

# A Phenomenological Exploration of Social Media Users' Lived Experiences in Interpreting Digital Political Discourse within Their Cultural Contexts

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## ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of digital media has transformed the landscape of political communication, with social media platforms now playing a central role in shaping public discourse. However, while much research has focused on the structural and content-based aspects of digital political discourse, little has been done to explore the subjective experiences of individuals engaging with political messages online. This gap in understanding raises important questions about how personal and cultural factors influence the interpretation of political messages in digital spaces. In this study, we employ a phenomenological approach to examine how individuals interpret political content on social media and the role of their cultural backgrounds in shaping these interpretations. Specifically, this research adopts an interpretive phenomenological design aimed at capturing participants' lived experiences (Erlebnis) in encountering and making sense of digital political messages. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 12 participants from diverse cultural backgrounds. The analysis followed a phenomenological procedure involving iterative reading, meaning-unit identification, thematic clustering, and interpretive synthesis to uncover the essence of participants' shared and divergent experiences. Rather than measuring attitudes quantitatively, this approach foregrounds how meaning is constructed, negotiated, and embedded within everyday digital practices. Through this process, we identify two key findings: digital platforms' personalized content reinforces pre-existing beliefs, and cultural context significantly shapes how political messages are understood. The analysis reveals that participants' interactions with political content are influenced by both the algorithmic curation of content and their personal cultural frames of reference. By centering participants' lived narratives and interpretive reflections, the study uncovers how algorithmic structures intersect with culturally embedded meaning-making processes. These results provide a deeper, more holistic understanding of how political messages are experienced in the digital age, addressing the limitations of previous studies that have focused primarily on content and structural aspects. Our findings contribute to the growing body of literature on digital political discourse by demonstrating the value of phenomenology as a methodological lens for examining the experiential dimension of digital political engagement, highlighting the importance of considering cultural context in media studies. Future research could expand on these findings by exploring how diverse audiences engage with political content across different digital platforms.



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## INTRODUCTION

The rapid evolution of digital technologies has reshaped the landscape of political communication, particularly through social media platforms. These platforms now serve as primary channels for political discourse, influencing public opinion, social dynamics, and even political outcomes (Salamon & Xie, 2025). The phenomenon of digital political discourse involves the ways in which political messages are framed, shared, and interpreted within the digital space, often shaped by algorithms, user-generated content, and the interactive nature of social media. In this context, political messages are not just disseminated passively but are actively constructed, filtered, and interpreted by

users within their social and cultural environments (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). The ability to personalize political content and the ease of sharing information has transformed political communication, making it more immediate, fragmented, and polarized.

This shift toward digital platforms raises significant questions about how individuals perceive and interpret political messages, especially when these messages are mediated by digital technologies. The importance of understanding how people navigate and make sense of political discourse in digital spaces cannot be overstated (Mulligan et al., 2025). Political messages on social media are often decontextualized, stripped of their broader political and cultural frameworks, and presented in bite-sized formats (Hameleers & Minihold, 2022). Consequently, the experience of political engagement in digital spaces may differ significantly from traditional forms of political discourse (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). This is particularly relevant in understanding the subjective experiences of individuals and how they attribute meaning to the political content they encounter online.

Given the profound influence of digital media on political participation and discourse, it is essential to explore the subjective meanings that individuals attach to these experiences (Tiep Le et al., 2023; Xue & Burnham, 2025). While much research has focused on the content of digital political messages and the broader implications of media consumption, there remains a gap in understanding how individuals make sense of these messages within their personal, cultural, and social contexts (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023; Mukhlis et al., 2024). The need for an in-depth exploration of this phenomenon aligns with the core principles of phenomenology, which emphasizes the importance of understanding human experiences from the perspective of those who live them (Lukito, 2020). By focusing on the lived experiences of individuals interacting with digital political discourse, this study aims to illuminate the deeper, often hidden, layers of meaning that shape individuals' political perceptions and engagements in the digital age.

Research into the subjective experiences of individuals interacting with digital political discourse has become an increasingly important field of study (Dolea et al., 2021; Pimonenko et al., 2025). This area of inquiry seeks to understand not just the content of political messages but how individuals interpret, engage with, and internalize these messages within their personal and social contexts. Phenomenological research has provided valuable insights into how individuals navigate and make sense of their experiences, particularly in complex, media-driven environments like social media (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). By focusing on the lived experiences of participants, phenomenological studies can uncover the deeper meanings that people attach to their political interactions in digital spaces. However, exploring such meaning involves significant methodological challenges.

