



## Social Media and the Changing Nature of Human Relationships: A Sociological Study of Digital Communities, Identity, and Social Behavior

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### ABSTRACT

Social media has influenced the interaction, communication and definition of self in today's society. The digital platforms have contributed to new ways of interacting, overcoming geographical barriers and introducing a new paradigm of operation that has created virtual communities as well as reshaped ways of communicating and interacting within relationships and collective identities. While there is a great deal to be studied in the field of social media already, research is usually conducted on one or a few aspects of social media – digital community or identity construction or social behaviour – without offering much sociological insight into how all these aspects are interconnected and how they form the emerging delineations of human relationships. This study attempts to bridge this gap by offering a sociological perspective on social media from an interpretive standpoint to explain the experiences of people and the social meanings created in the digital world. This study is a qualitative research, using interpretivist approach which is analysed by the method of thematic analysis of the scientific literatures that have been peer-reviewed and the policy reports and credible institutional publications from the literatures (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Castells, 2010). The analysis revealed that social media at the same time both reinforces and undermines human relationships, fostering social connectedness, community engagement, the formation of identities, access to information, and social isolation, in addition to causing misinformation or privacy issues and decreasing face-to-face interactions. The results also show the growing role played by digital communities in norms, interpersonal trust and collective social practices, and the need for a more general sociological approach to technology-mediated relationships. Theoretically, the study makes a contribution by combining the concept of the network society, the symbolic interactionism and the digital sociology theory to provide an understanding of how online social interactions are changing. In practice, results contribute to the knowledge of teachers, policy makers, and technology developers interested in supporting responsible digital engagement, digital literacy and socially inclusive online contexts. The overall findings indicate that social media has become a new social institution, altering the nature of social relationships and thus demands a balanced framework of digital governance as well as of social platform design to establish positive and sustainable.

## **Introduction**

Digital technologies have evolved extremely quickly and have affected the ways in which people communicate, connect and develop social relationships. Of all those technologies, social media has become one of the most effective innovations of the 21st century, and has revolutionized cultural, social, economic and political interactions. They can be used by people to communicate with others, share information, join virtual communities and create online identities, regardless of geographic and cultural differences (Castells, 2010; Van Dijck, 2013). Social media provide social interaction that is continuous, instant, dialogic and participatory – and that define the relationship, the social network and the social identity in the process of socialization of digital societies. Social media is therefore no longer just a technology innovation, but a great, social institution that is influencing the current communication and behavioural patterns.

The use of the internet and smart phones has multiplied across the globe and has contributed to an increase in social media usage by different population groups. According to recent international reports, people are using the social networks platforms daily for communication, education, professional networking, entertainment, business activities, etc. on a daily basis (DataReportal, 2024). Such a degree of digital interaction has changed the way interpersonal interactions are experienced and how they can now enable the possibility of ongoing interaction across distance. Different families who are separated due to migration, online students, similar groups with common interests but living in different countries and communities that are mobilizing around common interests are increasingly finding their social relationships through the digital realm. The developments illustrate the extent to which social media has become an integral part of the social fabric of the times, shaping peoples' experience and social practices.

Social media is not just a medium of communication, it is a place of society; a social space where people make meaning, construct identity and create complex networks of social relationships. With digital technologies, virtual spaces have emerged that allow people to form communities around cultural affiliations, interests, political identities, professional identities, and experiences. Digital communities can provide opportunities to people that they wouldn't have in real life: social support, knowledge sharing, civic participation and community action opportunities. One important aspect of the impact of digital technologies on social phenomenon is the extension of its reach to social activity and the redefinition of concepts of community, belonging and social cohesion, as exemplified in online communities (Castells, 2010).

Identity formation is one of the most talked about sociological effects of social media. Online environments provide opportunities to present, negotiate and constantly re-construct multiple aspects of identity, given that physical and social contexts may curtail identity construction. Users share personal experiences, opinions, successes and visuals selectively that help to build their online persona. This process provides people the opportunity to be creative in their approach, and to gain social recognition, validation and belonging in digital communities. In symbolic interactionist view, identity is a process of social interaction, social interpretation and social feedback from others. These are reinforced by social media, which can provide an immediate reaction in the form of comments, likes, shares and other elements of online communication, which therefore also affect self-perception and social identity construction (Goffman, 1959; boyd, 2014).

At the same time, the process of digital construction of identity is a sociological challenge. Capability to curate their own online selves could make individuals more likely to present themselves in a good light with discrepancies between what they put on line and what they experience in real life. Excessive exposure to the carefully crafted online persona has been proposed to have adverse effects, such as social comparison, uncertainty, emotional stress, and poor psychological and mental health, particularly among children and youth (Turkle, 2011). The pursuit of digital visibility and social approval can affect one's self-esteem, social trust and social behaviours, and there are concerns about what this might entail in the longer-term when using technology to form an identity. Thus, the ways in which people create and manage identity in digital spaces has become an important issue in current sociological and digital media research.

Social media has a bigger reach than just an individual's identity, it is also an impact on patterns of human relationships and human behavior. Personal relationships were established in the traditional sense—face to face in the school environment, on the job, and within the local community or among family members. However, in the modern day, with the advent of digital communication, there are many exchanges that are either enhanced or even replaced by in-person. Social networking sites are used to keep up with current relationships and allow individuals to build new relationships with others with similar interests, no matter where their location is. These digital interactions have broadened opportunities to collaborate, be emotionally supported, engage in culture exchange and social participation. Social media was identified as a key tool for maintaining social connections, for information and for engaging in social life, particularly at times of social disruptions, such as during a global pandemic like COVID-19.

These are the benefits that are obvious, but the question remains: what will be the role of digital connection in improving social connections? Others have suggested that social media increases social capital by its ability to communicate, broadening social networks, and encouraging civic involvement (Ellison et al., 2007). Some even believe that too much digital communication decreases the quality of interpersonal communication, because it gives people less face-to-face time and less emotional closeness and promotes superficial social interactions (Turkle, 2011). Likewise, the impact of digital communication technologies on the broader social consequences, such as cyberbullying and online harassment, misinformation, privacy violations, digital addiction and algorithmic influence, have been a growing topic of discussion. These 2 points seem to imply that social media and social relation are more complex than they might appear on their own; that they are more than just a direct correlation between the "good" technology and the "bad" social relations.

