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Social Media as a Space for Shaping Gay Identity

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ABSTRACT

Social media has become a space for interaction through which gay individuals express, negotiate, and manage their identities. This study aims to explore the experiences of gay individuals in Pangkalpinang City in constructing and presenting their identities through social media using Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective. This study employs a qualitative interpretive approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with five gay informants and documentation. The data were analyzed thematically, focusing on self-presentation, identity disclosure, audience management, and social responses. The findings indicate that social media provides opportunities for identity expression and social interaction while requiring individuals to consider the extent to which their identities are disclosed. Informants adjust their self-presentation according to their audiences, social circumstances, and perceived risks of disclosure. They select particular content, symbols, accounts, and personal information to manage how others perceive them. Their experiences also include negative responses, including ridicule, verbal harassment, stigma, and rejection. These experiences influence how informants manage privacy and disclose their identities across digital environments. The findings further indicate that front-stage and back-stage practices cannot be assigned permanently to particular platforms because different forms of self-presentation may occur within the same platform, depending on the audience and interactional context. This study contributes to an understanding of gay identity construction as an ongoing process shaped by self-presentation, audience expectations, and social responses.

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Introduction

LGBT identities continue to generate contrasting responses in Indonesian society. Some people regard these identities as inconsistent with prevailing cultural and religious values, while others emphasize the importance of respecting individuals in social life. These differences contribute to the stigma and negative treatment experienced by LGBT individuals in their everyday interactions (Sa'idah & Annajih, 2022). Discussions about LGBT issues also involve questions concerning individual rights and equal treatment under the law (Putri, 2022). Research on young people's attitudes in Indonesia indicates that perceptions of LGBT identities vary, ranging from rejection to acceptance, depending on social backgrounds and the environments in which individuals interact (Setyawan & Muhiddin, 2023).

Public responses to LGBT identities are influenced by cultural values, religious beliefs, and social expectations. These influences do not produce uniform attitudes across society. Some individuals and groups express more accepting views, while others continue to associate LGBT identities with negative social judgments (Loppies & Hindrajat, 2025). Such differences contribute to the social circumstances in which gay individuals negotiate their identities and decide whether to disclose personal information.

Social media provides opportunities for LGBT individuals to communicate, express themselves, and establish connections with people who share similar experiences. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter have been used to communicate identity and expand social networks (Khairani & Rodiah, 2023). These platforms also provide spaces in which users can develop relationships and maintain connections beyond their immediate social environments. Baym (2015) explains that digital communication has become part of the ways people maintain personal relationships and negotiate social connections. Papacharissi (2011) similarly discusses how networked environments provide spaces for individuals to present aspects of themselves and participate in digital communities. However, online visibility does not automatically result in social acceptance. Public expressions of identity may also attract criticism and negative responses, as discussed in research on LGBT representation in digital media (Phoebe *et al.*, 2024).

The use of social media also involves decisions about how individuals represent themselves. Users can select photographs, profile descriptions, symbols, and personal information to communicate particular aspects of their identities. Dewi and Abadi (2023) explain that LGBT individuals may manage the identities they represent on social media because their self-presentation

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can receive different responses from other users. The concept of networked publics also helps explain how digital environments connect users and make their shared content accessible to different audiences (boyd, 2014). These characteristics make social media a space in which identity expression is accompanied by decisions about visibility, privacy, and audience expectations.

Identity expression on social media is closely related to self-disclosure, which involves decisions about what personal information to reveal and what information to keep private. Research on LGBT individuals in Indonesia has examined how users disclose aspects of their identities through social media and how they respond to the reactions of other users (Kiswari *et al.*, 2023). A study of Malaysian LGBTQ youths also found that Twitter could provide a space for self-disclosure and interaction with supportive communities, although disclosure remained connected to the responses users received from their followers (Mohamad Tuah & Mazlan, 2020). Research on gay individuals in Mataram further indicates that the decision to disclose an identity may differ according to family circumstances, social stigma, and the availability of supportive environments (Novani *et al*., 2021). These findings show that identity disclosure is not simply an individual decision but is also influenced by social relationships and the anticipated responses of others.

In Pangkalpinang City, social media provides a means for gay individuals to communicate, establish relationships, and connect with other members of the gay community. The ways individuals present their identities may differ according to their intended audiences and concerns about social judgment. Research on gay identity in Toboali, South Bangka, provides a local point of comparison by examining how gay individuals negotiate their identities in public and social spaces (Rahmawan & Sujadmi, 2021). The present study focuses specifically on identity construction through social media in Pangkalpinang City, particularly how individuals manage self-presentation, identity disclosure, and audience responses in digital environments.

Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective provides a framework for understanding how individuals present themselves in social interactions. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman (1959) explains social interaction through the metaphor of theatrical performance, in which individuals manage the impressions they convey to others. The front stage refers to situations in which individuals present themselves before an audience, whereas the back stage refers to settings in which they can prepare or manage aspects of their performances away from that audience. Impression

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management describes the efforts individuals make to influence how others perceive them.

In digital environments, self-presentation also involves anticipating the audiences who may encounter shared content. Marwick & Boyd (2011) explain that social media users experience context collapse when audiences from different social contexts converge within the same digital environment. They also introduce the concept of imagined audiences, referring to the audiences users anticipate when creating and sharing content. Hogan (2010) further distinguishes between performances that occur in social situations and online exhibitions that may remain accessible beyond the immediate interaction in which they were created. These concepts are relevant to examining how gay individuals select content, manage personal information, and adjust their self-presentation according to different social situations. Bates *et al*. (2020) also demonstrate that social media identity practices may vary across contexts rather than representing a single, fixed identity presentation.

Based on this background, this study aims to explore how gay individuals in Pangkalpinang construct and negotiate their identities through social media using Goffman's dramaturgical perspective. Specifically, it examines how they present themselves, make decisions about identity disclosure, manage different audiences, and respond to social reactions encountered in digital environments. The study also examines how front-stage and back-stage practices operate within social media interactions without assigning fixed dramaturgical functions to particular platforms.

Method of Research

This study employed a qualitative interpretive approach to examine how gay individuals in Pangkalpinang construct and negotiate their identities through social media. This approach was selected to understand how individuals interpret their experiences, make decisions about self-presentation, and negotiate identity disclosure within different digital and social environments. Rather than treating social media platforms as spaces with fixed functions, the study focused on how participants use these platforms in relation to their audiences, social circumstances, and personal considerations.

The participants consisted of five gay individuals living in Pangkalpinang, selected through purposive sampling based on their relevance to the research objectives and their experiences of using social media for self-presentation and social interaction. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and documentation. The interviews explored participants'

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experiences of presenting and disclosing their sexual identities online, their considerations when interacting with different audiences, and the social responses they encountered. Documentation was used to complement the interview data by providing supporting information about participants' social media practices.

The data were analyzed thematically by identifying relevant information from the interviews and documentation, organizing recurring patterns into themes, and interpreting the findings in relation to the research objectives. The analysis focused on four interconnected aspects: identity construction, self-presentation, identity disclosure, and audience management, including social responses to online identity expression. Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective served as the analytical framework for interpreting how participants managed impressions and negotiated the boundaries between public and private aspects of their identities. Concepts of front stage, back stage, and impression management were applied in relation to participants' accounts of their digital interactions. The analysis also considered context collapse and imagined audiences to explain how anticipated encounters with different audiences influenced participants' decisions about online self-presentation and identity disclosure.

Importantly, front-stage and back-stage practices were not assigned permanently to particular social media platforms. Instead, their functions were interpreted according to audience composition, account settings, interactional situations, and levels of identity disclosure described by the participants. This analytical approach enabled the study to examine how different forms of self-presentation could coexist within the same platform.

Discussion

A. Social Media as a Space for Shaping Gay Identity in Pangkalpinang City

Social media platforms provide different opportunities for gay individuals in Pangkalpinang City to communicate, establish relationships, and present aspects of their identities. The findings indicate that participants' platform choices are influenced by their communication needs, intended audiences, and considerations regarding the visibility of personal information. Rather than using each platform for a single purpose, participants select digital spaces according to the forms of interaction they seek and the social circumstances they encounter.

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AA described changes in the platforms used to communicate with members of the gay community in Pangkalpinang:

> *"Di Pangkalpinang ini banyak sekali kelompok-kelompok Gay, biasanya dulu kita melakukan hal kearah yang tidak baik itu melalui whatsapp atau Instagram tetapi sekarang sudah dibatasi penggunaan-nya, jadi kita beralih ke Mi-chat lebih mudah."* (Wawancara AA, 02 September 2026).

This account illustrates how participants' platform choices can change in response to perceived restrictions and practical considerations. Rather than serving only as spaces for public self-expression, digital platforms can also facilitate communication and connections within particular communities. The choice of platform therefore reflects participants' efforts to find communication environments that they consider suitable for their needs. Research on social media affordances also explains that platform features can facilitate or limit identity expression and community formation among LGBTQIA+ users (Are *et al.,* 2025).

AA also described feeling confident about the content shared on TikTok because it received audience engagement:

> *"Saya sangat yakin bahwa hal yang saya lakukan ini benar, karna banyak sekali like atau penonton yang saya dapatkan di media social saya."* (Wawancara AA, 02 September 2026).

