Family identity in the digital sphere: Mothers' narratives on public and private Instagram accounts

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Abstract

This study examines the ways Indonesian mothers construct and negotiate family identity through the use of public and private Instagram accounts. The growing presence of mothers on Instagram has transformed the representation of family life into a performative digital practice shaped by visibility, social interaction, and cultural norms. Rather than functioning as a neutral record of everyday experiences, Instagram has become a discursive space where family identity is strategically produced and managed. Drawing on Narrative Performance Theory, this qualitative research employs in-depth interviews with Indonesian mothers who engage in different patterns of digital visibility. The findings indicate that mothers with public Instagram accounts tend to construct curated narratives of family harmony and ideality to achieve social recognition, legitimacy, and broader audience engagement. In contrast, mothers who use private accounts emphasize maternal reflexivity, emotional closeness, ethical responsibility, and the protection of children's digital privacy. These contrasting narrative practices demonstrate that digital family identity is shaped through internal and external boundary management strategies that balance self-expression, social connection, and digital safety. The study highlights Instagram's role as a dynamic arena in which family identity is continuously performed, negotiated, and redefined, contributing to broader discussions on digital parenting, family communication, and ethical considerations in social media use.

Introduction

Digital transformation represents a significant structural shift that affects nearly every aspect of society, including the dynamics and structure of families worldwide. Social media platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, along with various instant messaging services, play a central role in this change by providing spaces for information dissemination, visual content sharing, and interpersonal communication. In Indonesia, YouTube is the most widely used social media platform with approximately

143 million users, followed by Facebook (122 million), TikTok (108 million), and Instagram (103 million) as of early 2025 (Kemp, 2025). At the global level, platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok consistently rank among the most frequently used social media platforms, indicating their widespread adoption as communication spaces across different social contexts (Pew Research Center, 2025; van Dijck, 2013). Beyond the aspect of media use, the blurred boundaries between the private and public spheres have transformed digital public spaces into new arenas where families construct identities and share personal narratives openly (Thimm, 2016).

The public display of family life and the sharing of private moments within social circles predates digital media (Holloway & Green, 2017), yet the digitalization of public spaces has significantly transformed these practices. Expanded access to digital platforms has reshaped public discourse, with participatory social media creating new channels that influence the formation and management of the public sphere. Recent data show that Instagram is widely used by women, including mothers, as both a public and private communication medium. In Indonesia, women constitute nearly half of Instagram users, with many adult female users sharing family related content through public and private accounts (Kemp, 2025; Statista, 2025). These conditions position Instagram as an important space for family-related communication within digitally mediated public environments, where the public sphere operates as a dynamic co-construction among individuals, institutions, and the state.

Closely linked to shifting notions of privacy and personal data management, these changes reflect how users now shape privacy through active decisions about platform settings and selective content sharing. Meanwhile, traditional gatekeeping in social media has declined, lowering barriers to data publication. Ongoing concerns such as hate speech, cyberbullying, and misinformation underscore ongoing tension between freedom of expression and protection in the digital public sphere (Thimm, 2023). Paralleling these developments in online privacy and communication, conceptions of family have also diversified beyond the idealized nuclear model. Now, various relational forms and an emphasis on care and mutual support, rather than only legal or biological ties, have become more prominent (Thimm, 2023; Trost, 1990).

Viewing the family as a public entity draws attention to how family members particularly parents actively create and disseminate family representations through social media. This intensive sharing of family content is known as sharenting (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). Sharenting reflects new dynamics in the formation of family identity within the digital sphere, where interactions among parents, children, and social media construct symbolic and publicly visible representations of self and family (Wijaya et al., 2025). The phenomenon illustrates how domestic experiences and family dynamics are made visible to wide audiences. The media logic inherent in platforms such as Facebook and Instagram facilitates massive dissemination of family information, not only reflecting the need for social recognition but also enabling commercialization through digital business models. Examples include mummy blogs or insta families, popular family Instagram accounts that attract large audiences (Archer, 2019).

