

Stigma and Identity: A Phenomenological Study of LGBT+ Youth on Indonesian Social Media

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Abstract

The development of social media has reconfigured the dynamics of identity formation and stigma reproduction for LGBT+ youth in the conservative Indonesian context. This study aims to examine how LGBT+ youth interpret their identities and confront stigma in digital spaces, using a qualitative approach based on literature studies and a phenomenological framework. Social media, on the one hand, provides an alternative space that enables the expression of gender and sexual identities through dynamic performative practices. However, on the other hand, digital platforms also become arenas for the reproduction of symbolic power that reinforce heteronormative norms through hate speech, negative labeling, and biased algorithmic moderation. In this situation, LGBT+ youth develop resistance strategies through the formation of online communities, social campaigns, and the production of affirmative narratives. This phenomenon reflects the importance of digital agency in the process of identity emancipation, while also revealing the dilemmas of visibility and security experienced by vulnerable groups. This analysis demonstrates that social media is a complex and transformative terrain of identity politics and emphasizes the need for more inclusive policy design and digital literacy. This study contributes to the academic literature by offering a deeper understanding of LGBT+ youth's subjectivities in navigating social stigma through digital spaces in contemporary Indonesian society.

Keywords Identity; Social Media; Stigma

1. Introduction

The development of social media has revolutionized communication patterns and identity expression among adolescents, including those on the LGBT+ spectrum (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and others). Digital platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube have become platforms for self-expression relatively free from the structural restrictions they often experience in the real world. Social media serves as an alternative space for constructing, defining, and negotiating their sexual and gender identities (Kiswari et al., 2023). This phenomenon demonstrates



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that identity construction is no longer limited to physical spaces but is also actively formed in fluid and transformative virtual spaces.

However, the increased visibility of LGBT+ youth on social media does not necessarily guarantee social acceptance. On the contrary, digital spaces can also become fertile ground for the reproduction of stigma, discrimination, and even symbolic violence. In Indonesia, which is still dominated by heteronormative norms and conservative values, LGBT+ youth face complex psychosocial pressures. The stigma they experience arises not only from institutional actors such as the state and religion, but also from the general public, who use social media as an instrument of social exclusion (Wibowo & Sukardani, 2023). This demonstrates the paradox between the potential for self-liberation in the digital world and repressive social realities.

The stigma against LGBT+ people can be understood through sociological and psychological perspectives. According to Howard Becker's labeling theory, individuals labeled as deviant by society tend to internalize the label, which then influences their self-identity. In the context of LGBT+ youth, this labeling process is crucial because they are at a vulnerable stage of identity development. Social media, while providing a space for resistance to stigma, can also reinforce negative labels through practices such as doxing, cyberbullying, and the spread of hate speech (Ahmad & Efendi, 2023).

The process of identity formation among LGBT+ youth in digital spaces is inextricably linked to social constructionism theory, which emphasizes that identity is the result of ongoing social interactions. On social media, they engage in identity performativity, a concept developed by Judith Butler, in which gender expression and sexual orientation are staged through narratives, visuals, and symbols. However, this performativity is often constrained by fear of social judgment, resulting in a dynamic of "dual identity": a publicly displayed self and an identity hidden or shared only in safe spaces (Rachmayanti & Diarsa, 2024).

These identity dynamics demonstrate the complexity of the subjective experiences of LGBT+ youth in Indonesia. Not all youth are able to openly express their identity due to risk factors such as family rejection, peer bullying, and gender-based violence and sexual orientation. Previous studies have found that LGBT+ youth who experience social rejection tend to have higher levels of depression and anxiety than their heterosexual peers (Yudi et al., 2025; Syahrir et al., 2024). Therefore, it is important to delve deeper into how LGBT+ youth make sense of their identity amidst the pressures of stigma through a phenomenological approach that emphasizes understanding lived experiences from the subject's perspective.

Phenomenology, as a methodological approach, provides researchers with a space to authentically understand the subjective world of LGBT+ youth, without prejudice or normative bias. By exploring personal narratives and everyday experiences, this approach can reveal how individuals construct

meaning around their identities and the stigma they experience. Phenomenology serves not only as a research method but also as a form of epistemic empowerment, where marginalized voices are given space to be heard in scientific discourse (Budiawan & Dengen, 2024). This is particularly important in a society that tends to silence or erase the existence of LGBT+ groups from public discourse.

The lack of local studies focusing on the subjective experiences of LGBT+ youth on social media indicates a significant knowledge gap in social studies in Indonesia (Moekahar & Amalia, 2021). Existing research focuses primarily on legal approaches, reproductive health, or advocacy movements. However, the dynamics of identity and stigmatization among LGBT+ youth are highly contextual and require in-depth qualitative understanding (Triastuti, 2021). Therefore, this research will significantly contribute to the development of academic literature that is more inclusive and sensitive to the diversity of sexual and gender identities.