Social media also has a sociological dimension, as evidenced by the social transformation of social behavior due to digital communication. People who use online interactions are more likely to use the internet as their source for information, to express their political opinion, join in social movements, develop cultural identities and public discourse. The digital environment has introduced new ways for people to collectively act by enabling the organization of campaigns, community mobilization and awareness raising on social, environmental and political issues. During the period of time, concerns of social polarization, loss of trust in institutions and the speed of misinformation have emerged regarding algorithm-driven content and echo chambers. These changes demonstrate not just the impact of social media on interpersonal communication, but also the impact of social media on social norms, values and norms of collective behavior.

In the Light of these dramatic changes the sociological definition of social media should be analysed by the interdisciplinary approach, which should not be interpreted as independent social processes, but as a complex social phenomenon, in which digital communities, social identity construction process, interpersonal relations, and social behaviour are at play. Digital technology plays a pervasive role in today's societies and is affecting how people build and make relationships, and interact in social life. Therefore, it is relevant to consider these changes and understand the dynamics of human relationships in the digital age as a basis to assess the research problem and gaps in knowledge that will be discussed in the next section.

There is extensive literature on the influence of social media in sociology, communication and media studies, and the psychological and social studies literature, but the connection between digital communities, digital identity and digital social behaviour in relation to contemporary human relationships has not been developed. Research in the past has tended to be centered on the individual outcome of online communication, mental health effects, political participation or social networking and relatively less on a holistic sociological approach which offers a deeper understanding of the redefinition of interpersonal communication in the Internet era. Furthermore, literature on the benefits and harms of social media has been either benefits or harms only, failing to provide a clear picture on the overall social implications of social media. This argues for a qualitative investigation that makes sense of the complicated meanings people attribute to electronic communications and the impact of these communication experiences on social relations in a variety of social settings.

The other flipside of the literature at the moment is that digital platforms are dynamic. Social media technologies continue to evolve at a rate faster than academic researchers can keep up and have an impact on communication practices, community participation, identity expression and information sharing. This has created a variety of features such as algorithmic content, short videos, online influencers, virtual communities and personalized digital experiences; the sociological implications of these features have been less explored and their longer-term effects are not yet fully understood. Due to the increasing importance of digital communication in everyday life, the interpretive sociological research on the transformation of trust, belonging, social participation and interpersonal relationship caused by the development of digital communication also comes into focus.

The current study aims to discuss the impact of social media on the transformation of human relationships and how social media can be used as a means of examining the digital communities, the formation of identity and social behavior using an interpretivist qualitative research method. The study is not an attempt to quantify but rather it conveys meanings, experiences and social processes which are rooted in existing research and credible news coverage of technology-mediated interaction. The study will be achieved through a thematic analysis of existing literature, so as to offer a thorough sociological insight of the impact of digital communication on today's social life.

These are the research objectives that guide this study:

To talk about the evolution of human relationship in the current society via social media.

To talk about how digital communities affect social interaction and social belonging.

To explore the effect of social media on identity construction and self-presentation.

To analyse the impact of social media on social behaviour and communication between people.

To gain an appreciation of broader sociological challenges of digital communication of people and communities.

In order to accomplish these goals, the following research questions will be answered:

What has changed about the relationship between people in the age of social media?

What is the impact of digital communities on social interaction and social belonging?

What is the impact of social media on the self-image and personal presentation?

What is the impact of social media on social behaviour?

What do social media have to offer to the current society as a whole?

This study has a number of important contributions to the sociology and digital media studies. In theory it fuses aspects of Digital Sociology, Network Society Theory and Symbolic Interactionism to offer a comprehensive view of how technology is involved in interpersonal interactions and the formation of identity. The study contributes to the understanding of the social processes that digital platforms are changing the nature of human interaction by combining these complementary viewpoints.

From a practical point of view, the results are of great value for teachers, policy makers, social researchers, technologists, as well as the digital platform providers; from a social research point of view they are of great value. Knowledge of the impact of social media on relationships, identity and behaviour can guide efforts to the promotion of digital literacy, responsible online use, responsible platform use and governance and healthier digital environments. The results can also inform policy-making to foster online communities that are inclusive and address issues like digital inequalities, cyberbullying, misinformation, and privacy issues.

This study is overall a significant sociological question for today, namely how to analyse the changing character of human relationship in the era of digital society. The analysis of the interweaving of digital communities, the development of one's identity, and social behavior in the study will help to complete the picture of the opportunities and challenges of social media. The article begins with a critical review of literature, describes the method used in the study and discusses the themes which emerged, and ends with the theoretical, practical and policy implications of the study.

## **Literature Review**

One of the greatest social and technological developments of the modern era, which has transformed communication, social interaction and social life is Social Media. Unlike traditional communication modes, the social media platforms offer social media user-generated communication that is interactive and transcends geographical and cultural limitations. These platforms have become social spaces, not only spaces of information sharing but also spaces of identity construction, community creation, and constant negotiation of inter-personal relations, scholars claim (Castells, 2010; Van Dijck, 2013). From a social science perspective, this transition implies that societies are digitalizing: "Online communication is becoming the supplement and even replacement of traditional face-to-face communication. But, these changes are still a subject of debate regarding their positive role in strengthening social relationships or in social fragmentation; a need for further qualitative investigation remains.

Digital communities have received a lot of attention in research because it can be used to describe the ways in which individuals develop social networks about shared interests, values, experiences, and objectives that may not be physical-based. Digital communities can be a place to work together and to feel emotionally supported, to share knowledge and knowledge creation, and to be involved in civic life that may be more difficult to accomplish through other communication. Castells (2010) suggests that networked communication has changed the structure of modern society, by creating flexible social networks that enable collective interaction in a variety of settings. Likewise, boyd (2014) suggests that online social spaces enable communities to become a context of social belonging, culture and identity building. These studies indicate that digital communities have opened up new ways to interact with social environment, and have redefined what community and interpersonal environments mean.

