

Digital Narratives and Student Identity: A Phenomenological Study of Generation Alpha in Education

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Abstract

The dominance of digital technology in the lives of Generation Alpha has created fundamental changes in the way self-identity is formed, understood, and expressed. Since an early age, this generation has grown up in a digital environment filled with algorithms, social media, and online culture that is both interactive and performative. The digital narratives they consume and produce not only shape their self-representation, but also influence their cognitive, affective, and social structures. This study aims to examine in depth how digital narratives play a role in the process of identity formation of Generation Alpha students, especially in the context of education. Using a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method, this study involved junior high school students who actively use digital media as key participants. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and digital documentation, then analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) framework. The results of the study show that student identities develop fluidly, temporarily, and are often curated to meet social expectations in online spaces, which are not always in line with the norms of educational institutions. These findings highlight the need for adaptive, reflective, and empathetic pedagogical transformation, as well as the importance of critical digital literacy in guiding students to build authentic, healthy, and empowered identities amidst the complex challenges of the digital world

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Introduction

The dominance of digital technology in the lives of Generation Alpha is a socio-cultural phenomenon that cannot be ignored. This generation is the first group that has been fully exposed to a permanently connected digital ecosystem since birth—from social media, algorithm-based content, to artificial intelligence in games and online learning. As stated by Khanip et al (2024), children's involvement with digital technology is not merely instrumental, but also shapes their thinking structures, learning methods, and perceptions of reality. In fact, since preschool, children in this generation have developed what is called a digital instinct, namely the intuitive ability to interact with digital interfaces without formal training. This makes them not only passive users, but also active producers of digital narratives that shape their daily identities.



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However, this dominance is not without critical implications. Technology that is constantly present in children's lives has the potential to shift forms of direct social interaction and form fragmented identities. According to Mahrini et al (2025), children's digital engagement requires a deep understanding from educators and parents, because the digital environment is not value-neutral, it brings with it ideologies, social norms, and even commercial pressures that are not always in line with educational values. Therefore, high digital exposure in the lives of Generation Alpha needs to be understood critically, not only as technological progress, but also as a complex space that influences the formation of children's identities in a deep and sustainable way.

The changing patterns of identity formation in Generation Alpha require a rereading of classical theories of socialization and self-development. In a digital framework, identity is no longer a construct that develops linearly through stable life stages and is based on physical space, but is fluid, temporary, and often curated for an online audience. This phenomenon is in line with Giddens' (1991) idea of the "reflexive project of the self", where individuals actively reflect on and design their identities in modern society. However, in the context of Generation Alpha, this reflexive project is largely mediated by algorithms and platforms that are not neutral. Identities formed through digital media such as personas on TikTok, Instagram, or YouTube often emphasize performative and consumptive aspects rather than the process of deep internalization of values and morals. This has serious consequences for the emotional stability and authenticity of students' identities, because there is tension between who they really are and who they present themselves as online.

Furthermore, the digital narratives consumed and produced by students also affect their cognitive and affective structures in responding to reality. The algorithmization of information makes Generation Alpha more likely to receive the world in a visual, brief, and instant format, which in turn can narrow the space for reflection and depth of thought. As explained by Syarif & Rahmijati (2024), intense engagement with cyberspace often does not produce deep connections, but rather builds shallow and fragmented relationships. As a result, students' identities become fragile to social pressures and are easily influenced by momentary trends, external validation, and digitally determined standards of success. In the context of education, this creates a major challenge: how to guide students to form healthy, authentic, and resilient identities to the excesses of the digital world, without alienating them from the cultural space that has shaped their daily lives. A new pedagogical approach is needed that not only instills digital literacy, but also builds critical awareness of how digital narratives work to shape who they are.

