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Social Identity Construction in Digital Communities: A Case Study on Social Media Users in Indonesia

Han-Gyeol Yang¹, Thalita Syifa Fatimah².

¹Tongmyong University, Busan, South Korea, vgoodv788@gmail.com

²Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia, ithafatimah97@upi.edu

Corresponding Author: ithafatimah97@upi.edu¹

Abstract: This study aims to explore the process of social identity construction within digital communities in Indonesia using the Social Identity Theory approach. With a qualitative case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and content analysis from various digital communities such as fandoms, social activism groups, and hobby groups. The findings indicate that social media plays a crucial role in facilitating the formation of social identity through social categorization, social identification, and social comparison processes. Social media provides a dynamic space for individuals to find groups with similar interests, internalize community norms, and reinforce solidarity through symbols and collective activities. The collectivist culture of Indonesia influences social identity formation, reflected in the integration of local values such as the use of regional languages and cultural symbols in online interactions. However, challenges like polarization, cyberbullying, and social pressure also emerge, hindering the dynamics of digital communities. These findings affirm that social media is not only a communication tool but also a complex space that facilitates social identity formation with intertwined opportunities and risks. The results contribute theoretically to social psychology and digital culture literature and provide practical insights for managing inclusive and harmonious digital communities.

Keywords: Social Identity, Digital Communities, Social Media, Collectivist Culture, Social Identity Theory

INTRODUCTION

The digital transformation has brought fundamental changes in various aspects of life, including how individuals interact and form social identities. In Indonesia, the development of information technology, particularly social media use, has created a new space for interpersonal and collective communication. According to the latest report from We Are Social and Hootsuite, as of January 2024, Indonesia had over 139 million active social media users, accounting for 49.9% of the total population (Datareportal, 2024). Platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook are the most commonly used, with average daily usage time reaching 3 hours and 18 minutes (Databoks Katadata, 2024). These numbers indicate that social media has become an integral element of everyday life for Indonesian society.

Social media not only serves as a communication tool but also provides a space for social identity formation. From the perspective of Social Identity Theory, proposed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), social identity is defined as part of an individual's self-concept derived from their membership in particular social groups. Social identity influences how individuals behave, assess themselves, and interact with others. In the digital context, social media enables individuals to engage in processes of identity formation and modification through interactions with virtual groups that have diverse values, norms, and cultures (Ellison et al., 2007).

Indonesia has unique collectivist cultural characteristics, where group solidarity and social harmony are primary values (Hofstede, 2001). In digital communities, these values are often reflected in forms of interaction and participation in online communities such as hobby groups, fandoms, or social activism groups. For instance, social movements based on social media, such as #SaveKPK or #GejayanMemanggil, demonstrate how collective social identities can be formed and mobilized through digital media (Lim, 2020). Furthermore, local culture also influences how individuals express themselves on social media, such as through the use of regional languages, cultural symbols, or traditional references in their digital content.

However, the formation of social identity in digital communities does not always proceed without challenges. Social media also becomes an arena where individuals face challenges such as cyberbullying, social pressure, and intergroup conflicts (boyd, 2014). These factors can affect how individuals build and maintain their identities in the online world.

This study aims to explore the process of social identity construction in digital communities in Indonesia, focusing on how social media interactions shape individuals' self-perception and group membership. This study will also analyze the role of norms, culture, and technology in influencing these dynamics. With a case study approach, this research is expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions to understanding social identity in the digital era, especially within the culturally and socially diverse context of Indonesia.

Conceptual Framework

Social identity is an important aspect of human life that reflects individuals' membership in a social group. Social Identity Theory, proposed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), forms the basis for understanding social identity formation. This theory asserts that social identity is formed through three main processes: social categorization, social identification, and social comparison. In the context of digital communities, these three processes are facilitated by social media, allowing individuals to build social identity through virtual group interactions.

