

When the Real World Rejects, Social Media Welcomes: A Portrait of LGBT Identity in Postmodern Society

Agiva Early Wulanda¹, Fatma Azzahra², Risti Regina Putri³, Sista Anggrayani⁴, Achmad Hufad⁵, Yani Achdiani⁶

¹²³⁴Program Studi Pendidikan Sosiologi, Fakultas Pendidikan Ilmu Pengetahuan Sosial, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia

⁵Pendidikan Masyarakat, Fakultas Ilmu Pendidikan, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia

⁶Pendidikan Kesejahteraan Keluarga, Fakultas Teknologi dan Industri, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the role of social media in the formation of gender identity and sexual orientation, especially in the LGBT community in Indonesia, within the framework of postmodernism theory. This study examines how social media as a digital space allows individuals to express various versions of identity that are fluid, multiple, and contextual, while also presenting challenges in the form of social pressure, stigmatization, and psychosocial insecurity such as cyberbullying. Through a qualitative approach, this study describes the fragmentation of identity on social media that reflects the relativism of values in contemporary society. The results of the study indicate that although social media provides a space for support and validation for marginalized groups such as LGBT, there is an urgent need for social education and progressive policies to create an inclusive and safe digital environment. This study emphasizes the importance of balance between digital existence and real life in the process of positive and constructive identity formation.

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Corresponding Author:

Sista Anggrayani

Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia

Email: SISTA.ANGGRAYANI@upi.edu

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, rapid developments have occurred in information and communication technology, one of which is the internet. The internet, which is one of the main communication tools that is most in demand by the public, has made changes in information and communication technology more modern and digital, especially when the internet can be accessed via mobile phones or even smartphones or what we usually know (*smartphone*) (A. Rafiq, 2020). Current telephone devices are equipped with various communication features, such as instant messaging services (chat), electronic mail (email), short messages (SMS), and others, all of which can be easily accessed via an internet connection. Social media has given rise to a new way for people to communicate, interact, and collaborate with other users in forming virtual social bonds. Social media not only functions as a means for sharing information, but also as a medium for individuals to express themselves to others (Rantau & Kartika, 2024). In the rapid development of information, social media has become a new space for individuals to express their various identities, including gender identity and sexual orientation. This phenomenon not only shows changes in the way

individuals understand and present themselves, but also reflects more complex social dynamics in society. One theoretical approach that can be used to understand this phenomenon is postmodernism, which views identity as something fluid and socially formed through symbolic interaction.

Fluid identity in postmodernism theory is a concept that emphasizes that human identity is never fixed, but always changing and flexible depending on the social, cultural, and historical context. Postmodernism highlights that in postmodern society reality has been mixed with simulation so that the media not only reflects reality, but creates a new reality through symbols (Saumantri & Zikrillah, 2020). In this context, the development of increasingly sophisticated and extraordinary technology can make it easier for every individual who is separated by distance and space or even time to communicate using social media, meaning that social media plays a very important role in building and defining self-identity in each individual, not only as a reflection of the real world, but also can play an active role in the meaning of individual identity.

In Indonesia itself, discussions about gender identity and sexual orientation continue to face opposition in society. This happens because there are social, cultural, and religious norms that are still firmly held in society. Therefore, social media becomes one of the fields for self-expression that is open to everyone. This phenomenon contains the question of how individuals can form and negotiate their gender identity and sexual orientation through social media in the context of today's Indonesian society and of course with postmodern nuances in it?

From the statement, it can be seen that this study aims to understand the representation of gender identity and sexual orientation in social media through a qualitative approach using in-depth interviews as a method for data collection. This study will analyze how the phenomenon relates to postmodernist theories, especially in terms of identity fragmentation, the relativity of truth, and the role of media simulation in constructing social reality.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

In this study, the method used is a qualitative approach. Qualitative methods are research approaches that aim to understand phenomena in depth through descriptive and interpretive data collection. Bogdan and Biklen (1998), emphasized that in qualitative research, the presence of researchers as the main instrument is very important because it allows researchers to understand reality naturally and directly from the field (Wahidmurni, 2017). This shows that qualitative methods place subjective experiences and meanings as the center of research, in contrast to quantitative approaches that are more oriented towards numbers and statistics.