The challenge of education in responding to the development of the digital narrative of Generation Alpha lies in the delay of educational institutions in redefining their function in an ecosystem that has changed radically. Schools still operate with a 20th-century paradigm, where knowledge is seen as something stable, structured, and transmitted linearly from teacher to student. In fact, Generation Alpha lives in a digital ecosystem that is non-linear, hyperlinked, and based on participation. This creates a significant epistemological gap between how students learn and how teachers teach. According to Kurdi (2023), the education system tends to adopt technology superficially, for example the use of gadgets and online learning platforms without changing the underlying pedagogical structure. As a result, digital interventions that should open up space for exploration and reflection are reduced to technological formalities that do not touch on aspects of students' identities, emotions, and personal relationships.

Moreover, the role of teachers as authority figures in identity formation now faces very strong narrative competition from digital actors such as influencers, content creators, and online communities. Generation Alpha learns not only from teachers, but also from YouTube, TikTok, Reddit, and various other platforms that shape values, lifestyles, and perceptions of the future. If educational institutions fail to intervene in this narrative with a critical and reflective approach, then students' identities will be shaped more by the logic of the digital market than by the ethics of learning. Therefore, education must move beyond functional literacy to critical literacy, as stated by Miller (2023), where students are invited to be aware of and criticize the power structures behind texts, including digital texts. In other words, education that is adaptive to digital narratives does not simply add technological content, but must form a new pedagogical space that dialogues students' digital realities with a complete ethical, social, and identity awareness.

In the context of the dynamics of students' digital identities, the phenomenological approach is important because it offers a methodological framework that is not trapped in statistical generalizations, but rather focuses on a deep subjective understanding of students' experiences. This approach allows researchers to "enter" the everyday world of Generation Alpha students, seeing how they feel, interpret, and give meaning to their digital activities. As explained by Hernandez (2020), phenomenological studies aim to understand the essence of human experiences as they are experienced directly, not as defined from the outside. In this context, digital narratives are not only seen as technological phenomena, but as existential spaces where students negotiate their identities, social relations, and positions in a complex world. Therefore, it is important to not only ask "what they do digitally," but "how they experience themselves through that digital space."

Furthermore, the phenomenological approach also serves as an epistemological bridge between the realm of education and students' personal experiences that are often beyond the reach of formal school instruments. Digital identity cannot be understood simply by measuring screen time or the types of applications used, but must be traced through students' personal narratives about self-acceptance, online social pressure, the search for meaning, and the desire to be recognized. As expressed by Cirilli et al (2019), consciousness is never empty, but always about something and in the context of Generation Alpha, that something is very often related to their digital lives. Therefore, a phenomenological study involving in-depth interviews, narrative reflection, and participant observation will help reveal how digital narratives operate as a complex, ambiguous, and sometimes contradictory field of identity formation. With such an understanding, education can design interventions that are not merely normative, but empathetic, contextual, and grounded in students' real experiences.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method to explore in depth the subjective experiences of Generation Alpha students in forming self-identity through digital narratives. The phenomenological approach was chosen because its main focus is to understand the meaning of life experiences experienced by individuals directly and reflectively, not to test hypotheses or generalize findings. In this context, digital narratives are seen not merely as technological activities, but as existential spaces that mediate the process of

internalizing values, searching for identity, and forming students' social identities in the digital era.

The subjects of this study were junior high school students from Generation Alpha who actively use digital media, especially social media and content-based platforms. The participant selection technique used purposive sampling, with the criteria being students who have high digital interaction intensity and are able to reflect their personal experiences verbally. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, limited participant observation, and digital documentation such as relevant social media posts. Interviews were semi-structured to allow for flexible yet focused narrative exploration. The collected data were then analyzed using the stages of phenomenological analysis according to Moustakas (1994), namely through the process of epoche, horizontalization, grouping themes, and compiling essential descriptions of participant experiences. Data validity was maintained through member checking techniques, data triangulation, and critical reflection by researchers. With this approach, the study aims to uncover the depth of meaning hidden behind students' digital activities and how it influences the formation of their identities in contemporary educational spaces.