Social categorization is the process by which individuals classify themselves and others into certain categories, such as online community members based on hobbies, occupations, or shared goals. This process reinforces a sense of belonging to the relevant group. Social identification occurs when individuals begin to see themselves as part of the group, such that their behavior and decisions are influenced by the group's norms and values. Social comparison involves evaluating one's group against others, often to enhance group superiority or internal solidarity. These three processes occur dynamically on social media, where individuals actively participate in discussions, share experiences, and validate their membership in digital communities.

Social media plays a vital role in supporting social identity formation. With features such as groups, hashtags, and algorithms designed to connect users with similar interests, these platforms facilitate the formation of strong online communities. For example, fandom communities, social activism groups, or specific hobby groups often develop into spaces where members can express themselves, exchange ideas, and build solidarity. Social media also allows flexibility in social identity formation, where individuals can modify or even change their identities to align with digital group norms or new emerging trends (Ellison et al., 2007).

In the Indonesian context, collectivist culture plays a significant role in shaping social identity in digital communities. Hofstede (2001) explains that collectivism emphasizes the importance of interpersonal relationships within groups and the maintenance of social harmony. These values are reflected in digital communities, where group solidarity and concern for other members become priorities. For instance, social movements based on social media, such as #GejayanMemanggil and #SaveKPK, show how collective social identities can be used to mobilize mass support for social issues. Additionally, the use of regional languages, cultural symbols, and traditional references in online interactions demonstrates how local social identity is integrated into the digital space.

However, social identity formation in digital communities also faces challenges. Cyberbullying, social pressure, and intergroup conflicts often arise as negative impacts of interactions on social media (boyd, 2014). Moreover, social media algorithms designed to increase user engagement can amplify polarization, create rigid social groupings, and limit individuals' perspectives of other groups. This affects how social identity is formed and maintained in digital communities, particularly in a highly pluralistic environment like Indonesia.

This conceptual framework emphasizes that social identity formation in digital communities is a complex process involving interactions between social psychology theories, digital technology dynamics, and local culture. Social media provides a new space for building social identity, but also brings challenges that affect group interaction dynamics. By understanding this process, research can provide insights into how social identity evolves in the digital era and how local values influence these dynamics.

Tabel 1. Conceptual Framework Model

Variable	Indicator/Dimension	Theory/Reference
Social identify	- Social Categorization: Identification of groups based on interests, hobbies, or goals.	<i>Social Identity Theory</i> (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)
	- Social Identification: Feeling as part of the group and adopting group norms.	
	- Social Comparison: Evaluating between groups to strengthen solidarity or sense of superiority.	
Social Media	- Social Media Features: Groups, hashtags, and algorithms that help find digital communities.	Ellison et al. (2007), Boyd (2014)
	- Online Interaction: Communication between community members through posts, comments, or discussions.	
	- Identity Flexibility: Ability to modify or change identity according to group norms.	
Collectivist Culture	- Group Solidarity: Importance of interpersonal relationships and social harmony.	Hofstede (2001)
	- Influence of Local Values: Integration of traditional culture into digital identity, such as the use of cultural symbols.	
	- Social Mobilization: Formation of identity-based movements for collective goals (e.g., #SaveKPK).	
Challenges on Social Media	- Polarization: Excessive social grouping due to social media algorithms.	Boyd (2014)
	- Intergroup Conflict: Tensions and disagreements in online communities.	
	- Social Pressure: Negative impacts such as cyberbullying affecting identity construction.	

This model shows how various elements, such as social identity, social media, collectivist culture, and challenges on social media, interact in the process of social identity construction

in digital communities. This model is also based on relevant theories to support research analysis.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore social identity construction in digital communities in Indonesia. A qualitative approach was chosen to deeply understand social phenomena and human interactions in a specific context (Creswell, 2014). A case study was used to provide a detailed description of the social identity construction process in specific digital communities, in line with the characteristics of social media as an interaction platform. This study was conducted on digital communities active on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Digital communities were selected based on their active members, routine activities, and high engagement in online discussions or interactions. Examples of communities studied include hobby groups, fandoms, and social activism groups.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and digital content analysis. In-depth interviews were conducted with 15-20 participants who were active members of the selected digital communities. Participant selection was done using purposive sampling techniques, with criteria such as community activity, duration of involvement, and ability to provide relevant information related to the research (Patton, 2015). The interviews aimed to explore participants' experiences, perspectives, and ways of constructing social identities in digital communities. Participatory observation was conducted by directly participating in the activities of digital communities for three months. This observation included monitoring group discussions, posting activities, and patterns of interaction between members. The researcher also noted group norms, symbols, and values highlighted within the digital community. Field notes were used to document findings during observations.