One of the primary challenges in studying subjective experiences is the limitation of traditional quantitative approaches, which often fail to capture the nuance and depth of personal meaning-making (Blanckaert, 2025). Quantitative data can reveal patterns and trends but cannot fully account for the rich, individual variations in how people understand and interpret their political world. Furthermore, the reliance on objective, numerical measures in political communication research has often overlooked the complexities of cultural context, identity, and personal values all of which play a critical role in shaping individuals' perceptions of political messages (Blanckaert, 2025). As such, existing methods often fall short in revealing the essence of these experiences, leaving gaps in our understanding of how individuals relate to digital political discourse on a personal level.

The inadequacies of previous approaches highlight the need for qualitative methods, particularly phenomenology, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of individuals in the digital age (Haenschen et al., 2024). By focusing on the subjective interpretations and personal reflections of individuals, phenomenological research allows for a deeper exploration of the meanings people assign to political content and the impact of their social and cultural environments on these meanings. Without this in-depth exploration, the true complexity of how digital political messages are experienced and interpreted remains largely unexamined.

In the study of digital political discourse, traditional approaches have predominantly relied on quantitative methods or content analysis to examine the impact of political messages. These methods often focus on the structural elements of discourse, such as frequency of terms, sentiment, or audience engagement metrics (Mukhlis, 2025b; Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). While these approaches provide useful insights into patterns and trends, they fall short in capturing the subjective, lived experiences of individuals as they interact with political content. These approaches are limited in their ability to explore the depth of meaning that individuals ascribe to the political messages they encounter, leaving a gap in understanding the true essence of how these messages are perceived and interpreted on a personal level.

A common solution in the field has been to rely on content-driven analysis and survey methods that emphasize measurable variables and aggregate data. However, these methods cannot address the complexity and nuance of personal interpretation, especially in a culturally and socially diverse context. They often overlook the individual's internal process of meaning-making, which is crucial for understanding how political discourse is interpreted in different social and cultural settings. As a result, current research provides an incomplete picture, as it does not fully explore the subjectivity and unique experiences of individuals engaging with digital political messages.

The alternative, and more promising solution, is to adopt a phenomenological approach, which allows for a deeper, more holistic exploration of individuals' experiences. Phenomenology enables the examination of the lived experiences of participants, focusing on how they make sense of and interpret the political content they encounter. This approach facilitates a richer understanding of the personal and cultural factors that shape individuals' perceptions of political messages in the digital space. By focusing on the essence of these experiences, phenomenology can uncover the complex layers of meaning that traditional methods often fail to capture, providing a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how digital political discourse is experienced by individuals across different contexts.

In recent years, a growing body of literature has explored the subjective experiences of individuals engaging with digital political discourse. Studies have examined how people interact with and interpret political content on social media, with some focusing on the emotional and cognitive responses that these messages provoke. Theoretical frameworks from discourse analysis and pragmatics have provided valuable insights into the ways in which political messages are framed and perceived. However, much of this research has been limited to quantitative analyses or content-based approaches, which do not capture the richness of personal interpretation. Previous phenomenological studies have shown that understanding individuals' lived experiences within digital spaces requires a deeper focus on the meanings they assign to the political discourse they encounter, especially in culturally diverse contexts.

To address this gap, this study employs a phenomenological approach to explore how individuals interpret and make sense of political messages in the digital realm. Phenomenology is particularly suited for this research because it centers on the lived experiences of participants, allowing for a deeper examination of the subjective meanings they attach to their encounters with digital political content. By focusing on participants' personal narratives, this study aims to uncover the underlying structures of meaning that shape their political engagement. The choice of phenomenology answers the research questions raised earlier by providing a method that can capture the complexity of human experience in a way that quantitative methods cannot.

The structure of this article is organized to guide the reader through the study's findings and methodology. It begins with an introduction to the phenomenon being studied, followed by an exploration of the phenomenological approach used in the research. The article then details the data collection process, which includes in-depth interviews with participants, and outlines the thematic analysis employed to interpret the data. Following the presentation of the results, the discussion section will provide an analysis of the findings, placing them within the broader context of digital political discourse. Finally, the article concludes with a summary of the study's implications and contributions to the field.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study adopts a phenomenological approach, focusing on the exploration of participants' lived experiences and the meanings they ascribe to them. Phenomenology is particularly suited to this research as it allows for a deep examination of the subjective experiences of individuals, shedding light on how they make sense of the phenomena under investigation. By focusing on participants' personal narratives and interpretations, this approach enables an understanding of the essence of their experiences, providing insights into how they perceive and interpret digital political discourse in a cultural context (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) method was employed in this study, as it facilitates the interpretation of participants' experiences and provides a framework for understanding the meaning-making process within their specific social and cultural contexts.