This experience indicates that online engagement can influence how participants interpret their self-presentation. Likes and views may provide a sense of recognition, although such engagement does not necessarily indicate acceptance from all audiences. A systematic review of social media use among LGBTQ youths also identifies online interaction as a means of connection and identity development, while noting that digital environments may involve both supportive and negative experiences. NA described how TikTok enabled users to expand their social networks beyond Pangkalpinang:

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> *"Di tiktok juga kita bisa menambah lingkup komunitas bukan hanya di Pangkalpinang saja tapi bisa ke luar daerah."* (Wawancara NA, 02 September 2026).

Meanwhile, AA described the positive response received from audiences through content shared on social media:

> "Saya sangat yakin bahwa hal yang saya lakukan ini benar, karna banyak sekali like atau penonton yang saya dapatkan di media social saya." (Wawancara AA, 02 September 2026).

AA's experience indicates that audience engagement can influence how individuals evaluate their online self-presentation. Likes and views may provide a sense of recognition and encourage confidence in sharing particular content. However, audience engagement should not automatically be interpreted as widespread social acceptance. Positive responses from some users may coexist with negative attitudes from other audiences.

These findings can be interpreted through Goffman's (1959) concept of impression management, which explains how individuals organize their self-presentation to influence the impressions formed by others. The selection of communication platforms, shared content, and forms of interaction reflects participants' efforts to manage how they are perceived within digital environments. However, the findings also indicate that platform use cannot be understood through fixed distinctions between public and private spaces. A platform may facilitate interaction within a particular community while also serving as a space for broader social visibility. Its function depends on participants' intentions, the audiences involved, and the circumstances surrounding each interaction.

From this perspective, platform-specific performances do not mean that each social media platform has one permanent dramaturgical function. Rather, participants negotiate their self-presentation through different digital spaces according to their interactional needs and anticipated audiences. This interpretation provides a basis for understanding how front-stage and back-stage practices may operate across and within social media platforms.

B. Audience Segregation and Context Collapse in Identity Disclosure

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The findings indicate that participants consider their audiences when deciding how to present or disclose their identities online. Although social media offers opportunities for self-expression, participants may also anticipate encounters with people whose views differ from their own. These considerations influence decisions about account use, personal information, and the visibility of shared content.

FO described choosing a secondary account because of concerns about social sanctions and stigma, even though expressing their identity online could provide a sense of happiness:

> *"Tetapi saya lebih memilih mempunyai akun kedua yang tidak menampilkan diri saya yang menyimpang ini, karena saya sangat takut mendapatkan sanksi social atau stigma buruk oleh orang-orang yang berbeda pemikiran dengan apa yang saya lakukan, padahal dengan menampilkan jati diri saya di media social saya merasa Bahagia tetapi saya tidak bisa."* (Wawancara FO, 03 September 2026).

FO's experience illustrates the tension between the desire for self-expression and the need to manage potential social risks. Using a secondary account can allow users to separate different audiences and limit the information available to particular groups. This strategy reflects the importance of managing privacy boundaries when online content may be encountered by people from different social environments. Research on LGBT parents' social media practices similarly describes privacy as a matter that involves decisions about disclosure and the management of boundaries within social networks (Blackwell *et al.,* 2016).

This finding relates to the concept of context collapse discussed by Marwick and boyd (2011). Context collapse occurs when audiences from different social settings converge within the same digital environment, making it difficult for users to tailor their self-presentation to each audience separately. A post intended for supportive peers, for example, may also become visible to family members, acquaintances, or people with opposing views. The possibility of such encounters can encourage users to limit personal information or maintain separate accounts.

The use of different accounts also reflects the ways individuals manage their online identities. Research on LGBTQ youth has found that

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identity management on social networking sites involves decisions about what information to share and how to maintain relationships with different groups of people (McConnell *et al.,* 2018). In FO's experience, the secondary account functions as a means of managing the visibility of personal identity in response to anticipated social judgment.

DI described using a rainbow symbol on an Instagram profile to signal a gay identity to potential contacts:

> *"Biasanya kita menambahkan logo Pelangi di profil Instagram untuk menandakan bahwa identitas kita itu Adalah gay, jadi orang-orang yang mengajak kenalan sudah tahu terlebih dahulu jati diri kita dan kita tidak perlu menjelaskan lagi. Tetapi terkadang dengan adanya logo Pelangi itu juga kita mendapatkan ejekan atau perundungan social."* (Wawancara DI, 03 September 2026).

The rainbow symbol serves as an identity signal that can communicate information without requiring explicit verbal disclosure. At the same time, DI's account shows that the same signal may facilitate recognition by some users while exposing the account holder to ridicule or social bullying. The meaning and consequences of a profile symbol therefore depend on who encounters it and how they interpret it. Research on self-disclosure among gay and lesbian adolescents also emphasizes that decisions about revealing personal identities are influenced by the possibility of acceptance or rejection within their social environments (La'lang & Kusumiati, 2023).