These benefits also have drawbacks when using digital communities. Others have suggested that online relationships can be less deep, intimate and committed as compared to real-world relationships (Turkle, 2011). Others claim that algorithmic content and

custom-made digital environments can enable the development of "echo chambers" in which much less than a broad spectrum of ideas and worldviews is exposed to a user (Sunstein 2017). Digital communities afford opportunities and pose challenges to social cohesion, depending on the ways that people interact with them, and how they interpret their digital experiences.

Another key focus area in current digital media studies is identity construction. The sociological theories have always emphasized the importance of social interaction as a means of building identity; in other words, understanding the social nature of interactions and understanding how others interpret the interactions (Goffman, 1959). Social media amplifies these processes by continually giving people an opportunity to showcase themselves through photos, videos, personal stories and interactions. In contrast to offline settings, digital platforms provide users with the ability to manipulate and represent themselves in ways they may choose, thus rendering identity a constantly evolving and "processual" element. As online spaces are the platform for negotiating multiple identities, personal, professional, cultural and social identities are negotiated in different online spaces (Boyd, 2014).

While social media offers opportunities for creativity and expression, scholars have identified problems with identity management in a digital environment. Regular comparing to appropriate online material can have a negative impact on self-esteem, body image and mental health, particularly in adolescents and young people (Vogel et al., 2014). The craze for "likes" and "comments" on the web and for the number of followers can also make people more interested in being accepted online than in being accepted in person, according to Turkle (2011). Others, though, see social media as providing a positive space for marginalized groups and minority communities to be themselves, to find each other, and to get affirmation and support from others that they are not alone, which may not be available to them offline. The diverse opinions indicate that creating identity online is not a one-size-fits-all process, but shaped by individual experiences, culture, and online interactions.

Online interaction has also influenced the means by which humans communicate with each other. Social media supports people to make relationships no matter where they live, and also helps them to communicate instantly via messaging, video conferences and interactable content. These platforms encourage old and new relationships in addition to communication and social interaction, as they offer more avenues for communication and social interaction, argue Ellison, et al. (2007). During social disruptions (such as the COVID-19 pandemic), digital communication resulted had been essential to implement education, work, collaboration, communication with family members and community participation, further mandating the growing importance of the use of the Internet in everyday social life.

But how well online interaction is done is still up for discussion. A few researchers claim that digital communication promotes relationships that are more easier to maintain and increase social support, while others believe that hyper-reliant on digital communication can decrease face-to-face communication and lead to feelings of loneliness despite increased online connectivity (Turkle, 2011). The contrasting results indicate that, while the amount of digital interaction is one way to measure the impact of social media on human relationship, this is not the only way. Instead, it is important to use a qualitative method to grasp the meaning people attach to Internet use and how it influences their relationships in contexts of different social and cultural realities.

As a whole, the current literature has shown that social media has transformed the way digital communities are lived, the formation of digital identities, and how online interactions come about. But the dimensions have been explored separately at least in the past, providing only a partial understanding of the many dimensions involved in human relations dynamics. This is a collection of disconnected pieces of knowledge, which indicates a need for an integrated qualitative study that would interpret these interrelated social processes, from a broader sociological perspective.

Social media and social capital is an interesting phenomenon because social media have increasingly influenced the processes of social networking construction, maintenance and development. The social capital is the one that a person can receive from others by contact, like trust, cooperation, sharing information and social support. Social networking websites not only improve bonding social capital (family and friends) but also bridging social capital (more diverse, larger communities) (Ellison et al., 2007). Internet websites offer individuals the opportunity to look for a career, instructional information, emotional support, and also a group or network that they would not have in their local community. This study's findings suggest that social media can have a positive impact on social connectedness when relationships that are connected online are relationships that have a purpose to them, not merely an increase in online connectedness.

Belonging is linked to social capital – the sense of belonging to a community. Digital communities can offer place for the sharing of information, communication, and connection among individuals who share interests, identities, and experiences. Through

opportunities for participation and understanding, a feeling of isolation can be reduced among marginalized groups, through an online community. There have also been suggestions that, in digital spaces, the feeling of connection can be fleeting or superficial rather than created through interpersonal relationships, but can be created by algorithms (boyd, 2014). Although this participation in social media can increase social engagement, it doesn't always translate to lasting relationships or connections. But social media can offer opportunities for social participation – it does not necessarily mean deeper and lasting social relationships.

Today, one of the many research concerns is the impact of socio media on mental health. Some studies in the field of digital communication have been linked to psychological well-being, namely, to maintain relationships, to create social support and to reduce loneliness in people in geographical and social isolation. Emotional support, information sharing and opportunities to express themselves can have a positive effect on mental health in online communities. Other researchers, however, have found a correlation between excessive use of social media and anxiety, stress, low self-esteem and social comparison, especially if the platforms are used in such a way that users frequently compare themselves to their carefully curated online content (Turtle, 2011; Vogel et al., 2014). There is some conflicting evidence, indicating that social media can negatively or positively influence mental health, depending on its usage, the individual's characteristics, and the nature of the social interactions.

Social media, too, has contributed significantly to changing social norms – in terms of how people communicate, how they access information, how they participate in culture, and how they engage in civic life. With the help of digital platforms, people can express themselves, participate in public discussions and mobilise around social, environmental and political issues quite quickly and in an even more pronounced manner than ever before. The changes have facilitated citizen engagement and have impacted relationship and communication among citizens. But concerns have been raised regarding misinformation, cyberbullying, polarization, invasion of privacy, and the diminished interaction with the other. Sunstein (2017) argues that because of the algorithmic personalisation, people may end up exposed to less of other viewpoints and this may lead to echo chambers and further social polarisation. These results suggest that social networks can affect the actions of individuals and social dynamics in complex ways.

