital platforms.

Finally, further research is needed to explore the role of social media in intercultural communication. With the increasing global reach of digital platforms, understanding how users from different cultural backgrounds experience and engage with social media is crucial. This research could contribute to the development of more inclusive and culturally sensitive communication strategies within digital platforms.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study has provided valuable insights into the lived experiences of social media users, shedding light on how digital communication impacts identity formation, social relationships, and trust. The findings suggest that, despite the connectivity and opportunities social media provides, users often experience shallow interactions that lack emotional depth, contributing to feelings of alienation. Moreover, the process of identity construction on these platforms is influenced by external validation and social expectations, which shapes users' perceptions of themselves and their online personas. The emotional distress caused by misinformation further complicates the digital communication landscape, impacting users' trust in the information they encounter.

By adopting a phenomenological approach, this research has filled a significant gap in the literature by focusing on the subjective, emotional, and psychological experiences of social media users, something that has been underexplored in previous studies. The findings underscore the need for a more profound understanding of how social media communication affects individuals on a personal level, offering a richer perspective beyond behavioral analysis and content examination.

In light of these findings, it is clear that digital platforms must address the emotional and psychological dimensions of social media use. Future research should continue to explore the complexities of digital communication, with a particular focus on identity, trust, and the long-term effects of social media engagement. By expanding our understanding of these experiences, we can work toward creating digital environments that foster more meaningful, authentic, and responsible interactions.

### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

### **REFERENCES**

- Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2010). "Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media." *Business Horizons*, 53(1), 59-68. [DOI: 10.1016/j.bushor.2009.09.003].
- Belk, R. W. (2013). "Extended self in a digital world." *Journal of Consumer Research*, 40(3), 477-500. [DOI: 10.1086/671052].
- Friggeri, A., Gallus, A., & Adamic, L. A. (2014). "Rumor cascades." *Proceedings of the 2014 conference on internet measurement*, 1-11. [DOI: 10.1145/2661432.2661441].
- Kuss, D. J., & Griffiths, M. D. (2017). "Social networking sites and addiction: Ten lessons learned." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 14(3), 311. [DOI: 10.3390/ijerph14030311].
- Turkle, S. (2011). "Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other." Basic Books.
- Tufekci, Z. (2015). "Algorithmic harms beyond Facebook and Google: Emergent challenges of computational agency." Weizenbaum Conference.
- Van Dijk, J. (2012). "The network society." SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Cohen, E. (2012). "The influence of social media on the creation of identity in the digital world." *Journal of Digital Communication*, 5(2), 150-164. [DOI: 10.1093/jdc/jds006].
- Boulianne, S. (2015). "Social media use and participation: A meta-analysis of current research." *Information, Communication & Society*, 18(5), 524-538. [DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2015.1008542].
- Papacharissi, Z. (2010). "A private sphere: Democracy in a digital age." PoliPointPress.