Marwick and boyd's (2011) concept of imagined audiences further explains how users anticipate who might encounter their content when creating and sharing posts. Even when the actual audience is uncertain, assumptions about potential viewers can shape online communication. FO's decision to use a secondary account demonstrates how anticipated negative responses may influence identity disclosure before any particular audience reaction occurs.

These experiences also demonstrate why front-stage and back-stage practices should not be equated with particular platforms. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective helps explain how individuals manage impressions, while Hogan (2010) highlights the distinction between performances in social interaction and online exhibitions that may remain

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accessible beyond the immediate moment of sharing. A public profile, a secondary account, or a particular post may each serve different functions depending on its audience, visibility, and intended purpose. Thus, multiple forms of self-presentation can coexist within the same platform.

C. Social Responses and Challenges in Online Identity Construction

Participants' experiences indicate that social media can provide opportunities for self-expression while also exposing them to negative social responses. These responses influence how participants evaluate the risks of visibility and make decisions about the information they share. The findings particularly highlight concerns about stigma, ridicule, and social bullying.

FO's account illustrates how the anticipation of social sanctions can limit identity disclosure even when online self-expression is personally meaningful. The decision to use a secondary account reflects an attempt to manage the boundary between personal identity and the expectations of different audiences. This experience suggests that identity construction involves both the desire to communicate aspects of the self and the need to consider the possible consequences of disclosure.

DI's experience similarly demonstrates the ambivalent nature of identity signals on social media. A rainbow symbol can help communicate identity to potential contacts, but it may also invite ridicule or bullying. Research on TikTok self-disclosure among LGBT individuals also identifies the possibility of different social responses following the disclosure of identity through digital platforms (Shinthia et al., 2024). The same act of self-presentation can therefore create opportunities for recognition while exposing the individual to negative responses.

These findings caution against treating online visibility as an uncomplicated form of empowerment or assuming that disclosure always leads to acceptance. A systematic review of social media use among lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations found that online spaces can provide opportunities for support and connection while also exposing users to negative experiences such as cyberbullying and stigma (Escobar-Viera et al., 2018). This dual character of social media is relevant to understanding why participants may express certain aspects of their identities while keeping other information private.

The findings can be understood through Goffman's (1959) concept of impression management. Individuals make choices about how they appear to others based on the impressions they wish to convey and

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the reactions they anticipate. In digital environments, these choices may include selecting profile symbols, limiting personal information, using secondary accounts, or adjusting the content shared with different audiences. Such practices do not necessarily indicate that participants reject their identities. Rather, they demonstrate how self-presentation is negotiated in relation to the social circumstances they encounter.

Taken together, the findings show that gay identity construction through social media involves continuous decisions about self-presentation, disclosure, audience management, and responses to social judgment. Social media does not function exclusively as either a public or private space. Instead, the meanings and risks of online self-presentation depend on the interaction between users' intentions, platform features, audience composition, and the wider social context.

Conclusion

This study concludes that social media serves as a space for gay individuals in Pangkalpinang City to present, negotiate, and manage their identities through different forms of self-presentation. The findings indicate that identity expression varies across platforms according to audience characteristics, privacy considerations, and the degree of personal disclosure. TikTok provides opportunities for self-presentation to a wider audience through video content, while Instagram facilitates identity expression through visual representations, symbols, and social interactions. Twitter allows users to exercise greater control over disclosure through anonymous or alternative accounts, whereas Facebook tends to involve more limited identity expression because family members are part of its audience.Viewed through Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, these practices illustrate how individuals manage the impressions they create in front of different audiences. The front stage and back stage are not permanently attached to particular social media platforms but emerge through users' decisions about what to display, conceal, and share. Privacy settings, account selection, content filtering, and audience considerations become important strategies in managing self-presentation. Interactions and responses from other users also contribute to how individuals negotiate their identity in digital spaces, including experiences of acceptance, rejection, and social judgment. These findings demonstrate that social media is not merely a communication medium but also a social space in which identity expression is continuously negotiated through interactions between individuals and their audiences. The study contributes to the understanding of digital

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identity management by highlighting the relationship between platform characteristics, audience diversity, and impression management. However, the findings are limited to five informants in Pangkalpinang City and cannot be generalized to all gay individuals or other geographical settings. Future research may examine how digital identity management develops across different social environments and how changing audience relationships influence individuals' decisions to disclose or conceal their identities.

AI Declaration

In accordance with the principles of academic integrity and responsible research, the use of ChatGPT (OpenAI) in the preparation of this manuscript was strictly limited to grammatical correction and linguistic refinement. All intellectual contributions, theoretical arguments, empirical analyses, and scholarly interpretations remain entirely the responsibility of the authors. The authors have critically reviewed all AI-assisted language revisions and accept full accountability for the final manuscript.

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