Family content sharing practices are shaped by diverse social and cultural factors and commonly include the documentation of significant life events and milestones (Schreiber, 2017). Such sharing facilitates interaction and feedback from relatives, reinforces perceptions of appropriate parenting, and extends social support networks (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020). As mediated artifacts, family-related content highlights the role of communication media in social interaction and relationship maintenance (Thimm, 2023). Digital representations of family life often circulate within normative discourses that shape

public expectations of family harmony, bringing parental identities and experiences into the public sphere beyond the domestic domain (Capdevila et al., 2022). These developments reflect an ongoing process of media adaptation that influences family communication, parent child relationships, and intergenerational interaction over time (Papacharissi, 2011; Thimm, 2023).

In social media practices, families who choose digital visibility involve both parents and children in representational processes. Although Instagram sets a minimum age of 13 for account creation, this requirement applies only to registered users and does not restrict the appearance of children of various ages in content managed by legal guardians (Instagram Help Center, 2025). Instagram further differentiates age-based categories by applying specific protections to teen accounts aged 13-17, while users aged 18 and above are classified as adults (Meta, 2024). As a result, children may be present on the platform either as registered users or as subjects of parental sharing. In this context, parents function as primary managers of children's personal information and determine the extent of public exposure, a practice that has raised concerns regarding early digital identity formation before children can exercise informed consent (Thimm, 2023).

Narratives and images shared online serve not only to communicate non-normative definitions of family but also to clarify family identity, foster a sense of belonging to social networks and communities, and challenge idealized notions of family by offering more authentic representations of familial experiences (Shannon, 2022). Family identity refers to the social construction that defines a family's existence and characteristics, emerging dynamically from the interplay between internal family perceptions and external social perspectives (Suter, 2012). Studies of family discourse and identity have drawn upon the narrative performance theory, which, although not originally developed for family contexts, offers a conceptual framework for understanding how family stories function to construct, affirm, and negotiate family identity (Segrin & Flora, 2019).

A transactional approach in family communication views family identity as dynamic and discursively constructed through everyday symbolic interactions rather than fixed by legal or biological ties (Galvin, 2006). Family discourse operates through verbal and nonverbal communication, including narratives, rituals, and interaction patterns that collectively shape shared family realities (Galvin & Braithwaite, 2014). Putra & Febrina (2019), empirical studies show that parents' motives for sharing children's photos on Instagram shaped by both "because motives" and "in order to motives" produce distinct sharenting orientations, such as existent, sharing, and memory preserving parents. According to Galvin (2006), discourse-dependent families actively employ external strategies (labeling, explaining, legitimizing, and defending family ties) and internal strategies (naming, narrating, discussing, and ritualizing) to affirm and negotiate family identity. Purwaningtyas et al. (2025) In this context, Instagram functions as a key discursive arena where maternal narratives intersect with broader debates on reproductive choices and family identity, as evidenced by public contestations surrounding the "childfree" discourse in Indonesia (Galvin, 2006).

Social media thus operates as a digital space where families articulate and construct their identities. As one of the most popular platforms, Instagram offers public and private account features that allow mothers, in particular, to manage and curate their family narratives. This study focuses on exploring how mothers represent and negotiate family identity through their Instagram practices, providing deeper insight into the dynamics of digital family identity in the online sphere.

Method

To understand how family members interpret and assign meaning to their lived experiences, this study adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing narrative analysis. This approach was chosen because it enables the researcher to trace meanings derived from informants' subjective experiences and discursive practices within particular social contexts. Denzin et al. (2024) explain that qualitative research employs an interpretive and naturalistic approach to the social world, in which researchers aim to understand phenomena by examining the meanings individuals attribute to their experiences. This study examines how mothers construct, perform, and negotiate family identity within the digital public sphere, as part of contemporary communication and digital culture practices.