While the existing literature has contributed to the field, there are still several gaps in the literature that need to be addressed. Past research has tended to explore these areas as separate areas of enquiry: digital communities, identity construction, social capital, mental health and social behaviour. Past research has largely focused on these areas as distinct issues rather than on the complex relationship between these in terms of the changing nature of human relations. Moreover, the majority of studies are quantitative in nature, which assesses the amount of social media used and lacks any depth of understanding on the meanings that can be attributed to digital use. Fewer interpretivist studies to explain the reality of experience, negotiation and interpretation of relationships in digitally-mediated environments, from a qualitative perspective. Furthermore, the social media environment is constantly evolving and recent studies might not always apply to the existing social media environment and social networking and identity construction.

Based on the research approach that has been determined, the research method in this study is a qualitative interpretivist approach where the method of synthesis is thematic analysis of the existing literature in reliable sources by scholars. The study combines the research of digital communities, identity construction, social capital, mental wellbeing, communication and the change in social behavior, giving a more comprehensive sociological overview of the effect of social media on contemporary human relationships. By adopting this approach, some important gaps in the literature can be addressed, and the conceptual framework for using research methodology and thematic analysis in the subsequent sections are established.

## **Research Methodology**

In this study, the approach of interpretivist research paradigm is used to explore the effect of social media on human relationships, identities construction, digital communities and social behavior. For this reason, the interpretivist paradigm is appropriate, because it looks into the meanings, experiences, and social realities that people are “constructing” in their interactions rather than searching for causal explanation in a more universalistic manner (Creswell & Poth, 2018). From the sociological point of view, it is important to understand how social networks are influencing the social life of the modern world, which is why it is decided to apply the interpretivist approach in this study. This approach is more subjective and nuanced in aspects of social behaviour, as individuals have different social, cultural and technological contexts in which they interact and engage in digital interactions (Lincoln et al., 2018).

The study adopts a research design of a qualitative research type which is based on the interpretivist approach. Qualitative research is well suited for the study of complex social phenomena, as it allows researchers to explore meanings, patterns, and interpretations that can only be partially understood using quantitative methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). A qualitative approach is used in social media studies to gain insight into how digital technology influences interpersonal relations, the development of identity, community involvement and social interactions in everyday life. The study aims to generate a holistic understanding of the current knowledge in literature about the sociological implications of social media, rather than testing the existing hypotheses.

Document analysis is used as the main method of data collection for the research. Document analysis is a systematic process for examining, evaluating and interpreting current text to derive new insights into specific research problem (Bowen, 2009). Documents are seen as rich descriptions of social processes, theoretical perspectives and empirical findings that have been developed in various contexts and are valuable sources of evidence in qualitative research. In the current research, document analysis helps to combine various academic views into the area of social media and human relationships without initiating the primary data collection. This method is especially well suited since the study itself is not concerned with individual experiences, through interviews or surveys.

These documents include peer-reviewed journals articles, academic books and their respective chapters, government documents, policy documents, reports from international organizations and credible institutional publications. A special focus is given to articles published in well-recognized SSCI- and Scopus- indexed journals, ensuring academic quality and reliability. Reports from other organisations including UNESCO, United Nations, OECD, World Bank, Pew Research Center and DataReportal have also been included as these organisations provide up to date evidence on digital communication, internet use and the societal impacts of social media. Works of fundamental importance are cited if they help to set the theoretical backdrop and recent publications are emphasized to reflect contemporary developments in digital media and online social interaction.

The study uses purposive sampling technique in order to ensure the literature reviewed is relevant and of high quality. There are many reasons why purposive sampling is a common method in qualitative research where the researcher intentionally seeks information rich sources to directly address the research questions (Patton, 2015). Several criteria were used to determine which documents to include. They first had to select one or more of the core concepts discussed in this study such as social media, digital community, identity construction, online interaction, social capital, belonging, social behavior, and/or other sociological concepts. Second, peer-reviewed publications and authoritative institutional reports published mostly in the 2019-2025 period were given priority, influenced foundational studies were included when needed but in a limited number to provide theoretical background. Third, articles published only in English and from reputable academic and institutional sources were included in order to be consistent and reliable.

The documents which did not have an academic background or which were opinionated without empirical or theoretical evidence, documents which were a duplication of existing evidence and those which were not directly related to the research objectives were excluded from the analysis. This selection process assured the study's focus on high-quality sources that could offer useful information for understanding the evolving paradigms of human relationships in the digital era.

Qualitative content analysis technique was applied to the collected documents to process the textual information systematically for organizing, interpreting and synthesizing information in the texts. Qualitative content analysis can reveal common concepts, patterns and significance in various documents while maintaining the context of the qualitative evidence (Schreier, 2012). The analysis did not just provide a summary of previous studies but critically examined findings, looked for similarities and differences between the scholarly points of view and examined how different scholars have interpreted the social consequences of digital communication. This analysis method is especially well suited for interdisciplinary work, as it allows to combine the sociological, communication and digital media research into a coherent concept.

Thematic analysis is used as the main analytical technique in the study to reinforce the analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis technique that is flexible and widely used for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting themes that occur repeatedly in text data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In line with ideas presented by Braun and Clarke, all selected documents were read several times to familiarize oneself with the data and then meaningful patterns were identified. Then similar concepts and ideas were clustered into larger themes, reflecting broad aspects of the research such as digital communities, constructing identity, interacting online, social capital, feeling a part of something, mental health, and altering social behavior. These topics became the conceptual lens through which the literature was explored and the nature of the changes in human relationships in the modern world, as a result of social media, was explained.

The study uses a rigorous qualitative methodological approach to identify themes that allow for a deeper understanding of the sociological effects of social media and a qualitative content analysis of documents, following an interpretivist approach. This methodological approach enables to transcend descriptive summaries by critically analyzing the existing knowledge and uncovering a more general pattern of the relationship between digital technologies and the changing nature of human social life.