This qualitative technique was chosen to understand the phenomenon of social media as a place to express the sexual orientation of the LGBT movement in Indonesia in depth by emphasizing the theory of Postmodernism in it. The methods used include semi-structured interview techniques, where researchers are conducted for 10-15 minutes either face-to-face (directly) or online, we ask several questions where respondents will answer according to their personal views on topics that have been prepared and prepared in advance but still provide flexibility to explore respondents' answers. Sampling was carried out using convenience sampling techniques, where respondents were selected based on ease of access. Respondents involved in this study have the characteristics of people who are directly the objects of research and some people who have different views on the LGBT view which is considered relevant to achieve research objectives and supported by literature studies used data analysis, so that researchers review various relevant literature sources, including books, journal articles, and previous research reports.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The emergence of social media as part of the development of information technology has had a significant impact on the dynamics of people's lives. Social media is an online platform that allows its users to easily share, create, and participate in various types of content, such as social networks, blogs, wikis, forums, and other virtual worlds. The most frequently used forms of social media in the global community include blogs, wikis, and social networks. As an internet-based media, social media encourages interaction through web technology that can change communication patterns into interactive dialogues. Social media is a social networking site that allows individuals to create personal profiles, both public and limited in a particular system (Purbohastuti, 2017). The system also allows users to build connections with others and see the network of relationships they have built. The presence of social media has influenced the pattern of people's social lives, both in the form of transformation of social relations and in changes in the balance of social interactions as a whole.

Social media has evolved significantly over time. Its development began in the 70s, marked by the discovery of a bulletin board system that allowed individuals to connect with others using electronic mail and upload and download in the software at that time. All of this was done because it still used telephone lines that were connected to the modern era. In 1995, a site was born, namely GeoCities, a website that serves hosting or also a data storage rental service that can be accessed anywhere. In 1997-1999, the first social media was born, namely Sixdegree.com and Classmates.com. In that year, a site called Blogger also appeared which could create a personal blog. In 2002, Friendster appeared which at that time was very booming and its presence became a phenomenon. Since 2003 until now, many social media have been born which of course have their own advantages and characteristics, such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, MySpace, Google and others. Currently, social media has developed into a digital medium and digital activities such as social media *Endorsement* and social media activation.

The function of social media as a means of communication has become very important in the lives of modern society, by using social media an individual can make friends or interact with anyone, anywhere, and anytime (Ananda et al., 2024). Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter not only facilitate the communication process, but also help shape a new lifestyle in the midst of a digital society. Social relationships formed through social media tend to be faster and closer because they are driven by ease of access and speed of information exchange. The rapid development of information technology has also changed human behavior in utilizing technology, especially in communicating and expressing themselves.

This condition is reinforced by the development of information technology in Indonesia which opens up wide opportunities for the use of social media as a technology-based activity that can support communication, information, and social interaction widely. Social media allows people to share information quickly and effectively, strengthening connections between individuals and groups without being limited by geographical distance, in accordance with the concept of post-industrial society and the "Global Village" expressed in the literature (Wardiana, 2022). In today's increasingly advanced and modern era, we can see that in the context of the increasingly rapid development of information and communication technology, social media has become an important arena for individuals to express their identities personally. This phenomenon is very relevant in the study of postmodernism, which rejects the traditional view of identity as something stable and clearly defined. In postmodern theory, identity is understood as a social construction that is "fluid" and can change according to context and social interaction. Social media provides

a platform for users to explore and display various dimensions of their identities, which often conflict with existing social norms such as LGBT.

LGBT stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender. LGBT is a group with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. Lesbian refers to women who are emotionally and sexually attracted to other women, Gay to men who like other men, Bisexual includes attraction to more than one gender, while Transgender refers to those whose gender identity does not match their sex at birth (Devina et al., 2024). The LGBT community challenges traditional views of gender and sexuality, where gender identity and expression are not limited to masculinity or femininity, but include various variants in between. Through the various features offered, such as photos, videos, and texts, individuals can adopt different personas, creating complex and diverse identities and appearances. On social media, they play a role in building communities, spreading awareness, and fighting for equal rights. Social media was chosen because it provides a safe space(*safe space*), anonymity, and access to global support especially in countries with high social pressure like Indonesia. This reflects the concept of deconstruction promoted by postmodern thinkers, in the context of social media, postmodernism shows that the current social world is filled with phenomena that reject grand narratives and absolute truths, thus creating space for pluralism and relativism of truth. Social media as part of the explosion of the mass media industry functions as an extension of the human sensory system, which accelerates the spread of information and shows the pluralistic nature and humanism of culture where the single dominant narrative is replaced by a plurality of voices and experiences. Social media users not only act as consumers of information, but also as active content producers, which allows them to construct their identities in a freer and more creative way (Hidayat, 2019)