A narrative analysis was employed to examine how experiences and identities are represented through the stories conveyed by the informants. Baxter & Babbie (2004) state that narrative researchers explore social texts through three primary dimensions: the process of storytelling, the structure of the story, and the story's content. Narratives serve as a means of understanding how individuals make sense of their lives and articulate their social experiences. Through this method, the researcher does not merely examine narrative content but also its structure, context, and social function. In this study, the mothers' narratives on Instagram, both verbal (interview data) and digital representations (captions, visuals, and interactions), were analyzed to reveal how they perform and negotiate family identity within online spaces.

This research is theoretically grounded in Narrative Performance Theory (NPT), developed by K. M. Langellier & Peterson (2018). NPT views narrative not merely as an act of storytelling but as a performative practice, a process through which identity is enacted, displayed, and negotiated via communication. According to K. M. Langellier & Peterson (2018), personal narratives function not only as a means of recounting experience but also as performative acts that constitute and display identity before others. The mothers' Instagram posts, both textual and visual, can therefore be understood as social performances representing maternal values, familial relationships, and negotiations of the public and private boundaries. NPT provides a conceptual framework for understanding narratives not merely as stories that describe experience, but as performative communicative practices through which social meanings and identities are produced. From this perspective, narratives are enacted through storytelling, visual representation, repetition, and interaction, and they function as symbolic performances situated within specific social and cultural contexts (K. Langellier & Peterson, 2004).

The selection of informants in this study employed purposive sampling, considering characteristics relevant to the research objectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The criteria included parents with children under the age of 18, having an active Instagram account, and routinely engaging in *sharenting* or sharing family related content on social media. At the initial stage, four informants with public Instagram accounts (AE, IS, PA, and DR) participated in this research. Subsequently, an additional informant with a private account, informant RN, was included to expand the diversity of perspectives and ensure data saturation. In total, five informants took part in this study, representing two distinct patterns of account visibility, namely public and private. Interviews were conducted online via Zoom Meeting in August 2025 using a semi-structured format. In addition to the interviews, the researcher carried out digital observation by following each informant's Instagram account and examining how visual and textual narratives were practiced in their posts. Research ethics were upheld by ensuring the confidentiality of participants and using the initials informants AE, IS, PA, DR, and RN as pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

Data analysis was conducted through a thematic and interpretive process, focusing on the performative aspects of narrative how family identity is enacted, negotiated, and displayed within the digital public sphere. The analytical stages included transcribing the interviews, repeatedly reading the data to understand the narrative context constructed by each informant, conducting thematic coding to identify key patterns, and performing in depth interpretation by linking the findings to the Narrative Performance framework (Langellier & Peterson, 2017) and the concept of Family Identity (Galvin, 2006). The thematic coding process followed Braun & Clarke (2006) analytical guidelines to identify the narrative structures emerging from the interviews and digital observations.

Based on the informants' narratives, distinct patterns of Instagram use emerge in relation to family identity construction and boundary management. Informant AE used Instagram to document family activities and preserve children's memories, reflecting openness and family pride, while PA selectively shared positive moments to present harmonious family life. DR adopted a more reflective and selective approach, distinguishing between shareable and private family moments, whereas IS used Instagram as an educational space for sharing parenting-related content linked to family values and digital ethics. In contrast, RN, who managed a private account, limited audience access and children's visibility as a form of privacy control. These practices resulted in four main themes: openness and family pride, harmony and religiosity, emotional closeness, and control over children's privacy.

