

The Dynamics of Digital Communication in Society: Social Media Users' Experiences in Building Identity and Social Interaction in the Digital Era

Sitti Maesurah

Institut Agama Islam Negeri Bone, Indonesia

maesurah88@gmail.com

Article Info

Article history:

Received 23-01-2025

Revised 22-02-2025

Accepted 17-03-2025

Keyword:

Digital Communication, Online Identity, Social Interaction, Social Media, Digital Phenomenon, Virtual Communication.

ABSTRACT

Digital identity construction has become a crucial aspect of online communication, shaped by evolving technological landscapes and social expectations. While previous studies have explored self-presentation strategies on social media, less attention has been given to the lived experiences and meaning-making processes behind these practices. A significant gap remains in understanding how individuals negotiate authenticity and self-curation in digital spaces, leading to questions about the psychological and emotional implications of online identity management. This study employs a phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of social media users in constructing their digital identities. Through in-depth qualitative analysis, the research uncovers how users balance self-expression, validation, and digital fatigue in response to social expectations and platform affordances. Findings indicate that digital identity is a fluid and performative construct, where individuals experience ongoing negotiations between authenticity and external perceptions. The results reveal that while social media fosters connectivity and self-presentation opportunities, it also imposes psychological pressures related to digital self-representation. Participants reported heightened emotional strain due to the tension between maintaining an idealized online persona and their real-world identities. This study contributes to digital communication research by providing deeper insights into the psychological and sociocultural dynamics of online self-presentation. Future research should examine the long-term implications of digital identity construction across diverse cultural and technological contexts.



©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

The rapid advancement of digital technology has fundamentally transformed the way individuals communicate, interact, and construct their identities in contemporary society (Srisathan & Naruetharadhol, 2022). Social media platforms have emerged as primary spaces for self-expression, enabling individuals to craft and curate their digital identities while engaging in complex social interactions. This shift has redefined traditional notions of interpersonal communication, making online interactions an essential aspect of modern social life. However, despite the convenience and accessibility of digital communication, it also introduces challenges related to authenticity, self-presentation, and emotional well-being.

As digital platforms continue to mediate social interactions, the phenomenon of online identity construction has become a critical area of inquiry (Pamungkas dkk., 2021). Social media users often navigate between presenting an idealized version of themselves and maintaining authenticity, raising questions about the psychological and social implications of digital self-representation. Prior research has explored digital identity through various lenses, including social identity theory and self-presentation frameworks, yet there remains a gap in understanding the lived experiences of individuals as they engage in these practices. The subjective meanings and emotional dimensions of digital communication warrant deeper exploration to capture the complexities inherent in virtual interactions.

Previous studies have predominantly relied on quantitative methods, focusing on behavioral patterns, frequency of social media use, and statistical correlations between online behavior and psychological outcomes. While such approaches provide valuable insights, they often overlook the nuanced, deeply personal experiences of users navigating digital spaces (Lee dkk., 2022). Phenomenological inquiry offers a means to bridge this gap by delving into the subjective interpretations and meanings that individuals attribute to their online interactions. By centering on the lived experiences of social media users, this study aims to uncover the underlying structures of digital identity formation and interactional dynamics in virtual spaces.

Given the increasing significance of digital communication in everyday life, understanding how individuals experience, perceive, and interpret their online engagements is essential. This study seeks to explore these dimensions by focusing on the phenomenological aspects of digital self-presentation and social interaction (Katzenbach & Ulbricht, 2019). Through an interpretative phenomenological analysis, the research aims to contribute to the broader discourse on digital communication by offering an in-depth understanding of the personal and social realities shaped by online interactions.

The study of subjective experiences in digital communication has gained increasing attention in recent years, particularly in the context of social media engagement. Researchers have sought to understand how individuals construct and navigate their online identities, examining the psychological and social consequences of digital self-presentation (Kejriwal dkk., 2021). While numerous studies have explored the behavioral aspects of online identity, fewer have focused on the deeper phenomenological dimensions—how individuals perceive, experience, and interpret their digital interactions within the broader social context.