Thus, social media is not only a communication tool, but also reflects the postmodern character that rejects single structures and absolute truth. Identities displayed through social media become experimental spaces where individuals can challenge, negotiate, and redefine themselves, making the process of identity formation more dynamic and contextual. In this framework, social media acts as a mirror of postmodern culture that emphasizes diversity, ambiguity, and connectedness between identities. Identity itself is an important aspect in the lives of society and individuals, because it reflects the self-image that is recognized by others through physical characteristics, language, background, and other social expressions. Identity is not only descriptive, but also includes self-assessment influenced by social interactions, life experiences, and norms that apply in society. In real life, identity is formed through direct interaction and binding social norms, but in the digital space, identity becomes more flexible to be formed and displayed. The presence of digital technology today facilitates broader self-expression through various social media platforms, where individuals can display their values, interests, and beliefs openly. Social media also provides opportunities to strengthen self-confidence and independence, especially when individuals receive recognition for the experiences or achievements they share. However, social media not only strengthens identity, but can also be a trigger for identity transformation. This process occurs because the construction of digital identity formed in cyberspace can differ significantly from the identity held in real life or offline. Social media, in this case, has created an alternative space for the formation of identity that does not always reflect the factual conditions of the individual, but rather the result of symbolic identity and self-representation strategies in the digital world (Ananda et al., 2024).

In this context, social media has become an integral part of everyday life, a place where individuals connect, share and express themselves. Its presence is very important for forming and finding self-identity. Many individuals feel more comfortable sharing personal

experiences on social media, which not only helps them understand themselves in depth, but also gain validation and social support from others. Through this process, social media allows its users to express themselves in a broad and flexible way, including in terms of displaying physical images, distinctive characteristics, and values that they want to highlight. Interactions that occur through features such as comments and likes also strengthen social identity, because they are considered a form of recognition and empathy from the digital environment. This phenomenon shows that social media is not only a communication tool, but also a dynamic identity construction space that continues to develop according to user experience and interaction (Sakti & Yulianto, 2019).

Thus, this phenomenon shows that social media plays a very important role in the lives of modern society, especially in Indonesia. Currently, the number of social media users in Indonesia has reached around 63 million people, with around 95 percent of them accessing social networks via the internet. Among teenagers, the use of social media has become an inseparable part of daily activities. They access platforms such as Twitter almost every day to search for information, as well as share personal activities via Facebook. Based on a survey conducted by the Ministry of Communication and Information (Kominfo), as reported by Suara Merdeka on December 27, 2016, the five most popular social media in Indonesia are Facebook with 65 million users, Twitter with 19.5 million, Google+ around 3.4 million, LinkedIn reaching 1 million, and Path with 700 thousand users. In addition, Twitter CEO Dick Costolo stated that Indonesia is one of the countries with the largest number of online users in the world. He highlighted the ability of Indonesia's young generation to utilize the potential of the creative industry through Twitter for positive purposes. According to him, one of Twitter's advantages is its ability to collectively verify information through broad user participation (Anugrafianto, 2017).

However, while social media offers opportunities for exploration and connection, there are also challenges. The pressure to always appear perfect in the digital space can cause stress and mental health problems for individuals, while a fragmented identity may leave individuals feeling confused about who they really are. Being too obsessed with social media can lead to decreased self-esteem and uncertainty about self-identity. Teenagers who are too focused on the image projected on social media tend to feel dissatisfied with themselves, as they often compare themselves to others and try to meet unrealistic standards. This can worsen self-perception and reduce self-confidence, as well as causing uncertainty about their true identity. In addition, this obsession can also hinder the development of an authentic identity because teenagers are more oriented towards online appearance and social acceptance than recognizing and accepting themselves honestly and openly (Fitrialis et al., 2024). Therefore, it is important for individuals to be aware of how social media affects their identity and to use the platform wisely, in order to maintain a balance between online existence and the reality of everyday life. In this way, social media can be a positive tool in the journey of self-discovery and the formation of a true and beneficial self-identity.