Content analysis was conducted on posts, comments, and symbols used in digital communities. This analysis aimed to understand how social identity is represented in digital media. The resulting data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis process included data coding, identifying main themes, and interpreting findings based on the established theoretical framework. Data validity was ensured through method triangulation by comparing data from interviews, observations, and content analysis (Yin, 2018). Data validation was also conducted through member checking, confirming findings with participants to ensure the accuracy of the researcher's interpretation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Social Categorization in Digital Communities

Social categorization in digital communities is clearly visible in interaction patterns and group structures. Participants identify themselves as part of specific communities based on shared interests or goals. For example, in fandom communities, participants feel like part of a "virtual family" because they share the same interest in a particular artist or work.

Tabel 2. Social Categories

Community	Basis of Categorization	Example Activities
Fandom Community	Interest in a particular artist	Discussing latest works, sharing fan art
Activism Group	Concern for social issues	Online campaigns, petition dissemination
Hobby Group	Interest in specific activities	Sharing experiences, tutorials, and products

This categorization strengthens the sense of togetherness among community members, forming the basis for social identity construction. Social identification occurs when participants internalize the norms and values of their digital community. Participants from fandom

communities, for example, show high loyalty to their communities through activities such as defending their idol on social media or promoting their idol's work to the public. Meanwhile, in social activism groups, identification is evident through the use of shared hashtags, organizing online events, and active participation in discussions.

Participants also mentioned that group norms often shape how they interact on digital platforms. For example, politeness and solidarity are dominant norms in hobby communities, while activism communities emphasize courage in expressing opinions.

Social Comparison and Polarization

Social comparison often occurs between different digital communities. In some cases, this comparison results in a sense of group superiority, such as in fandom communities that consider their idol’s work superior to others. However, comparison can also trigger conflict, especially when norms or values between communities are in opposition.

Tabel 3. Social Comparison and Polarization

Community	Comparison with	Result of Comparison
Fandom A	Fandom B	Increased loyalty; conflict in online comments
Activism Group	Institutions or other groups	Strengthening internal solidarity
Hobby Group	Similar communities	Increased creative competition

Polarization between groups also becomes an issue, especially in communities with strong values, such as social activism.

Representation of Identity on Social Media

Participants' social identities are represented in various ways on social media. Content analysis shows that social identity is often represented through symbols, such as community logos, taglines, or hashtags. For example, the hashtag #SaveKPK is used to express solidarity within activism groups. Meanwhile, the use of local cultural symbols, such as traditional clothing in profile pictures or regional terms in discussions, shows how local values are integrated into digital identity.

Tabel 4. Representasi Identitas

Representation	Media Used	Meaning
Hashtag (#SaveKPK)	Twitter, Instagram	Solidarity and support for specific issues
Local Cultural Symbols	Profile pictures, text content	Regional identity and cultural pride
Community Logo	Facebook Grup	Pride and loyalty to the group

The main challenges in social identity formation in digital communities include cyberbullying, social pressure, and intergroup conflicts. Some participants reported that differences in opinion often triggered conflicts, especially in social activism groups. Moreover, social media algorithms that encourage engagement also exacerbate polarization, where individuals are more often exposed to their own group's views, reducing opportunities for dialogue with other groups.

Discussion

Social categorization is the initial step in the process of social identity formation. Social media provides a space that allows individuals to find groups based on interests, values, or shared goals. In this study, fandom, social activism, and hobby groups are the main examples of digital communities where individuals categorize themselves as members. This categorization is reinforced by social media platform features, such as groups and hashtags, which make it easier for individuals to connect with relevant communities (Ellison et al., 2007). This demonstrates that social media is not just a communication tool but also a social ecosystem that enables individuals to find their "place" in the digital world.