One of the primary challenges in studying digital identity is the difficulty in capturing the fluid and evolving nature of online self-presentation (Nguyen dkk., 2020). Traditional methodologies, particularly quantitative approaches, often fail to account for the intricate and deeply personal experiences of social media users. Surveys and statistical models provide insight into general trends but do not adequately capture the meaning-making processes that underpin digital identity construction. As a result, much of the existing research lacks a comprehensive understanding of how individuals experience digital communication on a personal and emotional level.

The reliance on surface-level metrics, such as engagement rates, post frequency, and sentiment analysis, limits our ability to grasp the underlying motivations and emotional implications of online interactions. While these metrics offer valuable data on user behavior, they do not provide a holistic picture of the psychological and social realities of digital communication. The subjective meanings individuals attach to their online presence, their struggles with authenticity, and their interpretations of digital interactions require a more nuanced methodological approach—one that prioritizes lived experience over numerical representation.

Phenomenological research offers a crucial framework for addressing these limitations, allowing for a deeper exploration of the lived realities of social media users. By focusing on individual experiences, this study aims to uncover the implicit and explicit meanings embedded in digital interactions. Understanding these experiences is essential for developing a more comprehensive perspective on the complexities of digital identity, self-presentation, and online social dynamics.

While existing studies have provided valuable insights into the behavioral and psychological aspects of digital identity, most have relied on quantitative methodologies that prioritize external observations over subjective experience. Surveys and statistical analyses have illuminated general trends in online behavior, such as patterns of self-presentation and the impact of digital interactions on mental well-being. However, these approaches often fail to capture the depth of individual experiences and the meanings ascribed to online identity construction and digital communication.

A key limitation of prior research is the focus on measurable indicators, such as engagement rates and sentiment analysis, which, while informative, do not offer a nuanced understanding of how individuals internalize and navigate their digital lives. This limitation is particularly evident in studies that overlook the complex negotiations between authenticity and curation in online self-representation.

The question of how individuals perceive and interpret their digital identity remains largely unanswered, creating a significant gap in our comprehension of the subjective dimensions of digital communication.

Moreover, the dynamic and evolving nature of online identity requires a methodological approach capable of capturing lived experiences and personal narratives. Phenomenology provides a compelling alternative by emphasizing the exploration of meaning-making processes and subjective interpretations. By adopting this approach, the present study seeks to address the existing gap by offering a deeper, more holistic understanding of digital self-presentation, social interactions, and the emotional implications of navigating virtual spaces.

This study aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse by providing an in-depth examination of individuals' experiences in constructing and maintaining their online identities. Through a phenomenological lens, it will explore how digital communication shapes identity formation, interpersonal relationships, and psychological well-being. In doing so, it seeks to uncover the underlying structures of digital interaction that remain obscured in conventional quantitative research.

Recent studies on digital identity have provided significant insights into how individuals engage with social media, focusing on aspects such as self-presentation strategies, psychological impacts, and social validation mechanisms. However, much of the existing literature has relied on survey-based and statistical analyses, which primarily capture patterns of behavior rather than the subjective interpretations of digital interactions. The phenomenological dimensions of online identity—how individuals make sense of their digital presence and its influence on their self-concept—remain underexplored. This study addresses this gap by applying an interpretative phenomenological approach to uncover the lived experiences and deeper meanings behind digital self-presentation.

To explore these dimensions, this study adopts a phenomenological methodology that prioritizes individual narratives and subjective experiences. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is employed to examine how participants perceive and negotiate their online identities within the broader social and cultural contexts of digital communication. By emphasizing lived experience, this approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the psychological and emotional aspects of online interactions, providing insights into how users experience authenticity, validation, and relational dynamics in virtual spaces.