Thus, a phenomenological study of LGBT+ youth on Indonesian social media is highly relevant. This research aims not only to uncover the dynamics of identity and stigma in the digital space, but also to critique oppressive social norms and create space for more just and inclusive social transformation. By understanding their subjective experiences, it is hoped that society and policymakers can formulate a more humane and responsive approach to the needs of LGBT+ youth in Indonesia.

2. Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a literature review to deeply analyze the dynamics of stigma and identity formation of LGBT+ youth on Indonesian social media. This method was chosen because it aligns with the research's exploratory and interpretive objectives, which address complex and contextual social phenomena.

Data were collected through a systematic search of scholarly sources from databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, ProQuest, and national digital libraries. The literature analyzed consisted of journals, academic books, research reports, and organizational documents related to LGBT+ issues published between 2019 and 2024. Inclusion criteria included relevance to the topics of stigma, gender identity, youth, and social media in the Indonesian context.

The analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, as described by Braun & Clarke (2006), which allows researchers to identify patterns of meaning across multiple text sources. This research also draws on a phenomenological approach to understand the subjective experiences of LGBT+ youth, as Creswell (2013) suggests that a phenomenological approach is suitable for exploring individual life experiences within specific contexts.

To maintain validity, source triangulation and researcher reflexivity were employed to ensure objective interpretation. This approach is also supported by Patton (2002), who stated that credibility in qualitative research depends heavily on the depth of analysis and consistency in data processing.

With this approach, the research is expected to be able to explore theoretical and contextual understanding of how LGBT+ youth form identities and face stigma in the digital space, as well as enrich the academic literature on sexual identity issues in contemporary Indonesian society.

3. Result and Discussion

Manifestation and Reproduction of Stigma Against LGBT+ Youth on Social Media

In the realm of contemporary digital sociology and social psychology studies, the phenomenon of stigma against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and others (LGBT+) groups has undergone a significant transformation along with the massive migration of social activities to digital spaces, particularly social media. Stigma, as a social construct attached to identities deemed deviant from majority norms, in this case heteronormative norms, not only persists in the real world but is also actively manifested on digital platforms through forms of hate speech, negative labeling, and symbolic violence (Saha et al., 2019). This process makes social media not merely an arena for communication, but an ideological space where exclusive and discriminatory narratives are systematically reproduced.

Stigma against LGBT+ youth on social media manifests in various forms, often subtle or explicit. Hate speech, for example, is not limited to crude verbal expressions but also takes the form of memes, pseudo-religious narratives, and comments embodying moral superiority. The distorted labeling of LGBT+ identities as a form of “moral disease” or a “threat to the traditional family” illustrates mechanisms of symbolic domination rooted in conservative moral frameworks. Stereotyping that equates LGBT+ identities with hedonism, moral degradation, or “westernization” also demonstrates systemic efforts to delegitimize them (Fisher et al., 2024).

Conservative groups play a crucial role in the reproduction of this stigma. Through their widely accessible public accounts, whether based on religion, culture, or politics, they

disseminate narratives rejecting LGBT+ individuals, relying on perceived normative authority (O. Alichie, 2023). From the perspective of Stanley Cohen's (1972) moral panic theory, LGBT+ individuals are often used as symbols of deviance that threaten society's moral order. This narrative is further reinforced by the viral mechanisms of social media, which enable the massive, rapid, and relatively uncontrolled dissemination of discriminatory content.

The stigma experienced by LGBT+ youth on social media is not only external but also has profound psychosocial consequences internally. Empirical studies, such as those conducted by Ștefăniță & Buf (2021), show that continuous exposure to discriminatory content can lead to minority stress, social anxiety, depression, and even a tendency to withdraw from online communities. Furthermore, the internalization of stigma leads to identity fragmentation and self-conflict, hindering the formation of a healthy and authentic identity. In this context, social media shifts from a space for expression to an arena for symbolic control that restricts identity diversity.

A structural dimension that reinforces the reproduction of stigma against LGBT+ people lies within social media algorithms themselves. Algorithms designed to optimize user engagement often prioritize controversial or highly emotional content, including hate speech. This supports Marston's (2019) argument regarding platform governance, namely that technical decisions in algorithm design have significant political and ideological implications. Conversely, non-transparent, inconsistent, or biased content moderation policies further reinforce the dominance of heteronormative narratives and undermine educational efforts by LGBT+ communities in digital spaces.

The heteronormative norms underlying the operation of social media constitute a form of symbolic power reproduced through mechanisms of representation, regulation, and censorship. Digital platforms generally do not provide representative features for non-heterosexual or non-binary identities, and even systematically censor terms related to LGBT+ on the grounds of content policy violations. This demonstrates that although social media functions as an open space, in practice it is still subject to dominant logics that negate the diversity of identities. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity is relevant in explaining how the repetition of heterosexual representation as the sole norm reinforces exclusive gender hegemony.