Social identification emerges when individuals begin to internalize the norms, values, and symbols that apply within their digital communities. This study found that, in fandom

communities, for example, social identification is reflected in members' loyalty to their group and idol. Activities such as sharing fan art, promoting the idol's work, or participating in online campaigns demonstrate how individuals build a sense of belonging to the group. In social activism communities, the use of hashtags like #SaveKPK or #GejayanMemanggil becomes a symbol of solidarity that strengthens social identification. These findings are consistent with social identification theory, which states that the process of internalizing group norms can strengthen individuals' relationships with their communities (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Social comparison is an important aspect of social identity formation, especially in highly competitive digital communities. In this study, comparisons between fandom groups show a tendency to strengthen loyalty through assertions of group superiority. However, these comparisons also trigger conflicts, such as disputes in comment sections or attempts to undermine other communities. On the other hand, in social activism communities, comparisons are more often used to strengthen internal solidarity and create a sense of shared purpose. These findings are relevant to social comparison theory, which states that intergroup comparisons can strengthen social identity but also increase the potential for conflict (Tajfel, 1982).

Social media as a digital space offers great opportunities for individuals to express their social identities. Symbols, such as hashtags, community logos, or the use of local languages, often serve as ways for community members to represent their identities. In the Indonesian context, collectivist culture plays a crucial role in shaping social identity in the digital space. The use of local cultural symbols, such as traditional clothing or regional terms, shows how local values are integrated into digital identity. This aligns with Hofstede's (2001) findings on collectivist culture, where harmony and group solidarity are the main priorities.

However, this study also found several challenges in the formation of social identity in digital communities. Polarization between groups is one of the most prominent issues, especially in communities with strong values, such as social activism. Social media algorithms designed to increase engagement often reinforce certain group views, thus reducing opportunities to interact with other groups. Additionally, cyberbullying and social pressure are significant obstacles in the process of social identity formation. Some participants reported that the pressure to comply with group norms could cause stress or even the desire to leave the community.

These findings imply that social media can be an effective tool for building social identity, but there needs to be awareness of the challenges that arise. Social media platforms and digital communities need to create inclusive spaces to encourage dialogue between groups and reduce conflicts. Moreover, individuals need to have good digital literacy so that they can use social media in a way that supports mental health and social harmony.

Overall, this discussion confirms that social identity formation in digital communities is a dynamic and complex process. Social media offers opportunities to strengthen social relationships but also presents risks that need to be managed. By understanding these dynamics, this study provides significant contributions to social psychology and digital culture literature, particularly in the context of Indonesia's unique social and cultural diversity.

CONCLUSION

This study explores social identity construction in digital communities in Indonesia using Social Identity Theory as an analytical framework. The findings show that social media plays an essential role in facilitating social identity formation through the processes of categorization, identification, and social comparison. Social media is not only a communication tool but also a dynamic space that allows individuals to find and strengthen their identities in relevant communities. Social categorization occurs through grouping individuals based on shared interests or values, such as in fandom, social activism, and hobby communities. Social identification is evident in the internalization of group norms and values, reflected in members'

loyalty to their digital communities. Meanwhile, social comparison creates complex dynamics, both in strengthening group solidarity and increasing the potential for intergroup conflict. These findings also indicate that social identity in digital communities in Indonesia is influenced by collectivist culture, where values of solidarity and group harmony are important. The use of local cultural symbols in digital communities reinforces the integration between local and digital identity. However, challenges such as polarization, social pressure, and intergroup conflict are significant obstacles in social identity formation. This study emphasizes that social media is a potential space for social identity building but also brings risks that need to be managed. Awareness of the importance of digital literacy and inclusiveness in digital communities is required to minimize negative impacts such as conflict and cyberbullying. Thus, this research provides an important contribution to social psychology, digital culture, and the unique cultural context of Indonesia, as well as offering practical insights for better digital community management.

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