This article is structured as follows: The introduction contextualizes the study within the existing literature and highlights the significance of exploring digital identity through a phenomenological lens. The methodology section outlines the research design, participant selection, data collection procedures, and analytical framework employed in the study. The results section presents key themes that emerge from participant narratives, while the discussion connects these findings to existing theoretical frameworks and implications for digital communication. The conclusion summarizes the study's contributions, limitations, and potential avenues for future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of individuals engaging in digital communication. Phenomenology was chosen due to its capacity to uncover the subjective meanings and perceptions of participants regarding their interactions on social media. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of how individuals construct their online identities and navigate digital social interactions. Specifically, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was applied to focus on the interpretation of participants' experiences, acknowledging the researcher's role in contextualizing these meanings within broader social frameworks.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that they had substantial experience engaging in social media interactions. The study included 10–15 active social media users from various demographic backgrounds, all of whom had been actively involved in digital communication for at least two years. Inclusion criteria required participants to engage regularly in

online social interactions, while exclusion criteria ruled out individuals who primarily used social media passively. The participant group consisted of individuals from diverse professional and age backgrounds, allowing for a comprehensive examination of how digital interactions shape identity construction and social engagement.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in a private and comfortable setting to encourage open and honest responses. The interview guide was designed to explore key themes such as digital identity formation, authenticity versus curation, emotional impact, and interpersonal communication in online spaces. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted either in person or through video conferencing, depending on participant preferences. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. Additionally, observational data were gathered by analyzing participants' online behaviors and interactions, focusing on content curation, engagement styles, and patterns of communication.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis within the interpretative phenomenological framework. The analysis process involved multiple stages, beginning with detailed transcription and initial coding to identify recurring patterns. Key themes were then extracted and refined through an iterative process, ensuring that findings accurately represented participants' lived experiences. Interpretative techniques were applied to explore underlying meanings and contextual influences on participants' digital communication practices. NVivo software was utilized to facilitate the organization and coding of qualitative data, ensuring a systematic and structured approach to analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board prior to data collection. Participants were provided with detailed information about the study's objectives and procedures before giving their informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, with all data being de-identified to protect participant identities. Participants retained the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequences. The research adhered to established ethical guidelines for qualitative studies, ensuring that participants' rights and well-being were prioritized throughout the research process.

RESULTS

Constructing Online Identity – Between Authenticity and Curation

Participants described their experiences in shaping their digital identities, highlighting a tension between authenticity and curation. Many acknowledged that their online personas were carefully crafted representations of their real lives, often omitting unfavorable aspects. One participant shared, "I feel pressured to present only the best version of myself on social media because I fear being judged negatively by others." This sentiment was echoed across multiple interviews, indicating a broader social expectation for digital self-presentation. While some participants perceived this curation as a necessary adaptation to the digital space, others expressed frustration over the disconnect between their online and offline identities, leading to feelings of dissonance.

Digital Communication and the Complexity of Social Interaction

The transition from face-to-face interactions to digital communication has introduced both advantages and challenges. Participants reported that social media platforms enabled them to stay connected with friends and family across distances, yet they also highlighted the limitations of non-verbal cues in digital interactions. One participant noted, "I often misunderstand messages because I can't see the sender's expressions or hear their tone. It sometimes leads to unnecessary conflicts." The absence of contextual cues in online communication led to misinterpretations, causing occasional strain

on relationships. Despite this, digital interactions were still considered an essential means of maintaining social bonds, especially in an increasingly digital world.

Emotional Exhaustion and Digital Fatigue

A significant number of participants expressed experiencing digital fatigue due to the pressures of continuous engagement with social media. Many reported feeling overwhelmed by the need to maintain an active online presence and respond to messages promptly. One participant explained, "Scrolling through social media all day makes me mentally exhausted. There's always a sense of pressure to stay updated and engaged." This perpetual connectivity often led to emotional exhaustion, prompting some participants to take periodic breaks from digital platforms to regain their mental well-being. Others admitted to struggling with self-regulation, acknowledging that excessive use of social media sometimes negatively affected their real-life productivity and emotional stability.

Superficial Interactions Versus Meaningful Engagement

Another key finding was the distinction between superficial interactions and deep, meaningful connections on social media. While participants engaged in frequent online conversations, many felt that these exchanges lacked depth. "Most of my interactions online are just quick comments or likes; I rarely have meaningful conversations anymore," remarked one participant. This shift towards surface-level communication raised concerns about the potential weakening of genuine interpersonal relationships. However, a few participants indicated that they actively sought out deeper engagement through long-form discussions, voice messages, or video calls to maintain closeness with important individuals in their lives.