Result and Discussion

1. The Subjective Meaning of Digital Narratives in the Lives of Generation Alpha Students

The subjective meaning of digital narratives in the lives of Generation Alpha students reflects a very deep and emotional involvement between young individuals and digital space as an arena for self-expression and social existence. For a generation born and raised with digital technology, forming a self-narrative is no longer an exclusive activity in the real world, but rather a daily activity that is internalized in social media practices. Identity is not only built from direct interactions, but also through visual and textual representations in cyberspace. Through uploading content such as photos, short videos, comments, and account bios, students construct the version of themselves they want to present to the world. As expressed by a 13-year-old student,

"I chose the coolest and most aesthetic photos so that people know that I can look good, so that they won't be considered nerdy."

This statement shows that content selection is not neutral, but rather is laden with social representation strategies, where aesthetics and content curation become a way to form a desired self-image, while avoiding negative judgments from their digital environment.

This phenomenon can be explained through the theoretical framework of self-presentation from Erving Goffman (1959), which states that individuals in social interactions always act like actors who appear on the "front stage" to influence audience perception. In the digital context, the stage becomes wider and more permanent, because digital traces are recorded and widely distributed. Students' digital narratives reflect performative efforts to maintain the desired "social face," which is often not identical to their authentic experiences. In addition, this imaging process is also intertwined with the desire to gain validation in the form of "likes," "views," or positive comments. This validation becomes a symbolic marker of social acceptance. This is clearly seen from the statement of an 11-year-old student, "If no one watches or likes my video, I immediately think that maybe I'm not fun or not liked." This reflects the link between digital recognition and self-esteem, a tendency referred to in the literature as social comparison orientation (Swargiary, 2024), namely the tendency of individuals to judge themselves based on comparisons with others on social media.

Furthermore, the digital world has also become a space for students to aspire and escape. Most of them not only create content to share, but also to express their hopes and fantasies about the future. A 12-year-old male student said,

"I like making videos like a vlogger, even though my life is just ordinary. But it's fun, it feels like being famous."

This shows that digital space functions as an identity sandbox, a place where children can experiment with identities that they may not be able to display in real life. In the study of digital developmental psychology, this kind of identity is referred to as a "transitional" identity, a very dynamic form of self-discovery. However, this exploration space is not entirely free from pressure. Rather than being an arena for authentic self-expression, social media often demands performative consistency, where children must continuously produce content that attracts attention. This pressure is what slowly grows digital fatigue or emotional exhaustion due to overly intense involvement with digital space, especially when that involvement is driven by external motives such as social expectations and anxiety about exclusion.

A further consequence of this phenomenon is the emergence of identity fragmentation. In practice, many students have several social media accounts: a "clean" and aesthetic main account, a second account or "finsta" (fake Instagram) that is more private and used to express things that cannot be shown on the main account. This shows the distinction between public and private identities, and sometimes also reflects the tension between the desire to appear authentic and the need to maintain a social image. This fragmentation psychosocially risks creating identity diffusion if it is not balanced with a space for critical reflection and guidance from adults. Therefore, it is important for schools and families to not only focus on technical digital literacy, but also strengthen the ethical, emotional and reflective dimensions of children's involvement in digital spaces. Adolescents and children need "digital mentors" who understand that their online activities are not deviations, but reflections of the dynamics of legitimate identity development that need to be understood empathetically.

Thus, digital narratives are not just technological activities, but social and psychological phenomena that shape the way students know, imagine, and evaluate themselves. The digital world is not just a space for entertainment or information, but also an ideological field where children form identities, social relations, and future hopes with all their potential and risks. Therefore, understanding the subjective meaning of digital narratives is not only an academic need, but a social imperative to design an education and parenting ecosystem that is able to respond to the challenges of the times in a more humane way.

2. The Relationship between Online Identity and Socialization Processes in Schools

The presence of digital space has shifted the paradigm of identity formation for adolescents, especially Generation Alpha, from being determined by the immediate social environment to an interactive, fluid, and continuously negotiated process in online networks. Digital identity, as expressed by Sholihatinnisa et al (2021), is not only a reflection of who someone is, but also the result of performative social and technological practices. In this context, social media becomes an arena for self-representation that allows students to convey their personal narratives more autonomously. An eighth grade student said, "On Instagram I can be myself, at school I have to obey the rules." This statement shows the dualism of identity between the online persona which is free and full of experimentation and the school persona which is subject to structure and norms. This supports the idea of Arik & Kütük (2022) that today's individuals shape themselves "in relation to their screen," and that digital media creates opportunities to explore aspects of identity that were previously suppressed by social norms.