However, LGBT+ youth are not entirely passive in the face of these digital pressures. Various forms of resistance have emerged through the formation of safe online communities, the production of educational and affirmative content, and hashtag-based social campaigns aimed at normalizing diversity of sexual orientations and gender identities. This resistance reflects the existence of digital agency used to renegotiate the meaning of identity and expand affirmative space within a repressive system. Thus, social media can also be a tool for identity struggle when utilized strategically and collectively.

Therefore, it is crucial for stakeholders, including academics, policymakers, digital platform developers, and community activists, to build critical awareness of the mechanisms of stigma reproduction in the digital space. Interventions can be implemented through the development of more inclusive platform policies, increasing digital literacy that favors vulnerable groups, and strengthening community solidarity across identities. A just and socially just digital space can only be realized if the systems and structures that support it undergo a transformation toward values of equality, respect, and diversity.

Dynamics of Formation and Negotiation of LGBT+ Youth Identity in Digital Space

The formation and negotiation of LGBT+ youth identities in digital spaces is a complex and dynamic social process. Identity is no longer viewed as something essential or inherent, but rather as a social construct shaped through power relations and discursive practices. In this regard, the theory of identity performativity proposed by Judith Butler (1990) in Inayah & Fauzi (2024) provides an important conceptual framework, stating that gender and sexual identities are not fixed categories, but rather the result of repeated actions and representations within specific social contexts. In digital spaces, LGBT+ youth represent their identities through symbolic practices such as uploading photos, using hashtags, choosing language, and even preferences for the content they share and consume (Maharani et al., 2025).

Social media, as a contemporary discursive space, functions as a field for identity articulation, enabling the formation of alternative subjectivities outside of heteronormative norms. Through the logic of social constructionism, LGBT+ youth identities are understood as the result of continuous interaction and negotiation between actors and their social environments. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter not only provide spaces for self-representation but also arenas for norm reproduction, resistance, and community formation. In these spaces, LGBT+ youth gain access to more plural and diverse identity

narratives, allowing them to explore terminology, collective experiences, and cultural expressions previously marginalized in the offline realm (Permana, 2024).

However, identity expression in digital spaces is not free from social limitations and risks. LGBT+ youth often face a dilemma between the need to express their identity and the pressure to maintain safety and comfort in online interactions. They must contend with the possibility of stigmatization, symbolic violence, cyberbullying, and other forms of digital exclusion. In this context, the concept of audience management becomes relevant, where individuals strategically manage how and to whom their identity is presented. As a result, many LGBT+ youth develop a dual identity between a "public identity" that conforms to social norms and a more authentic "private identity," often hidden or only revealed in safe spaces.

This phenomenon reflects the complexity of digital representation practices, where individuals must navigate identity within the framework of platform algorithms, online community expectations, and social pressures from offline environments. Some adolescents even create multiple personas across platforms to adapt to different audience dynamics. The decision to "come out" or "conceal" is not a neutral act, but is closely linked to power relations, dominant social norms, and structures of access to resources and psychosocial support.

However, digital spaces also offer transformative potential for identity formation and community solidarity. In many cases, LGBT+ youth find safe affective and epistemic spaces through online community networks. Closed groups, discussion forums, and educational threads provide avenues for sharing experiences, gaining validation, and accessing alternative narratives that deconstruct stigma. These spaces enable horizontal peer support and strengthen individual bargaining power in building self-esteem and collective agency.

Furthermore, the dynamics of digital identity formation are inextricably linked to the context of intersectionality. Factors such as social class, ethnicity, religion, and cultural background play a significant role in determining how LGBT+ identities are negotiated online. In countries with conservative social norms like Indonesia, this process becomes even more complex. Research by Gooding et al. (2023) shows that LGBT+ youth in Indonesia tend to develop strategies of high anonymity in digital interactions, given the potential for social pressure, identity-based violence, and cultural sanctions they face in their daily lives.

As an ongoing social project, the digital identities of LGBT+ youth are constantly evolving over time and through changing online experiences. Digital spaces become a kind of

social laboratory, where identities are tested, reconstructed, and adapted to changing social conditions. This dynamic underscores the importance of understanding identity not as an endpoint, but as a process constantly open to negotiation and transformation (Thomson et al., 2021). Within this framework, digital experiences are not simply about self-expression but also reflect efforts to shape empowered subjectivities within social structures that are not always supportive.