The findings suggest that digital communication is a multifaceted phenomenon that intertwines convenience with challenges. Participants' experiences highlight the continuous negotiation of identity, the complexities of online social interactions, the psychological impact of digital engagement, and the evolving nature of interpersonal relationships in virtual spaces. While social media facilitates connection and self-expression, it also introduces new dimensions of pressure, emotional strain, and interpersonal miscommunication. These insights contribute to a more nuanced understanding of digital communication and its implications for social interactions in the digital era.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that digital identity construction is a dynamic and deeply personal process shaped by users' negotiation between authenticity and self-curation. The subjective experiences of participants highlight the complexities of online self-presentation, digital social interactions, and the emotional toll of maintaining an active online presence (Iazzi dkk., 2020). These insights directly address the core research questions concerning how individuals construct, experience, and interpret their online identities.

The study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing a phenomenological perspective on digital communication, emphasizing the lived experiences of social media users (Hameleers & Minihold, 2022). Unlike previous research that predominantly quantified online behavior, this study uncovers the psychological and emotional underpinnings of digital identity formation. The results demonstrate that online identity is not merely a reflection of offline identity but rather a curated construct influenced by social expectations and platform affordances. Participants expressed feelings of digital fatigue and pressure to conform to idealized online representations, underscoring the emotional impact of sustained social media engagement (Lukito, 2020). Furthermore, the findings illuminate the paradox of online connectivity, where increased digital interactions do not always translate to deeper or more meaningful relationships.

Comparing these findings with prior literature, this study expands on Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation by illustrating how digital platforms amplify the performative aspects of identity management. While previous studies have established the presence of selective self-presentation in social media (e.g., Hogan, 2010), this study further explores the subjective experiences behind such practices. Additionally, the findings align with Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory by

demonstrating how individuals seek validation and social belonging through their online personas. However, unlike traditional conceptualizations of identity formation, the findings suggest that digital identity construction is more fluid and adaptable, shaped by evolving social norms and technological affordances. This study also supports Rosen et al.'s (2013) concept of digital fatigue, adding depth to the discussion by highlighting the psychological strain that stems from the continuous negotiation of online self-presentation.

Implications of Findings

The implications of these findings extend across multiple domains, including digital psychology, media studies, and online communication research (St-Onge dkk., 2022). Social media users, particularly younger individuals, face significant psychological challenges in managing their online identities, which can impact self-esteem, mental health, and interpersonal relationships. The study's insights highlight the need for greater digital literacy programs that emphasize self-awareness and critical engagement with social media. Furthermore, organizations and technology designers can benefit from these findings by incorporating more user-centered approaches that encourage healthier digital interactions, such as reducing algorithm-driven pressures that reinforce unrealistic online self-presentation norms.

From a cultural perspective, the study contributes to the understanding of how digital spaces influence societal expectations regarding self-representation. The negotiation between authenticity and curation reflects broader social dynamics in which individuals are compelled to conform to digital norms while maintaining personal integrity. This tension underscores the evolving nature of identity in the digital era, where users must balance personal expression with the external validation mechanisms embedded in online platforms.

Study Limitations

Despite its valuable contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the study focuses on a relatively small sample of social media users, which limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. While phenomenological research prioritizes depth over breadth, future studies could explore a more diverse set of participants across different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds to understand variations in digital identity construction (Al-Rahmi dkk., 2020). Additionally, the reliance on self-reported experiences may introduce biases, as participants may reflect on their digital behaviors through a particular lens influenced by memory recall or social desirability.

Another limitation lies in the study's reliance on digital interactions as the primary context for identity construction. While online identity formation is a crucial aspect of modern communication, future research should explore the interplay between online and offline identity negotiations more comprehensively. Investigating how digital identity construction translates into real-world social interactions could provide a more holistic understanding of self-presentation in contemporary society.