However, the relationship between digital identity and the socialization process in schools is not always constructive. When the identity narratives constructed in the digital world do not match the dominant norms in schools, conflict and marginalization often arise. A male student who uploaded content about his gender expression stated,

"My friends online support me, but I get bullied at school. My teacher also told me not to overdo it."

This reflects the existence of digital dissonance, namely the tension between social acceptance in the digital space and rejection in the real world. According to Bahroni & Zulkarnain (2024), digital media provides space for the formation of alternative identities, but educational institutions are often not ready to accommodate this complexity. Schools remain institutions that shape identities with a normative approach based on discipline, uniformity, and strict social control. This is in line with the findings of Grassini (2023) who stated that although students are active in the digital world, their experiences and existence in schools remain confined within a conservative social framework.

Institutional responses to students' digital expression often tend to be repressive rather than educational. Rather than developing critical digital literacy, many schools choose a surveillance or prohibitionist approach, which actually deepens the distance between students and educational institutions. One student said,

"We were once told to delete a TikTok video because it was considered embarrassing to the school, even though it was just a regular lip sync."

In this case, schools fail to distinguish between potentially harmful forms of digital expression and those that are part of the participatory culture of young people. Jenkins et al. (2016) in the concept of participatory culture emphasize the importance of formal institutions to not only recognize, but also embrace the active participation of young people in digital spaces as part of the learning process and identity formation. Without this approach, schools will continue to lag behind in responding to the needs of students who live in a world that is simultaneously online and offline.

This tension also impacts the psychosocial aspects of students. Feelings of being "torn in two" between online persona and institutional persona can lead to identity stress, self-doubt, and even social isolation. One student said,

"Sometimes I'm tired, because online I can be funny and lively, but at school I'm considered weird."

The pressure to conform to school expectations while maintaining an authentic digital identity creates a significant psychological burden, especially for students who are in minority identity groups (gender, race, orientation, subculture). In the perspective of adolescent developmental psychology, Erikson refers to adolescence as a period of identity search versus role confusion. When institutions such as schools do not provide a safe and supportive space for this process, the risk of dissonance and disruption of identity development increases.

Thus, it is important for schools to transform their roles from mere institutions that control behavior to facilitators of cross-identity dialogue. Reforming the approach to socialization in schools must involve recognizing the existence and legitimacy of students' digital identities. Schools must begin to build safe spaces where expressions of identity, both online and offline, can be discussed openly and critically supported. Digital literacy curricula, teacher training to understand the dynamics of digital generation identity, and policies that respect diversity of expression are urgent steps that need to be taken. Because in this interconnected world, the success of education is not only measured by adherence to norms, but also by the ability to form whole individuals in both physical and digital realities.

3. Pedagogical Implications for Identity Education in the Digital Age

In the dynamics of Generation Alpha's life, digital space has become an inherent part of the identity formation process. Identity is no longer formed solely through direct interaction with family, peers, or teachers, but also through algorithms, social networks, and digital culture that shape self-narratives simultaneously and across spaces. The results of this study confirm that students experience emotional and symbolic attachment to digital space. As expressed by one student:

"Sometimes I feel more like myself on Instagram or Discord than I do at school. There I can choose who I want to be known as."

This is in line with the findings of Dito & Pujiastuti (2021) who explained that digital identity is not fixed, but decentralized and flexible, formed through ever-changing social networks. Digital media allows adolescents to create personas and negotiate identities in environments that are often more open than school environments that tend to be hierarchical.

However, this flexibility is not free from pressure. In fact, Generation Alpha's digital identities are often shaped by invisible algorithms and social expectations. One student stated,

"If you don't update or look cool, you feel invisible. Your friends' responses will also be different."