This condition is also reflected in the interview results which show the diversity of the informants' views on LGBT identity, which also confirms the practice of value relativism in postmodern society. For some informants, especially those who come from inclusive environments or are close to the LGBT community, they view sexual orientation as a personal aspect that cannot be judged based on a single moral standard. They consider sexual orientation to be part of human diversity that should be appreciated, not corrected or blamed. This understanding is situational and contextual, reflecting a postmodern mindset that emphasizes that truth is relative and contextual. On the other hand, there are also informants who experience value confusion because they are at the crossroads between inclusive understanding and traditional norms that have been inherent since childhood. One

informant said, "*I actually support my gay friends, but sometimes I still feel weird. Maybe because since I was little, I was taught that it was wrong.*". This statement illustrates how individuals in postmodern society live among various intersecting value systems, without any absolute truth held in common. Social media also reinforces this dynamic, becoming a space where individuals not only seek recognition, but also face inner conflict in the process of searching for their identity and moral position amidst social plurality.

Social media has become a field where value relativism is manifested in contemporary society. Today, many people are becoming more aware and exposed to LGBT issues thanks to the presence of social media, where they can read, see, or even engage in discussions about diverse gender identities and sexual orientations (Rizkyani et al., 2025). This digital space brings together various viewpoints, from very conservative to very progressive, all of which coexist without the pressure to submit to a single truth. In the postmodern social landscape, previously marginalized groups such as LGBT are now beginning to gain space to express their views and identities more openly, especially through social media (Hidayat, 2019). However, despite increasing access to information and representation of LGBT identities, recognition of the rights of this group is still limited. They still face obstacles in terms of freedom of expression, legal protection, and overall social acceptance. This condition reflects one of the main characteristics of postmodern society, namely that gender identity and sexual orientation are not only formed internally, but are also influenced by complex social interactions, which are full of conflicting values.

In this context, the phenomenon of identity fragmentation is one of the crucial aspects that deserves attention in the study of social media in the postmodern era. The term "fragmentation" itself comes from the word fragment, which according to the Online Big Indonesian Dictionary is defined as a part or fragment of a whole. Fragmentation refers to a condition in which something is divided into parts that are not always harmonious, and often contradict each other (Burhan, 2020). In this case, the word identity, which was initially considered as something given to everyone by God that is whole and singular, is now understood as the result of a continuous process of interaction with others. Identity is no longer seen as a permanent gift from outside oneself, but as something that is built through relationships with others. In the reality of social media use, identity fragmentation appears when individuals present various forms of different self-representation, depending on the type of platform used, who the audience is, and the social context behind it. Identity becomes fluid, not fixed, and often fragmented, reflecting the characteristics of postmodern society, where the boundaries between authentic and representative identities are increasingly difficult to distinguish.

One of the main characteristics of identity fragmentation on social media is its multiple nature. Social media users often present different versions of themselves depending on the platform and audience they are facing (Wulansari et al., 2024). For example, someone becomes an influencer who likes to promote a product such as a beauty product on the Instagram platform, interacting with others on the platform every day. While on his second account he often uploads and discusses K-Pop. This shows that social media users in Indonesia tend to adopt various identities that are adjusted to the norms and expectations of a particular digital community. Thus, identity is not a static entity, but rather a performance that is constantly being negotiated. In addition to being multiple, identity on social media is also highly contextual. This means that a person's self-expression can change significantly depending on the situation and digital environment in which he interacts. For example, an LGBT person chooses to hide his sexual orientation on Instagram or TikTok because of pressure and demands from family and society. While on the X and Telegram platforms he is free to express himself without fear of stigma from others (Ramadhani Rusdin et al., 2023). In this case, social and cultural factors play an important

role in personal appearance on social media. In Indonesian society which is still thick with collectivist values, many users feel the need to regulate their identities to fit the norms that apply in various digital spaces.

Another aspect that is no less important is the instability of identity on social media. Unlike real-world identities that tend to be more consistent because they are formed by physical experiences and ongoing social interactions, digital identities can change rapidly along with the dynamics of platforms and evolving trends. Someone who presents themselves as a dentist today may change to content *creator* humor due to algorithmic demands or the desire to gain more engagement. The existence of identity instability on social media is often triggered by the need to remain relevant and accepted in an ever-changing online community. This phenomenon is also exacerbated by the nature of social media itself which allows users to easily edit, delete, or recreate their personas. The implications of this identity fragmentation are quite complex. On the one hand, social media allows individuals to explore various aspects of their identity more freely, without being bound by the norms that apply in the real world. However, on the other hand, this condition can also cause identity confusion and existential anxiety due to the lack of a stable grip. Multiple, contextual, and unstable identities reflect the complexity of postmodern life, where the boundaries between reality and virtuality are increasingly blurred.