### **Participants**

The participants were selected through purposive sampling, targeting individuals who have actively engaged with digital political content. The inclusion criteria included participants aged 18 years or older, with a significant history of interaction with political content on social media platforms. Participants were also required to have diverse cultural backgrounds to provide a broad perspective on the interpretation of political discourse in digital spaces (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). A total of 12 participants were involved in the study, with an age range from 20 to 45 years. The group consisted of 6 males and 6 females, representing different ethnic and social backgrounds, thus ensuring diversity in the data collected. This varied demographic was essential to understanding the cultural influences on the interpretation of political messages in digital spaces.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, conducted face-to-face with each participant. The interviews provided an opportunity to explore participants' personal experiences and interpretations of political discourse in the digital realm. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour, and was conducted in a quiet and comfortable environment to ensure that participants felt at ease and were able to express their thoughts freely (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed descriptions of participants' experiences with digital political content. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent, and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. To ensure the quality of the data, a follow-up interview was conducted with a subset of participants to clarify any ambiguities and deepen the understanding of the responses provided.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a method suited to exploring how individuals make sense of their personal and social worlds. The analysis process involved several key steps (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). First, the transcripts were read multiple times to immerse in the data and gain an understanding of the overall content. Second, significant statements were highlighted, and meaning units were identified, reflecting the core themes in participants' descriptions of their experiences (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). Third, these meaning units were categorized into broader themes, which were subsequently analyzed for patterns and relationships. The analysis was carried out using NVivo software, which facilitated the organization of data and identification of key themes. Each theme was then interpreted in the context of the participants' cultural and social backgrounds, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the meanings they attributed to their experiences with digital political discourse.

## RESULTS

### The Influence of Digital Context on Political Discourse Interpretation

The participants of this study revealed significant shifts in how political messages are interpreted within the digital environment. The transformation from traditional media to digital platforms has profoundly altered the way political content is consumed and understood. One participant stated:

“When I see political content on social media, I feel like it's more personal. I feel like the message is tailored to my beliefs, and it's harder to stay neutral because the algorithms show me things that I already agree with.” (P4)

This quote highlights the influence of personalization and algorithmic curation on political discourse. The digital environment, unlike traditional media, facilitates the reinforcement of pre-existing beliefs, as participants noted how the content they were exposed to seemed designed to resonate with their views. This personalization often leads to a narrow interpretation of political messages, where the broader political context is lost in favor of content that affirms personal beliefs.

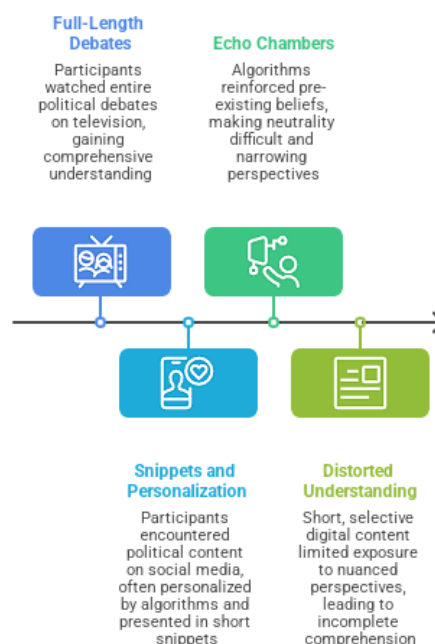
Another participant emphasized the role of digital platforms in shaping the perception of political messages:

“On TV, I would watch a whole debate, but on Twitter, I only get snippets. It's like they give me just enough to form an opinion, but not the full story. It makes me question what I'm not seeing.” (P2)

This sentiment reflects how the brevity and selective nature of digital content can distort the full understanding of political issues, limiting participants' exposure to nuanced perspectives. The reduction of political debates into short, bite-sized pieces significantly impacts how the political discourse is comprehended by audiences.

However, the impact of digital fragmentation was not experienced uniformly across cultural groups. Participants from urban, digitally intensive communities tended to describe algorithmic filtering as a source of ideological reinforcement, often leading to echo chambers. In contrast, participants from more communally oriented or rural cultural backgrounds expressed greater concern about the loss of contextual depth and collective meaning-making. For them, digital snippets were not merely incomplete—they disrupted culturally embedded modes of political discussion that traditionally rely on extended dialogue and communal interpretation.