Directions for Future Research

Building on these findings, future research should further investigate the longitudinal effects of digital identity management on psychological well-being. A longitudinal approach would provide deeper insights into how individuals' perceptions of their online identities evolve over time and how digital self-presentation influences long-term social relationships and mental health outcomes. Additionally, exploring cross-cultural variations in digital identity construction could reveal how different societal norms shape online self-representation strategies.

Further studies could also examine the role of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality, in shaping future digital identities (Wood dkk., 2023). As digital environments become increasingly immersive, understanding how users construct and interact with digital identities in augmented spaces will be critical. Finally, integrating interdisciplinary approaches—combining psychology, media studies, and digital ethics—could enrich the discussion on how individuals navigate their digital lives in an era of rapid technological advancement.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a phenomenological exploration of how individuals construct, negotiate, and experience their digital identities within social media environments. The findings reveal that online self-presentation is a complex process influenced by authenticity struggles, societal expectations, and emotional engagement. By prioritizing subjective experiences, this study expands our understanding of digital identity formation beyond quantitative analyses. The results suggest that while digital platforms facilitate connectivity, they also introduce psychological burdens related to self-curation and validation. These insights have important implications for digital literacy, mental well-being, and platform design, emphasizing the need for user-centered interventions. Future research should continue exploring the evolving nature of online identity in different cultural and technological contexts.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

- Al-Rahmi, W. M., Alzahrani, A. I., Yahaya, N., Alalwan, N., & Kamin, Y. B. (2020). Digital communication: Information and communication technology (ICT) usage for education sustainability. *Sustainability (Switzerland)*, 12(12). Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12125052>
- Hameleers, M., & Minihold, S. (2022). Constructing Discourses on (Un)truthfulness: Attributions of Reality, Misinformation, and Disinformation by Politicians in a Comparative Social Media Setting. *Communication Research*, 49(8), 1176–1199. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650220982762>
- Iazzi, A., Pizzi, S., Iaia, L., & Turco, M. (2020). Communicating the stakeholder engagement process: A cross-country analysis in the tourism sector. *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, 27(4), 1642–1652. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1002/csr.1913>
- Katzenbach, C., & Ulbricht, L. (2019). Algorithmic governance. *Internet Policy Review*, 8(4). Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.14763/2019.4.1424>
- Kejriwal, M., Wang, Q., Li, H., & Wang, L. (2021). An empirical study of emoji usage on Twitter in linguistic and national contexts. *Online Social Networks and Media*, 24. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.osnem.2021.100149>
- Lee, F. L. F., Liang, H., Cheng, E. W., Tang, G. K. Y., & Yuen, S. (2022). Affordances, movement dynamics, and a centralized digital communication platform in a networked movement. *Information Communication and Society*, 25(12), 1699–1716. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1877772>
- Lukito, J. (2020). Coordinating a Multi-Platform Disinformation Campaign: Internet Research Agency Activity on Three U.S. Social Media Platforms, 2015 to 2017. *Political Communication*, 37(2), 238–255. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2019.1661889>
- Nguyen, M. H., Gruber, J., Fuchs, J., Marler, W., Hunsaker, A., & Hargittai, E. (2020). Changes in Digital Communication During the COVID-19 Global Pandemic: Implications for Digital Inequality and Future Research. *Social Media and Society*, 6(3). Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120948255>
- Pamungkas, E. W., Basile, V., & Patti, V. (2021). A joint learning approach with knowledge injection for zero-shot cross-lingual hate speech detection. *Information Processing and Management*, 58(4). Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ipm.2021.102544>

- Srisathan, W. A., & Naruetharadhol, P. (2022). A COVID-19 disruption: The great acceleration of digitally planned and transformed behaviors in Thailand. *Technology in Society*, 68. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techsoc.2022.101912>
- St-Onge, C., Ouellet, K., Lakhali, S., Dubé, T., & Marceau, M. (2022). COVID-19 as the tipping point for integrating e-assessment in higher education practices. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 53(2), 349–366. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.13169>
- Wood, A. J., Martindale, N., & Lehdonvirta, V. (2023). Dynamics of contention in the gig economy: Rage against the platform, customer or state? *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 38(2), 330–350. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ntwe.12216>