Table 1. Narrative Themes (source: Researcher's Analysis)

Informants Narratives	Narrative Interpretation	Thematic Category
"I want my child to remember their childhood, that's why I post many family activities" (Informant AE)	Using Instagram as a space for documentation and expressing family pride	Openness and family pride
"I usually post the good moments, so the vibes stay positive" (Informant PA)	Curating narratives of a harmonious and aesthetically positive family life	Openness and family pride
"I don't share everything. Some moments are just for us" (Informant DR)	Reflection and selectiveness in sharing digital content	Emotional closeness and privacy control
"I often share parenting tips because it's my way of helping others while reflecting on my own family" (Informant IS)	Sharing content with educational value and digital ethics orientation	Harmony and religiosity
"My account is private; I'm very selective about who can see my child (Informant RN)	Strict boundary regulation as a strategy for child protection	Control over children's privacy

Data validity was ensured through triangulation between in-depth interviews and digital observations of the informants' Instagram accounts, accompanied by repeated readings of the transcripts to maintain consistency of meaning and interpretation (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The analysis was conducted iteratively by comparing individual narratives with broader socio-cultural contexts, allowing the findings to be interpreted within a comprehensive and coherent analytical framework.

Results and Discussion

Instagram has become a crucial medium for mothers to construct, display, and negotiate family identity in the digital era. Building on Galvin (2006), family identity is a social construction formed through ongoing communication among family members and between families and their social environment. Social media platforms such as Instagram open new spaces where narratives, visuals, and online interactions allow informants to construct meanings of "family" not merely as biological ties but also as communicative practices that are social and performative (Kozharinova & Manovich, 2024). Narrative functions as a primary medium to express maternal values, emotional closeness, the public and private boundary, and to assert who the family is and how they wish to be understood by audiences.

Grounded in the narrative approach of Baxter & Babbie (2003), the findings are organized based on three narrative analytical dimensions: process, form, and content. This approach helps explain how stories are delivered, how their structures are formed, and what meanings are constructed in the informants' digital narratives. In addition, Narrative Performance Theory (NPT) is used to understand how narratives do not merely recount experiences but also perform identity through symbolic actions embedded in the social, cultural, and material conditions of digital platforms (K. M. Langellier & Peterson, 2018). The findings reveal two primary patterns of family identity representation on social media, narratives of openness (informants AE, IS, PA, and DR, whose Instagram accounts are public) and narratives of protection (informant RN, whose Instagram account is private). These two patterns illustrate different narrative strategies employed by mothers to manage family image and make sense of maternal roles in the digital public sphere.

The four informants with public accounts display a consistent narrative orientation toward visibility, positive expression, and social legitimacy. They use Instagram as a space for representing an ideal family through the documentation of specific moments, bright visuals, and captions that express gratitude, togetherness, or religious values deemed appropriate for public view. Informant AE described her use of Instagram as both a digital catalog and a way to represent her family to the public:

"When I upload photos of my kids or moments with my husband, it's not just showing off it's like documenting our life… I'm happy when people comment, 'your family looks so close'." (Informant AE, Interview, 2025).

Meanwhile, informant IS interprets Instagram as a space for sharing maternal learning. *"Sometimes I write long captions so others can learn something. If someone DMs me saying they relate, I feel my posts are useful."* (Informant IS, Interview, 2025).

Informant PA demonstrates a selective strategy in content curation.

"I rarely upload when I'm tired or upset. I choose the happy moments so people don't misunderstand." (Informant PA, Interview, 2025).

Informant DR reinforces the aesthetic orientation of her narrative

"I like editing photos so my feed looks neat. I think people prefer looking at something visually pleasing." (Informan DR, Interview, 2025)

These four public-account informants construct narratives aligned with dominant cultural discourses on the ideal family. Within the framework of external boundary management, such narratives function as filters determining what is appropriate for public display and what should remain hidden (Galvin, 2006). From the perspective of

NPT K. M. Langellier & Peterson (2018), these performances show how family narratives are shaped by material conditions such as audience preference for aesthetic visuals, the positive interaction culture in comment sections, and platform logics that encourage engagement through likes and direct messages. The four public informants tend to frame family experiences as positive stories suitable for broad audiences.