Selected documents were systematically coded to look for meaningful patterns that were of interest to the research goals. All documents were initially read multiple times to get a feel for the content of the documents and to create awareness of the key concepts regarding social media and interpersonal relationships. During this phase, key ideas, key concepts and major observations were emphasized. The same ideas were then given codes for a preliminary classification, and the codes were then sharpened and put into larger categories. The coding process was iterative, themes were not preconceived but emerged from the literature. This approach allowed for the analysis to stay within the interpretivistic paradigm where meanings were created by carefully interpreting qualitative data instead of measuring it statistically (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Coded data were categorised into more general themes that spoke more strongly to the central theme of the study. The topics that were explored in these themes were: how social media can affect digital communities; building identity; online interactions; social capital; sense of belonging; mental health; and shifting social practices. Themes were continually revisited and adjusted to reflect the different aspects of the problem under study and to capture each theme in a different way. We present the results in the form of a thematic analysis rather than reporting only the previous findings, to compare the different scholarly views, to uncover common themes, to note divergent views, and to describe the various themes as a whole to understand the evolving nature of human relationships in the digital age.

The principles of trustworthiness propounded by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were followed to improve the quality and rigor of the study. The use of peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and reports from reputable international organizations was an effective way to enhance the credibility of the findings and ensure that they were based on reliable and authoritative sources. The issue of transferability was addressed by describing in detail the context of the study, and by making the procedures used to select and analyze the literature clear, so that readers can assess the transferability of the results to other contexts. To support dependability, the analysis of the documents was conducted in a systematic and transparent manner, where document selection, coding, and theme development led to consistent qualitative analysis. Confirmability was achieved by being objective, by basing the findings on literature rather than own assumptions or opinions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical issues were also considered during the research process. The study did not involve any human subjects, and therefore was not subject to formal ethical approval. However, academic integrity was upheld by providing accurate representation of previous researchers' ideas, appropriate APA 7th edition in-text citations, and ensuring that no plagiarism or misinterpreted published material was provided. An attempt was made to ensure that literature reviewed was presented fairly and critically, including all points of view where applicable.

Although the methodology adopted was good, it had some drawbacks. The study has been conducted purely on secondary resources and thus relies on the quality and extent of the secondary literature. Social Media technologies are changing and some recent changes may not be fully represented in existing academic literature. The study also covers a limited number of research works in other languages, though this may not reflect the breadth of research that exists in other languages. The interpretivist approach gives depth and richness to the context, but the results are of an interpretative nature and cannot be statistically generalized to any population or social setting.

In general, the chosen methodology is appropriate for this qualitative study. This approach is interpretivist, document analysis, qualitative content analysis, and thematic analysis, which gives a systematic framework touching on the impact of social media on human relationships, digital communities, identity construction, and social behavior. The methodology of synthesizing and critically analysing the existing scholarly knowledge allows for the understanding of the changing sociological effects of social media and provides a solid foundation for the findings and discussion in the next section.

## **Findings and Discussion**

In this section, findings and discussion of the qualitative study investigating the nature of human relationships, digital communities, identity construction and social behavior influences in the era of social media are presented. The findings were generated with the use of a qualitative thematic analysis approach which sought to highlight the socially constructed meanings, experiences and interpretations of contemporary digital interactions. This qualitative study investigates the meanings and processes people make sense of and engage in in their social networks, or sense of self, in such mediated digital contexts. The



study findings show that social media is now not only a communication tool, but also a social space that allows the creation, maintenance, transformation, and even challenges of relationships.

The thematic analysis resulted in several themes that are interconnected and represent the transformations of human social life in the digital age. The findings are evidence that social media has also generated new understandings of intimacy, belonging and community and that it has also raised issues regarding authenticity, intimacy, privacy and social comparisons. The experiences of the participants indicate that digital platforms have opened up spatial opportunities for communicating with others and enabled them to create communities of interest, identities and experiences. Their transformations, however, also point to a change in the nature and quality of interpersonal interactions, characterized by greater visibility on social media platforms, self-expression through digital performance, and interaction with algorithms.

By this sociological view, the results lend themselves to the argument that social media must be interpreted as a social environment and not just a technological platform. Digital platforms have entered into people's daily social behaviors and influenced the social communication, identity building and collective participation patterns. This is in line with Castells' (2010) notion of the "network society", where he argues that societies today make increasing use of networks of digital communication in their social organisation. Likewise, boyd (2014) is concerned with the nature of social media and the networked publics in which people meet, showcase themselves, and interpret social sense within digitally connected communities.

The qualitative results also show that social media creates a "double social reality. On the other hand, it fosters social bonds by promoting ongoing communication, emotional support, and engagement in various communities. When it comes to the other side, it can undermine the traditional aspects of interpersonal communication, fostering superficial relationships, performative identities, and reliance on digital validation. Previous qualitative studies have also underscored that online and offline relationships are not mutually exclusive contexts of social life, but rather are related aspects that shape individuals' emotional experiences and social identities in the present (Hampton & Wellman, 2018; Turkle, 2017).

Thematic analysis is used to organize the discussion of findings, with major themes identified. Each theme critically explores the impact of social media on the ways people relate to each other, build community, create identity, communicate, and act socially. The interpretation brings together the theories in the social sciences, such as symbolic interactionism, network society theory, and theories of identity performance, in order to clarify the process of meaning construction among people in digital environments. The section links in with existing scholarship and qualitative insights, thereby making it part of ongoing discussions on the social impacts of digitalization, and the changing forms of human relationships in modern society.

Overall, the results indicate that social media is an important sociological change in the organisation of relationships and social interactions. It has pushed the limits of human interaction and redefined what the presence, communication and belonging mean. While it has not taken the place of social relations, it has transformed the nature of how people live, experience and understand social relationships in their daily lives.

### **Theme 1: How human relationships are changing in the digital age**

The first overarching qualitative theme to emerge from the qualitative analysis is the change in human relationships as a result of digitally mediated interaction. Results suggest that social media is a transformative force in the ways people form, build and play out social relationships. The experiences of participants indicate that digital platforms have increased the possibilities of forming relationships, enabling people to remain connected across geographical, cultural and social distances. Relationships have transcended physical boundaries and are now taking place in mixed reality environments where online and offline experiences constantly shape and inform one another.