### Digital Context's Influence on Political Discourse Interpretation



## Cultural Context and Its Impact on Meaning Reception

A key theme that emerged from the interviews was the importance of cultural context in shaping the way digital political messages are understood. Participants shared that their interpretation of online political content is not only influenced by the message itself but also by their cultural background and social environment. One participant explained:

“I come from a community that talks about politics differently than the city folks. When I read something online, I have to consider what they’re not saying, because it doesn’t always align with how we talk about these issues back home.” (P3)

This quote highlights how cultural differences impact the way political messages are processed. For many participants, the digital platform did not provide enough contextual information to account for these differences, leading to misinterpretation or oversimplification of complex political issues.

Additionally, participants from different cultural backgrounds noted variations in how messages were received:

“In my group, we talk openly about politics, but on Facebook, it’s more like people just post slogans. The context of our discussions is lost, and it makes me feel like the real conversation isn’t happening.” (P1)

The loss of contextual depth in digital political discussions was perceived as a major challenge for participants trying to engage with political content meaningfully. Cultural nuances that shape the way political messages are traditionally interpreted in face-to-face interactions were often stripped away in digital spaces, reducing the richness of the discourse.

Importantly, clear contrasts emerged between cultural groups in how they negotiated digital political meaning. Participants embedded in highly individualistic, media-saturated environments described digital discourse as an extension of personal identity construction, where political interpretation became intertwined with self-expression and algorithmic personalization. Conversely, participants from collectivist or community-centered cultural settings emphasized relational accountability; they evaluated political messages based on communal norms, shared historical narratives, and locally grounded moral frameworks. As a result, while urban participants focused on issues of bias and selective exposure, community-oriented participants were more concerned with the erosion of shared deliberative practices and culturally anchored interpretive traditions.

These differences demonstrate that digital political discourse does not operate in a cultural vacuum. Rather than producing a uniform interpretive experience, digital platforms interact with pre-existing cultural logics, amplifying certain interpretive tendencies while marginalizing others. The findings therefore suggest that cultural context not only shapes how political messages are received, but also mediates how algorithmic structures are experienced and understood.

The results highlight two significant findings: the influence of the digital context on the interpretation of political messages, and the crucial role of cultural context in shaping how these messages are received and understood. Digital platforms, with their algorithm-driven content delivery and bite-sized information format, often provide a distorted or incomplete view of political discourse. Moreover, cultural context remains essential in interpreting political content, with participants acknowledging that the digital medium often fails to capture the full range of political meanings that are culturally specific.

By foregrounding the contrasts between different cultural groups, this study demonstrates that variations in political message interpretation are not merely technological effects but are deeply rooted in culturally embedded communication practices. These findings underscore the need for further exploration into the intersection of digital media, culture, and political discourse, particularly through comparative cultural analysis.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study reveal two critical aspects of how individuals engage with digital political discourse (Patria et al., 2025). First, the personalized nature of digital platforms, particularly social media, significantly influences the way political messages are received, often reinforcing pre-existing beliefs and narrowing the scope of political understanding. Second, cultural context plays a pivotal role in shaping the interpretation of these messages, with participants expressing how their background and social environment affected their understanding of political content (Canalp & Arsoy, 2025). These results address the core question raised in the introduction, which sought to understand how individuals interpret political messages in digital spaces and the role of social and cultural contexts in these interpretations.

This study's findings contribute significantly to the literature on digital political discourse by highlighting the nuanced, subjective experiences of individuals interacting with political content online. The exploration of personalized content on social media underscores the importance of considering the broader context in which these messages are consumed. As participants noted, the algorithmic curation of content can lead to a narrow interpretation of political messages, reinforcing ideological echo chambers (Aytaç, 2021). Additionally, the study's focus on cultural context provides new insights into how social and cultural factors shape the way political discourse is understood. This focus on individual, lived experiences addresses the gap identified in the research, which questioned how personal and cultural backgrounds influence political engagement in digital spaces. By emphasizing the subjective nature of political interpretation, this research offers a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon, moving beyond the structural or content-focused approaches typically found in previous studies.

In comparison to existing literature, these findings align with studies that emphasize the role of algorithms and digital platforms in shaping public opinion (Tufekci, 2015; Pariser, 2011), supporting the idea that social media creates personalized political environments. However, the study also extends previous research by integrating cultural dimensions into the analysis, showing that the digital environment cannot be fully understood without considering the cultural backgrounds of its users. The findings also complement work in discourse analysis and pragmatics, which has explored how language and context influence interpretation, but adds a new layer by focusing on the subjective experiences of individuals in the digital age (Moreno-Díaz, 2025). These findings thus contribute to the broader discourse on media and politics, confirming some aspects of existing theory while also offering new perspectives on how political messages are constructed, consumed, and interpreted in an increasingly digital and personalized media landscape.