Contrastingly, the informant RN, who uses a private Instagram account, exhibits an introspective and protective narrative orientation in her family-sharing practices. Her content circulation is deliberately restricted to a limited circle of trusted individuals, reflecting a strong emphasis on audience control. RN's sharing practices prioritize everyday family activities while minimizing identifiable visual exposure of family members, particularly children. This pattern indicates a privacy-oriented boundary regulation strategy, in which digital visibility is carefully managed to protect family intimacy and children's privacy.

Informant RN rejects the dominant logic of openness on Instagram. Silence, minimal public interaction, and symbolic aesthetics are chosen as forms of internal boundary management to maintain relational intimacy (Galvin, 2006). Informant RN demonstrates ethical awareness regarding children's exposure in online storytelling.

> *"I want my child to have the choice later whether they want to appear online or not, so I limit it now." (Informant RN, Interview, 2025)*

Informant RN narrative style represents an alternative performativity of a "protective mother," emphasizing moral agency and digital awareness of children's privacy rights rather than projecting an ideal family image. Informant NR narrative constitutes a resisting performance in NPT challenging norms of openness and dominant aesthetic standards within Instagram culture. Her decision reflects resistance to power discourses that typically position parents as the sole narrators of family stories.

A key finding of this study concerns how material conditions both constrain and enable digital family narratives (K. M. Langellier & Peterson, 2018). These conditions determine who has the right to narrate, what types of stories are considered appropriate, how stories are presented, and which meanings are prioritized in family representation. For the four public account informants (AE, IS, PA, DR), narrative authority extends to a wide audience, whereas informant RN limits this authority to her close circle. Material conditions also regulate content selection positive moments such as togetherness, children's activities, and religious practices are deemed appropriate for posting, while sensitive or deeply personal domestic moments are excluded.

Informant IS affirms this selective process.

> *"If there's a photo that feels too personal, I take it down." (Informant IS, Interview, 2025).*

Informant PA shares a similar view.

> *"Not everyone needs to know family problems." (Informant PA, Interview, 2025).*

The delivery of stories is also shaped by platform materiality, public account informants rely on bright visuals, aesthetic feeds, and narrative captions, whereas informant RN opts for more private symbolic visuals such as atmosphere shots without showing children's faces. Informant RN even rejects storytelling styles that turn children into public entertainment:

> *"I don't want funny stories about my child to become something lots of people laugh at." (Informant RN, Interview, 2025).*

On the level of meaning, the public-account informants highlight togetherness,

morality, and religiosity as symbols of an ideal family, while RN prioritizes safety and children's privacy rights. These findings show that digital family narratives result from the mobilization of cultural resources such as religiosity, harmony, visual aesthetics, and gendered norms of motherhood, negotiated by the informants to produce narratives they consider appropriate, safe, and aligned with their sociocultural values.

The following table summarizes the field findings based on these key theories and incorporates interview quotations to support the analytical interpretation.

Table 2. Research Findings (source: Researcher's Analysis)

Analysis	Public Account Findings	Private Account Findings
Performative Narrative	Performing the "ideal mother". (Informant DR: *"The feed has to look pleasing."*)	Performing the "protective mother". (Informant RN: *"I limit it now so my child can choose later."*)
Storytelling Process	Open, interactive, responsive. (Informant PA: *"If someone asks, I reply."*)	Selective, minimal public interaction. (Informan RN: *"I rarely reply to comments."*)
Narrative Form	Linear, chronological, bright visuals, curated feed. (Informant IS: *"I like my feed to look neat."*)	Non linear, symbolic, atmosphere based without showing face (Informant RN: *"I prefer atmosphere shots… feels more honest."*)
Internal Boundary Management	Selecting positive content and presenting an ideal family suitable for public view. (Informant AE: *"I only share the positive things…"*) (Informant IS: *"I like lively moments…"*) (Informant PA: *"If it's a family event, I always upload it…"*)	Careful self regulation of content meaning and emotional disclosure within a trusted circle
External Boundary Management	Broad audience access with limited restriction	Restricting audience and protecting family privacy. (Informant RN: *"The account is private… and I never show my child's face."*)

These findings show that narrative practices serve as a site of negotiation involving moral boundaries, technological structures, and social expectations. Instagram functions as a performative space where mothers articulate versions of family life they consider safest, most appropriate, and aligned with their personal values.