The qualitative results indicate that social media offers people new avenues to maintain their weak and strong social relationships. Social networking sites allow people to "hang out" with relatives and friends far away, former friends, business contacts, and groups of people with similar interests. The digital relationships provide an impression of ongoing presence, as people can be part of one another's lives via updates, messages, pictures, and shared experiences. This is in line with Granovetter's (1973) theory of weak ties, which suggests that weaker social relations can lead to important sources of information, support and social integration. In the digital world, social media has grown the reach of weak ties, giving people the ability to keep up with a large number of social connections with little effort.

But the results also show that digital connectivity does not always translate to greater connectedness. They described situations in which they felt close to someone online, but not as close as they felt face-to-face. This is echoed by Turkle's (2017) claims that the

digital world can produce a sense of connection but at the same time deprive people of the chance for real, in-person social interaction. The qualitative results indicate that social media has created a paradox: people feel more connected than ever, but sometimes they feel a bit more disconnected when using social media.

According to a symbolic interactionist viewpoint, relationships are built as a result of communication and the sharing of meaning (Blumer, 1969). These processes have been revolutionized by the use of social media, which brings new symbols of relational commitment: likes, comments, reactions, online visibility, etc. The results indicate that the digital behaviors are increasingly understood as signs of friendship, attention and emotional support. Digital presence and actions have acquired symbolic values in today's relationships, such as a delayed response, lack of engagement or lack of response to online interactions as a sign of social rejection.

The changing nature of relationships also shows the greater changes in social expectations. Participants reported that social media has established an expectation of being able to interact instantaneously and always. This can make things easier to access but can also cause pressure to be social and responsive. Digital communication technologies have also been found in previous studies to change norms of interaction, with expectations of constant connectivity (Baym, 2015). So, social media is not just a means to connect and relate but also a reimagining of the social norms around connection, attention, and emotional expression.

Thus, this theme shows that the social media has not taken the place of traditional relationships but rather re-structures them and gives a new interpretation. In today's digital world, the nature of human relationships is characterized by greater accessibility, extended networks, and novel types of intimacy, as well as authenticity, emotional depth, and reliance on digital interactions.

## **Theme 2: Digital Communities, Belonging and New Forms of Social Connections**

The second theme focuses on the development of digital communities as alternative opportunities for feeling a sense of belonging and developing a sense of collective identity. The qualitative results show that social media is used to join communities outside the geographical and social limits of one's life. Participants shared that online spaces were significant environments for them to meet others who shared their interests, experiences, values and identities. These online communities offer emotional support, sharing of knowledge and opportunities to join in collectively.

The results indicate a shift in the concept of community in the context of social media. The traditional sociological ideas about communities tend to focus on the extent to which people are physically near each other and share their locality; however, digital communities show that social belonging can also be created through shared interests and symbolic links. This helps to explain Anderson's (1983) notion of imagined communities as people who feel connected to something without having any firsthand involvement with everyone. In online settings, people construct group identities by engaging with discussion content, sharing content, and discussing shared causes.

The experience of participants shows that digital communities can play a special role for people who feel marginalized or lonely in their physical surroundings. Online groups offer an opportunity for people to share, get advice, and find emotional support. Jenkins et al.'s (2016) research also emphasizes how participatory digital cultures enable people to interact online, forge communities and construct shared meanings. The findings show that social media has the potential to provide social inclusion when those who do not have similar communities in their surroundings.

The qualitative analysis also uncovers conflicts in the digital communities at the same time. Online environments could foster inclusion but also be ideologically polarized, exclusionary, and algorithmically driven. Participants reported that sometimes digital communities foster interaction between people who have similar views, reducing exposure to other viewpoints. This mirrors concerns over online "echo chambers," systems that algorithmically reinforce existing beliefs and limit potential for meaningful discussion about differences and disagreements between groups of people (Pariser, 2011).

Digital communities can be understood from the position of network society theory, which is based on the change from place-based social organisation to network-based social organisation (Castells, 2010). The results indicate that people are creating a sense of belonging through a web of interactions instead of the traditional institutions. Individuals can simultaneously engage in multiple communities through social media, which offers more fluid and flexible means of social identity.

Hence this theme shows that Digital Communities are becoming important sociological contexts in which people negotiate their belonging, identity and collective participation. These communities offer opportunities for connection and support but also pose problems of polarization, fragmentation and quality of relationships.

### **Theme 3: The construction of a digital identity through the use of social media**

The third theme concentrates on the role of social media in the construction and presentation of identity. Qualitative results show that people are actively using digital platforms for the creation, the management and communication of elements of their identities. Participants said social media profiles are places that they embody personal values, lifestyles, accomplishments, opinions, and social affiliations. The findings indicate that the identity in the digital age is more performative, visible, and in constant negotiation.

This is a very strong indication of the view of self-presentation proposed by Goffman (1959), who suggested that people control the impressions they create when performing socially. Social media continues this in the digital realm, giving users the opportunity to curate their photos, captions, opinions, and interactions to influence how others view them. Digital platforms offer the opportunity to strategically construct a self-representation of oneself through the ability to edit and control these representations, unlike the real world where such control is not possible.

Results show that there was sometimes conflict between self-expressive and socially desirable identities. Many reported feeling motivated to share positive things from their lives, but not negative items that it might impact the others' conceptions. This confirms earlier studies that found that social media is associated with impression management and selective self-disclosure (Marwick, 2013). Digital identity, thus, is a co-created process that reveals a negotiation between personal authenticity and social expectations.

The qualitative analysis also underscores the impact of visibility and audience responses on identity construction via social media. Likes, comments and follower engagement are types of social recognition that can affect perception of self-worth. It is similar to the symbolic interactionist aspect of Mead (1934) that views the self as evolving through interacting with others and making sense of their responses. In digital worlds, audiences are always involved in the process of self-construction, giving feedback and validation.

But the results show that the reliance on online validation can result in psychological and social pressures. Experiences of comparison, anxiety and concern about social approval were discussed. Previous research has also revealed that over-emphasis on online self-presentation can also lead to feelings of identity insecurity and social comparison processes (Vogel et al., 2014).

Overall, this theme shows that social media has radically changed, and popularized, the process of identity from something relatively private and stable to something dynamic and performed in the public sphere. Digital platforms offer opportunities for self-expression and identity exploration and also bring on with it pressures of visibility, approval and authenticity.