One concrete manifestation of this dynamic can be found in the experience of marginalized groups such as LGBT who use social media as a form of community space and self-expression. Social media is often seen as a place that provides social support and solidarity networks for groups that have been marginalized. However, the risk of insecurity remains a significant psychosocial challenge. This phenomenon represents a major paradox in the digital era. On the one hand, online platforms offer a relatively free space for expression and a broad solidarity network, but on the other hand, it creates new vulnerabilities in the form of social pressure, stigmatization, and uncertainty of acceptance which ultimately worsens the existential anxiety of its users. In the context of Indonesia, which is thick with conservative religious and cultural values, this insecurity emerges in a more complex form due to the sharp clash between freedom of expression in the virtual world and various limitations and pressures in the real world (Salsabila & Putri, 2023). This tension is increasingly felt considering that social media has become the main space for many individuals, especially the younger generation, to explore and shape their identities. Ironically, it is in this space that various identity vulnerabilities are most clearly visible, ranging from the threat of cyberbullying, fear of forced identity disclosure, to the pressure to constantly present an ideal version of oneself according to the expectations of the virtual community.

Online community support, although real, has several structural limitations that make it unable to completely eliminate users' insecurities. Various discussion forums and online groups specifically for LGBT in Indonesia do function as safe spaces to share experiences and obtain identity validation, but the protection provided is very fragile (Devina et al., 2024). The anonymity that is the main shield is often easily penetrated through doxing practices (leaking of personal data) by irresponsible parties. Sometimes this online community support is often conditional and exclusive, where solidarity is only given as long as individuals adjust to certain norms and standards in the community. The sources of insecurity on social media are multidimensional and interrelated. Stigmatization and cyberbullying emerge as the most real threats, where LGBT groups in Indonesia face the risk of double stigmatization as sexual minorities and as social media users who are considered to violate social norms. Individuals who are part of LGBT often receive homophobic comments on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and X, often comments coming from anonymous accounts that freely spread hatred. What is more concerning is

that this bullying does not only come from outside the community, but also from within the LGBT community itself in the form of identity gatekeeping, where members question the validity of each other's identities. The misalignment between the virtual and real worlds further exacerbates this insecurity. Emotional support obtained online often cannot be implemented in real life due to various structural pressures.

Insecurity persists despite the support of online communities. Relationships on social media are fluid, temporary, and contextual, very different from traditional social ties in the real world which tend to be more stable and sustainable. Validation of identity in digital spaces becomes highly uncertain, depending on engagement (likes, comments, shares) which can change drastically over time. This condition triggers someone to seek unhealthy validity, where individuals become dependent on recognition from others on social media to maintain their self-esteem. This dependence on external validation ultimately creates constant anxiety of rejection, where social media users, especially from marginalized groups, are constantly on guard against the possibility of being ignored or criticized by their online communities (Devina et al., 2024). Social media does provide a certain space of protection and validation for marginalized groups, but various forms of structural insecurity, ranging from discriminatory platform policies to restrictive social norms, continue to create an environment that is not entirely safe. In Indonesia, this challenge is further complicated by the socio-cultural context that still marginalizes LGBT groups and other minorities. Therefore, online community support needs to be strengthened with more progressive policy interventions, so that digital spaces can truly become a safe place for all identities.

4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that social media plays an important role in the formation of gender identity and sexual orientation, especially for the LGBT community in Indonesia. Through a postmodernist approach, identity is understood as a fluid and complex social construct, reflecting the dynamics of interaction in the digital space. Although social media offers space for self-expression and community support, individuals also face challenges such as social pressure, stigmatization, and identity uncertainty. The fragmentation of identity that occurs shows that individuals present various versions of themselves according to the context and audience, which creates confusion and existential anxiety. Thus, the findings in this study confirm that social media plays a role not only as a means of communication, but also as a space for identity exploration, where individuals can test and redefine themselves by challenging prevailing social norms. By utilizing digital platforms, individuals, especially from the LGBT community, can explore and express themselves more freely, although they still face the risk of insecurity. Therefore, it is necessary to create a safe and supportive social media space so that the process of forming individual identity can develop healthily, positively, and constructively.

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