Narratives as Performative Practices of Family Identity on Instagram

Mothers' narrative practices on Instagram mark a shift in social media functions from spaces of personal sharing to arenas of social representation. Digital narratives do

not merely recount family life they act as symbolic devices mediating relations among personal identity, social norms, and cultural values. Communication norms and patterns are shaped by the specific functions and characteristics of each culture. When individuals lack the ability to adapt to cultural differences, they may develop reluctance or hesitation to engage in interactions with people from other cultural backgrounds (Widiastuti, 2020). Through narrative, individuals negotiate their roles as mothers, family members, and media users within a digital ecosystem saturated with public expectations. Galvin's (2006) family identity perspective clarifies that family identity emerges through continuous communicative processes each act of sharing, defining, and concealing information becomes part of the social construction of "who" the family is in the public eye.

The four informants with public accounts exhibit strong narrative patterns oriented toward openness, harmony, and positivity. Their posts highlight moments of family togetherness, religious activities, birthday celebrations, vacations, and children's achievements. The narrative structure tends to be linear, following the chronological flow of family life, while the visuals predominantly feature bright colors, neat compositions, and carefully curated feed aesthetics. This pattern aligns with (Baxter & Babbie, 2004) process, form, content dimensions, demonstrating how open and communicative storytelling processes, structured narrative forms, and consistently positive content emphasize themes of gratitude, love, and togetherness.

This practice can be understood as a form of identity performance storytelling not only depicts the family but also acts as communicative action that enacts identity before others (K. M. Langellier & Peterson, 2018). When informants AE, IS, PA, and DR choose to present their "best" family moments, they are not merely documenting reality but producing an idealized version of their families that aligns with cultural discourses of harmonious and religious households. Repeated narratives of cheerful children, grateful parents, and peaceful domestic life reinforce a stable family image deemed socially acceptable.

In terms of process, public account informants demonstrate an intensive engagement pattern with their audiences. They routinely reply to comments, respond to direct messages, share daily activities via Stories, and occasionally invite audience responses through questions or short reflections. This interaction pattern illustrates that family narratives do not move unidirectionally; instead, they are shaped through reciprocal relationships with followers. Validation in the form of likes, comments, or supportive messages becomes part of the "social feedback" that reinforces their narrative choices.

Conversely, informant RN presents a more introspective and protective narrative approach by using a private account, limiting her audience, and sharing content that is more symbolic than explicit. Narratives are always embodied and tied to material and social contexts (K. M. Langellier & Peterson, 2018). Informant RN perceives the digital environment as a risky space, particularly concerning children's digital footprints, potential misuse of photos, and the loss of control over personal data. The maternal performance she adopts is not one of openness but one of protection, caution, and ethical reflexivity. Informant RN construction of family identity centers on the belief that family can be celebrated without full exposure.

The contrast between the two informant categories shows that digital family identity is not accidental but constructed through conscious and strategic communicative choices. Public account informants build family identity using the logic of visibility, the belief that appearing as a harmonious and active family constitutes social capital. Private account informants construct identity using the logic of protection, the belief that keeping parts of the family story within intimate boundaries is a moral responsibility. Both strategies reveal that families on social media continuously engage in *doing family online*: producing,

performing, and negotiating family through adaptable narratives. To clarify how family narratives are performed across different levels of digital visibility, Table 3 presents a comparative overview of informants' narrative practices on Instagram.