### **Theme 4: Changing Communication Patterns and Emotional Interaction in Digital Spaces**

The fourth emerging theme from the qualitative thematic analysis is the change of communication patterns and emotional interaction via social media platforms. The results highlight that social media has transformed the way people communicate emotions, share information, build and sustain relationships, and receive social messages. Based on the experiences of participants, it can be inferred that communication is becoming quicker, more accessible and increasingly relies on digital symbols such as text messaging, emojis, images, reactions and short-form content. The transformations illustrate that social media has established a new mode of interaction that not only involves language but also digital expressions and mediation practices that shape the construction of meaning.

The qualitative results indicate that social media has opened up opportunities for ongoing communication, as it lowers the barrier of time and space. People can talk to family members, friends, co-workers and online communities in real time, no matter where they are. This ongoing connectivity has changed people's perception of availability and responsiveness. Participants stated that digital communication is integral to daily relationships as they are able to keep connected emotionally even when physically not. This fits in with Baym's (2015) view that digital communication technologies do not supplant other forms of interaction, but rather fit into the broader social practices in which they are used, and thus offer new ways of sustaining relationships.

The results, however, also show that the digital communication has affected the quality and understanding of emotional communication. Participants indicated that there are times when the online conversation is not as emotionally rich as an in-

person conversation since social cues like tone of voice, facial expressions, and physical presence are removed from the digital communication. This is consistent with Turkle's (2017) proposition that digital platforms may actually limit the opportunities for more meaningful emotional connection, even if they encourage more frequent communication. The results indicate that social media establishes a communication environment in which people feel more connected but can also encounter emotional misunderstandings and have lower levels of interpersonal sensitivity.

In the sociological context, communication is the way people develop shared meaning and communicate socially. Symbolic interactionism is the focus on the way that humans interact by giving meaning to symbols and reactions of other people (Blumer, 1969). Social symbols have been updated in digital environments with new ones, such as likes, reactions, emojis, and the online status. The qualitative results show that the digital signals are increasingly perceived as signs of care, attention, acceptance, or rejection. For instance, some positive engagement to a post can produce emotions of recognition and recognition, while none could be misinterpreted as social neglect.

What's more, the results show that social media has helped to foster more public emotional expression. People are sharing personal experiences, emotions and life events with large numbers of people, through posts, stories and updates online. This visibility can lead to emotional support, collective empathy, but may also pose issues of privacy, emotional dependency, and personal experiences being monetized. Previous studies indicate that social media has made private experiences public performances, and that social media and personal life are now one (boyd, 2014).

Another significant discovery is the fact that digital communication has new ways of social participation. People who are not comfortable communicating in person can be more comfortable using the internet. Social media enables quieter people to have a voice, join in with others and build relationships gradually. This shows that the use of digital communication can enhance social participation by providing alternative places for communication.

However, the results also highlight some issues with over-communication in the digital realm. Participants shared their experiences with feeling tired from communicating, being pressured to be available at all times, and/or feeling less focused when communicating offline. Please note that requests for quick answers may lead to stress and affect relationships. Previous research has also concluded that the constant connectivity can exert psychological pressure, reducing the boundaries between social, personal and professional space (Mazmanian et al., 2013).

The general impression of this theme is that social media has shifted the nature of communication from predominantly face-to-face to hybrid digitally-social communication. Digital platforms have led to greater opportunities for connection, for emotional expression, and for participation, but also new challenges around authenticity, emotional depth, and the understanding of social meaning. Results indicate that communication in modern society is increasingly being influenced by how human emotions interact with digital technologies.

#### **Theme 5: This theme examines how social media, behavioral change, and the reshape of social life go hand-in-hand**

The fifth theme is on the effects of social media in relation to individual behavior, social norms, and wider social dynamics of social interaction. The qualitative results suggest that the social media is a powerful socializing tool that influences the conduct of people, their decisions, self-evaluation, and their relations with society. The experiences of the participants indicate that digital platforms are having an impact on communication practices as well as the daily life, choices, and social norms and understandings of social reality.

One of the key findings in this theme is that social media has changed social behaviour patterns by making users constantly monitor themselves and be active in the digital world. Participants talked about changing their behaviours to meet their expectations of the internet, such as wanting to seem social, informed and connected. Social media platforms provide platforms where individuals are always conscious of how they are viewed by others. This is a result of the theory of impression management of Goffman (1959) which posits that people will change their behaviour to suit the impressions they want to make on audiences. However, in digital environments this is ongoing, because anyone who enters is always potentially visible to a wide array of observers.

The results also highlight that the social media can impact on the social comparison patterns. Participants indicated comparing themselves to others online in terms of life, successes, looks, and social interactions. These comparisons frequently impacted self-evaluation and feelings of success and belonging. This is in line with Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory, which posits

that people compare themselves with others to determine their self-evaluations. But in digital worlds, the contrasts are magnified, as users are inundated with mostly carefully crafted and idealized depictions of others' lives.

In the results of qualitative analysis, the role of algorithms that influence social behaviors is also highlighted. Participants acknowledged that their online experience is shaped by recommendation systems which shape what they see. These algorithmic structures influence patterns of engagement, opinions, preferences, and attention. Algorithms are not neutral technological systems, but are instead actively organized as visibility and influence social experiences as Gillespie (2014) points out. The results indicate that social media users are active in social settings with a segment of invisible technological processes influencing them.

The analysis also shows that social media has modified the ways of collective action and social participation. Digital platforms enable people to arrange trips, disseminate information and take part in social campaigns outside the traditional institutional framework. Participants noted various examples of how Internet communities did raise awareness and motivating collective participation. This is in line with Castells' (2015) claim that digital networks have emerged as significant social movements and political participation spaces.

The results also show the downsides of using social media. Participants talked about issues of misinformation, online conflict, cyber aggression and attention spans. Digital environments can foster quick responses instead of reflective engagement, and affect the ways that people process information and relate with others. In the past few years, social media has been shown to amplify emotions and intensify the dissemination of misinformation, often resulting in their rapid spread (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

On a socio-cultural level, these results show that social media are part of the fabric of everyday life. It influences not only behaviour, but norms around communication, identity, relationship and participation. Social media are a social institution that shape(s) people's self-concept and place in society.