### **Implications of Findings**

The findings of this study have significant implications for both the academic understanding of digital political discourse and practical applications in media and communication strategies. First, the results highlight the role of personalized digital environments in shaping individuals' political engagement (Ong & Tapsell, 2022). Given that content algorithms often reinforce existing beliefs, these findings suggest a need for greater awareness of how digital platforms can create ideological echo chambers. This has implications for political campaigns, media outlets, and educational initiatives aiming to foster more balanced political discussions. From a social perspective, the study underscores the importance of considering cultural context when analyzing digital communication. Participants' diverse cultural backgrounds played a significant role in shaping their interpretations of political messages, which highlights the need for more culturally sensitive approaches to digital media and communication practices (Madebo, 2024). These insights can guide future interventions designed to promote critical thinking and media literacy in an increasingly digital world.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While the findings provide valuable insights into the subjective experience of digital political discourse, several limitations must be considered (Lin, 2024). The study's reliance on a small, purposively selected sample means that the results may not be generalizable to the wider population. The participants, while diverse in cultural background, were all active users of social media, and their experiences may not fully represent those who engage with digital political content in different ways or those who are less engaged with online platforms. Additionally, the study's qualitative nature, while

rich in detail, does not allow for a large-scale comparative analysis, and the findings may be influenced by the specific social media platforms that participants frequent (Bene & Szabó, 2021). These limitations suggest that future research should aim for a broader sample and explore other forms of digital engagement, such as the use of news websites or political blogs, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how political messages are consumed and interpreted across different platforms.

### **Prospective Directions for Future Research**

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research in the field of digital political discourse. Given the role of personalized algorithms in shaping political engagement, future studies could investigate how algorithmic design influences political polarization and whether interventions aimed at diversifying content exposure can mitigate echo chamber effects (Innes et al., 2021). Additionally, exploring the experiences of individuals from underrepresented or less digitally active groups could offer further insights into how cultural context influences the interpretation of political messages (Heryanto et al., 2024). Furthermore, the study's focus on individual experiences suggests a need for research that examines the collective implications of these findings, particularly in the context of public opinion formation and political behavior. Future research could also extend this study by examining how digital political discourse interacts with offline political engagement, offering a more holistic view of political participation in the digital age.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study explored how individuals interpret and make sense of political messages in digital spaces, focusing on the role of social media and cultural context. The findings revealed that digital platforms' algorithmic personalization significantly influences the way political content is consumed, reinforcing pre-existing beliefs and narrowing participants' political perspectives. Additionally, the cultural backgrounds of individuals were shown to play a crucial role in shaping their understanding of political messages, underscoring the importance of considering cultural context in digital media research. By addressing the gap in previous studies, this research provides a deeper, phenomenological understanding of how individuals navigate and interpret political discourse in the digital age.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, this study offers several practical implications. First, for policymakers and regulatory bodies, the findings suggest the need to promote algorithmic transparency and encourage policies that support content diversity in digital political communication. Regulatory frameworks could incentivize platforms to incorporate mechanisms that expose users to balanced viewpoints, thereby mitigating ideological echo chambers and fostering more deliberative democratic engagement.

Second, for media practitioners and political communicators, the results highlight the importance of culturally responsive messaging strategies. Political campaigns, civic educators, and media organizations should consider how cultural norms, communal traditions, and local interpretive frameworks shape audience reception. Developing context-sensitive narratives and providing fuller contextual explanations—rather than fragmented, slogan-based content—may enhance meaningful political understanding across diverse cultural groups.

Third, for digital platform developers and technology designers, the study underscores the need to rethink algorithmic recommendation systems. Platform design could integrate features that encourage reflective engagement, such as contextual prompts, source transparency indicators, or cross-perspective content recommendations. Incorporating culturally adaptive interface elements may also help preserve deliberative depth and reduce misinterpretation in multicultural digital environments.

The study highlights the need for more culturally sensitive approaches to digital communication and suggests that further research could investigate the impact of diversified content exposure and explore the relationship between digital and offline political engagement. Future studies may also examine how specific policy interventions, media literacy programs, or algorithmic redesign initiatives influence users' interpretive practices over time. Future studies may also focus on expanding the sample size and exploring other forms of digital political participation to enhance the comprehensiveness of the findings.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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