Table 3. Comparison of Narrative Performances of Family Identity on Instagram (source: Researcher's Analysis)

Aspect	Public Accounts (AE, IS, PA, DR)	Private Account (RN)
Narrative Orientation	Openness, harmony, and positivity	Introspection, protection, and ethical reflexivity
Narrative Focus	Family togetherness, religious activities, celebrations, vacations, children's achievements	Everyday family moments shared symbolically without explicit exposure
Narrative Structure	Linear and chronological storytelling following family life events	Non linear and selective storytelling
Visual Presentation	Bright colors, neat compositions, and carefully curated feed aesthetics	Symbolic visuals, atmosphere-based images, avoidance of identifiable faces
Identity Performance	Performing an idealized, harmonious, and socially acceptable family image	Performing a protective and privacy oriented maternal identity
Audience Engagement	Intensive and reciprocal interaction (comments, direct messages, Stories, audience prompts)	Limited interaction within a restricted and trusted audience
Underlying Logic of Identity Construction	Visibility as social capital and legitimacy	Protection as moral and ethical responsibility

Differences in narrative form are also influenced by the Indonesian cultural context. As shown in Riyanti & Astuti (2024) an Indonesian *selebgram* mother constructs motherhood narratives according to intensive motherhood norms within Indonesian society. Values such as collectivism, religiosity, and propriety exert pressure on individuals to present an image of a harmonious family. Public account informants adhere to these norms by reproducing symbols of the ideal family through openness and religious language. In contrast, the private-account informant exhibits subtle resistance to the norm of openness by practicing visibility limitation. Family narratives function as tools for negotiating values between social pride and moral awareness, between public expectations and children's rights to privacy.

A performative approach to reading these narratives reinforces that family identity on social media is not the result of spontaneous processes but of deliberate and strategic communicative decisions (K. M. Langellier & Peterson, 2018). Public account informants present performances aligned with social expectations, while the private account informant performs a critique of digital openness norms. These strategies indicate that mothers on social media are not merely platform users but active agents shaping digital motherhood discourse. This analysis reinforces the view that digital narratives function within a representational system that both reproduces and challenges social values. Public-account informants represent stability, love, and happiness, whereas the private account informant

projects protection, ethical awareness, and autonomy. Each constructs a different version of the "ideal family." Instagram thus functions dually as a space for personal expression and as a social arena where family values are symbolically foregrounded and negotiated.

Family Narratives as a Discursive Arena of Meaning and Power Negotiation

The digital public sphere facilitates the emergence of discursive spaces where individuals negotiate meaning and power relations through storytelling. This arena unfolds dynamically within a complex networked public sphere that extends across various digital communication settings characterized by a shift from situational communication to ubiquitous forms (Eisenegger & Schäfer, 2023). Family storytelling is always embodied and situated within specific material and social conditions (Langellier & Peterson, 2017).

These material conditions determine (1) who has the right to narrate whether to a broad public (AE, IS, PA, DR) or to a closed circle (RN), (2) what is considered appropriate to share socially safe positive moments versus sensitive ones such as conflict, parental stress, or domestic issues, (3) how stories are conveyed through bright visuals, aesthetic feeds, long captions, or more private symbolic imagery, and (4) which meanings are prioritized togetherness, morality, religiosity, or child safety. The informants actively respond to these conditions by curating content, deleting posts deemed too personal, limiting audiences, or choosing not to reveal their children's faces.

Family storytelling is also governed by external and internal discursive rules. External rules relate to social discourses that define what topics are permissible, appropriate, or taboo to narrate (K. M. Langellier & Peterson, 2018). For public account informants, narratives of domestic conflict, parental failure, or financial tension rarely appear. These issues may exist, but they are not included in public facing narratives. Instead, themes such as gratitude, children's small achievements, harmony, and religious activities dominate. Internal rules emerge through recurring storytelling habits, such as routine posts of birthdays, religious traditions, or specific family moments continually narrated as symbols of closeness.