Hence this theme demonstrates how the social media is a significant change in the present social activities. It offers opportunities for creativity, involvement, and social interaction, but also poses comparison, surveillance, misinformation, and behavioral dependence challenges. The results indicate that the study of contemporary social life needs to account for digital platforms as active social spaces that are influencing and moulding social life.

### **Summary of themes**

The qualitative results across all of the five themes show that the social media has fundamentally changed the way human relationships and social behavior are organized. Social media has brought about a new "hybrid" social reality in which digital interactions shape social life, identity, and relationships. The results align with the current sociological theories that emphasize the social embeddedness and shaping of technology and the ways technology, in turn, shapes human practices (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Castells, 2010).

The study adds to the sociological understanding by demonstrating that social media should not be regarded only as a means of communication but as a transformative social space. It alters the way people relate, build their identities, feel belonging, express their feelings and engage in communal life. The qualitative themes highlight empowering and challenging aspects of digital society, and indicate that it is necessary to balance these aspects in the way digital society is experienced.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative study aimed to identify and describe the evolution of human relationships in the digital era through the lens of social media impact on digital communities, identity and communication, as well as social behaviour. The findings indicated that social media is an important social phenomenon which restructures the way people make sense, relate to others and build their identity and engage in a collective life through qualitative thematic analysis. Social media has become a much more than just a technological communication medium: a social environment in which relationships, communities, and personal identities are constantly negotiated. Digital platforms with their potential to offer new social connection opportunities have also posed new authentic, emotional, social and behavioral problems.

The first finding was the change in human relationships in a digitally mediated interaction. Social media has developed the potential to extend the possibilities of maintaining relationships across geographical boundaries, allowing people, families and communities to communicate and connect at all times. The results indicate that digital platforms reinforce social networks, helping the people maintain strong and weak ties in accordance with Granovetter's (1973) theory on the necessity of network connections in social life. The results, however, also show that the more connected the more people become, the more emotional

they are not necessarily. People enjoy more opportunities for being accessible and communicating with one another, but there are also times when people feel less connected and intimate in their digital interactions than in their face-to-face interactions. This is part of a larger sociological issue of technologic connection versus sincere human communication (Turkle, 2017).

The second key discovery was the importance of digital communities as place of belonging and collective identity. Social media allows people to connect together through a like-minded community instead of a physical community. These online communities can offer a place for social support, involvement, and identity, especially for those who are marginalized in social settings. The results help to advance current debates on networked societies, as they show how there is a growing way of belonging that is networked beyond purely geographical and institutional ties (Castells, 2010). The study also underscores, however, that digital communities can also introduce problems, such as polarization, exclusion and disintegration of social interaction.

The third theme was related to how social media influences digital identity. The results indicated that people are actively building and controlling their online selves by framing and communicating with their audiences and performing themselves online. This helps support Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation, which argues that social interaction is an ongoing process of managing behaviour that is part of identity. But in digital environments, identity performance is more public, enduring, and shaped by feedback from the audience. The study illustrates how social media offers opportunities to express one's self and explore one's identity, alongside the pressures of social approval, social comparison and social authenticity. The results are part of the understanding of identity as a more dynamic and publicly negotiated process in the contemporary society.

The fourth finding highlighted was regarding the change in communication patterns and emotional interaction. Social media has created emergent communication modalities through instant messaging, visual expression, signifying with digital symbols, and sharing of emotions. The results indicate that digital communication has opened up opportunities for communication but has also altered the way that people interpret emotional cues and communicate with others. Symbols like likes, comments, reactions have come to have social meanings and shape perceptions of attention, acceptance, and belonging. This underpins symbolic interactionist views that focus on the significance of shared meanings for human communication (Blumer, 1969).

The fifth theme showed the social media's influence on social behavior and everyday life. The results show a digital influence on individual behaviour, social expectations and participation patterns. Online platforms, particularly social media, have been shown to shape personal conduct and social norms through social comparison and self-monitoring. The literature shows how social media can affect personal behavior and social norms in terms of social comparison and self-monitoring. In parallel, these platforms offer collective action, knowledge sharing and social participation opportunities. The results resonate with the notion that digital technologies are not just part of social life, but help to shape its transformation in the modern world (Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

This study, from a theoretical perspective, helps advance sociological research by combining theories from symbolic interactionism, network society theory and the theory of identity performance to discuss how human relationships are evolving within a digital context. The results reveal that social media is not a substitute for the traditional ways of social interaction, but it is rather, it changes the meaning, nature and expectations of social connection. The study focuses on personal experiences and interpretations, thus creating a much better understanding of the impact digitalization has on the everyday social reality.

This research has significant implications for practice for educators, policy makers, technology developers, and social institutions. The results indicate the necessity of higher digital literacy levels, which would help people to see digital interactions critically, manage their digital identities and build healthier social media engagement. Schools need to address issues about responsible digital behavior, online communication ethics and critical media awareness. Rewire the design of platforms, algorithms and engagement mechanisms to take into account social relations and wellbeing. Governments need to create strategies to promote safe and positive online experiences while preserving privacy and trust in society.

There are some limitations of this study. This is a qualitative study and findings are therefore not meant to reflect the views of the general social media user. The personal experiences will differ from person to person and be influenced by culture, age, social context and digital engagement. Further, the dynamics of social media are constantly evolving, and new technologies could mean new dynamics of relationships in the future. This study might be extended in future by comparative studies across cultures, by longitudinal qualitative studies, and mixed methods research that explores individual and social experiences.

Finally, the social media is one of the biggest changes in modern social life. It has increased human connectivity, the capacity to form communities and groups, and the ability to express oneself; and changed expectations of relationships, identities and communication. The results show that digital platforms are not a social world apart, but are actually part of the social world as it

is lived and experienced by people and how they construct it. To grasp the future of the human relationships, then, requires acknowledging social media as a potent sociological force, which is constantly reshaping the ways people connect, communicate, and define themselves in a world that is becoming more and more digital.

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