This illustrates how mechanisms such as likes, followers, and viral content create forms of digital social capital that directly impact students' self-esteem and social position. Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) theory of surveillance capitalism provides an important framework for understanding how students' data, attention, and behavior on digital platforms are monitored and monetized, ultimately affecting how they understand who they are. In this context, education can no longer be neutral toward technology. Schools must prepare students to become digital citizens who are aware of the processes of identity production they experience.

Unfortunately, pedagogical approaches in schools are not yet responsive enough to this complexity. Teachers are generally not equipped with the knowledge or reflective framework to critically understand students' digital world. A teacher in an interview admitted,

"We don't know where to start when it comes to digital identity. It's a whole other world that we don't really understand, frankly."

This reflects the digital literacy gap between the teaching generation and the taught generation. In fact, as emphasized by Hamdani (2021), the task of education is not only to educate children to succeed academically, but also to help them become autonomous and conscious subjects in a complex world. In the context of the digital era, this task includes the ability to facilitate students to critically understand the relationship between digital representation and their identities.

Therefore, identity education must be oriented towards the development of critical digital literacy. This literacy includes the ability to read, assess, and produce digital content consciously, as well as understand the ideological and structural dimensions of the digital platforms used. Digital literacy education should go beyond technical mastery, towards the ability to interpret digital experiences as part of larger social and political dynamics. This kind of literacy allows students to not just be passive users, but to become reflective actors who are aware of how they are constructed and conditioned by the digital systems they enter. In the context of Indonesian education which often emphasizes discipline-based learning, this is a major challenge that demands a transformation of the pedagogical paradigm. The first step towards this transformation is to redefine the role of the teacher as an identity facilitator, not just an academic instructor. One student expressed her hope:

"I want teachers to not only give me assignments or scold me for playing with my cellphone, but also listen to why I upload something, why I like certain digital characters. That's also a part of me."

This statement highlights the need for a dialogical and empathetic pedagogical relationship, where teachers are present as exploration partners, not just assessing authorities. This is also in line with the concept of pedagogical listening developed by Wangi (2024), which emphasizes the importance of listening to students' narratives and expressions as a way to build meaningful and inclusive education. With this approach, identity education does not become a moral coercion project, but a collective process of searching for meaning.

Furthermore, schools need to create reflective spaces and safe spaces for students to openly explore their digital experiences. This could be in the form of digital narrative projects, digital storytelling, cross-media discussion forums, or journaling activities that combine identity reflection and technological literacy. Yusa et al.'s (2024) research shows that adolescents need space to develop agency through media that are relevant to their daily lives, including social media and forms of visual communication. With this kind of approach, educational institutions can play an active role in fostering students' self-awareness, identity resilience, and critical thinking skills.

Finally, the pedagogical implications of this discussion lead to three main recommendations: (1) Integration of critical digital identity curricula into formal education programs; (2) Teacher training in empathetic and reflective pedagogies based on students' digital experiences; and (3) Redesigning learning ecosystems that support dialogic, inclusive, and sustainable exploration of identity. Education that is not only adaptive to technology, but also empathetic to students' human processes, is key to assisting Generation Alpha to grow as autonomous, self-aware, and responsible individuals in an increasingly digitalized world.

Conclusion

Digital narratives have become a crucial element in the identity formation process of Generation Alpha students who live in an interconnected and simultaneous digital ecosystem. Identities that were once formed through direct interaction are now mediated by algorithms, platforms, and online cultures that are full of performativity. Students not only present themselves, but also curate digital personas that suit the expectations of their virtual audiences. In this context, social media becomes an arena for self-representation as well as a place to seek social validation. Tensions arise when fluid and free online identities clash with the normative structures of school institutions. Schools' unpreparedness in responding to this digital expression often results in marginalization and psychosocial stress. The relationship between students and teachers has also shifted, demanding a more empathetic and reflective pedagogical approach. Schools need to transform from institutions of control into safe spaces for dialogue for the exploration of digital identities. Critical digital literacy is an urgent need so that students are able to understand the power dynamics behind digital narratives. The role of teachers must also develop into identity facilitators, not just conveyors of material. In this context, education has a strategic responsibility to accompany students to become individuals who are socially, emotionally, and digitally complete.

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