The narratives also show how power operates in determining who can speak and who becomes the object of the story. The mothers in this study occupy a central position as primary narrators who manage accounts, select photos, write captions, and decide which moments are worth sharing. Children frequently appear as represented objects without the agency to negotiate how their digital identities are constructed. Only in informant RN case is there an explicit effort to refrain from locking the child into a narrative that they might not agree with later. Public account informants reinforce dominant discourses of the ideal family by presenting narratives aligned with widely held values. Storytelling offers legitimacy to certain definitions of "a good family," which may influence how others perceive themselves and their families. At the same time, informant RN narrative introduces a critical alternative by rejecting unlimited openness and prioritizing child protection. Family narratives on Instagram can both perpetuate and challenge power structures embedded in digital culture.

Family narratives cannot be understood merely as individual "emotional expressions" but as communicative acts with social consequences. Mothers' decisions to present their family life are strategic processes shaped by the need for social recognition, performative authenticity, and the social or financial benefits attached to sharing practices (Van den Abeele et al., 2024). The key questions are not only "why does the mother tell this story?" but also "whose interests does this narrative serve?" and "how does this narrative shape who matters and what meanings are prioritized?" On public accounts, narratives highlighting family harmony may serve needs for social recognition, parental legitimacy, or reputational maintenance within social networks. Conversely, on private accounts, minimalist and

symbolic narratives serve needs for safety, autonomy, and respect for children's rights.

Digital family narratives are influenced by cultural resources such as religiosity, gender norms, social class, and motherhood ideologies. In digital interactions, Indonesian users often prioritize solidarity, group harmony, and the use of culturally embedded symbols to strengthen communal identity and maintain social cohesion (H. G. Yang & Fatimah, 2024). Public account informants mobilize these cultural resources to construct identities as successful mothers and exemplary families. The private account informant mobilizes different resources children's rights discourse, digital ethics, and awareness of online risks to build an alternative narrative of responsible motherhood

Instagram can thus be understood as a discursive space where family narratives are produced, sustained, and negotiated, aligning with findings that social media has become a routine medium for parents to narrate domestic life (Cino & Formenti, 2021). Family identity on social media emerges as a dynamic construction that continually adapts to technological changes, audience expectations, and mothers' moral reflections. On one hand, the platform provides space for self-expression, social support, and the strengthening of family bonds. On the other hand, it presents challenges related to privacy, pressures to appear perfect, and risks of normalizing narrow standards of the "ideal family."

Conclusion

The findings indicate two principal patterns in representing family identity on Instagram: external boundary management and internal boundary management. Together, these strategies show that family identity on social media is not singular but emerges from the negotiation between the desire for visibility and the need to preserve private space. Social media becomes a discursive arena in which mothers actively determine how their families are represented. These results underscore the relevance of NPT in explaining how social media narratives operate as symbolic action. In this sense, digital narratives function simultaneously as a mode of communication and as a medium for negotiating meaning between individuals and broader social systems.

Theoretically, this study demonstrates that Narrative Performance Theory as articulated by Langellier and Peterson (2018) when combined with the concept of family identity as discourse dependent proposed by Galvin (2006) and the process, form, and content framework developed by Baxter and Babbie (2004), provides a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of family representation in the digital public sphere. These three approaches reveal the performative, symbolic, and communicative dimensions that bridge the personal lives of mothers with social expectations, cultural norms, and platform logics. Family identity does not appear as a static category, but rather as a series of communicative actions shaped by material conditions, cultural values, and social interactions. From a practical perspective, the findings of this study highlight the importance of digital literacy for parents, particularly in understanding the social and ethical implications of sharing family content. Awareness of managing visibility, considering children's rights to privacy, and understanding the risks of digital footprints are crucial in maintaining a balance between self expression and family protection. Parents need to develop the ability to choose safe narratives and visuals without losing the emotional and social meaning of their storytelling.

Acknowledgements

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