Ultimately, the process of identity formation and negotiation in digital spaces has serious implications for the psychosocial well-being of LGBT+ youth. Digital spaces can be a source of strength and support, but they can also be a source of stress and vulnerability. The tension between visibility and safety, between expression and self-protection, is a challenge that needs to be addressed through an interdisciplinary approach, encompassing platform regulation, digital literacy education, and psychosocial support that is sensitive to identity diversity. Therefore, it is crucial for researchers, educators, and policymakers to create safer, more inclusive, and empowering digital spaces for LGBT+ youth.

Social Media as a Space for Emancipation and a Strategy for Resistance against Stigma

Social media, as a product of the development of digital communication technology, has reconstructed social spaces in contemporary society, including spaces for the expression of gender and sexual identity. In the context of LGBT+ youth in Indonesia, social media is not merely understood as a passive arena for information consumption, but as an active field for identity articulation and resistance against oppressive social structures. This phenomenon marks a significant shift from conventional public spaces to digital spaces as a locus for the formation and emancipation of identities previously marginalized by heteronormative and patriarchal norms (Chaniago, 2025). As Homi Bhabha explains through the concept of Third Space, digital spaces become arenas where hybrid identities can be negotiated creatively and subversively against dominant hegemonic structures.

Furthermore, social media also facilitates the formation of community solidarity and safe spaces that enable LGBT+ youth to build social networks, share experiences, and provide and receive emotional support. Within the framework of Bronfenbrenner's developmental ecology theory, these online communities can be positioned as mesosystems that play a crucial role in adolescent identity development and psychosocial resilience. When microsystems such

as family and school exhibit rejection or even symbolic violence, social media serves as a significant substitute, affirming the existence of LGBT+ identities (Wijdan et al., 2024). This dynamic emphasizes the importance of supportive digital spaces as a medium to mitigate the impact of social isolation and psychological distress resulting from systemic marginalization.

As a form of cultural resistance against stigma, LGBT+ youth utilize social media to initiate digital campaigns that are both educational and advocative. Personal narratives, visual content, and even memes are used as discursive strategies to challenge dominant discourses that tend to pathologize gender and sexual diversity. Within Gramsci's framework of cultural hegemony, social media functions as a counter-hegemonic tool that enables the formation of alternative collective consciousness within society. Campaigns such as #LoveWins or #IndonesiaButuhRuangAman are expressions of symbolic resistance that seek to deconstruct stigmatizing social constructs and broaden the horizon of acceptance of LGBT+ identities in the digital public sphere.

Active participation in these digital practices also has a significant impact on strengthening individual resilience. By sharing personal experiences and receiving positive feedback from online communities, LGBT+ youth develop essential psychosocial resilience in the face of social pressure and discrimination. The concept of the minority stress model emphasizes the crucial role of social support in mitigating the negative effects of minority stress experienced by LGBT+ people. Thus, social media serves not only as a channel for expression but also as a crucial mechanism for psychological recovery and empowerment in the lives of LGBT+ youth (Trevisan, 2020).

Furthermore, social media enables the production of alternative discourses aimed at broad public education. Through digital content such as infographics, short videos, podcasts, and visual essays, LGBT+ youth convey information related to identity diversity, inclusive concepts, and the history of LGBT+ struggles. This process represents a form of discursive practice (Foucault, 1977), in which power is not only reproduced through language but also resisted through the creation and dissemination of alternative knowledge. The production of this type of content helps broaden public understanding of the complexities of sexual and gender identities and opens up space for more egalitarian dialogue within society.

However, it is important to recognize that digital space is ambivalent. On the one hand, it provides a space for resistance and emancipation; on the other, it also becomes an arena

where digital violence, algorithmic surveillance, and hate speech occur. Nakamura's (2020) research shows that while social media can empower marginalized communities, platform algorithms often reinforce polarization and exhibit systemic biases that exacerbate the vulnerability of minority groups. Therefore, protecting digital identities, cybersecurity literacy, and navigating online spaces are crucial aspects in strengthening LGBTQ+ youth's resistance in the digital realm.

In this context, it is crucial to foster an inclusive and supportive digital culture, one that relies not only on community initiatives but also involves digital platforms, educational institutions, policymakers, and the wider community. A progressive digital culture must be built on the values of tolerance, equality, and respect for diverse identities. Digital literacy, emphasizing principles of social justice, needs to be integrated into formal education as a long-term strategy to shape a more empathetic and inclusive digital generation.

Thus, the digital resistance strategies employed by LGBTQ+ youth not only reflect the dynamics of personal identity formation but also form part of a broader social transformation movement. These digital practices demonstrate that social media can be an arena for affective politics, where emotions, personal experiences, and expressions of identity are used as instruments to intervene in public discourse and create social change. Within this framework, social media must be seen not merely as a communication technology, but as a political space with the potential to shape a more just and equitable social order.

Conclusion

In the contemporary landscape of digital sociology and social psychology, social media has become an ambivalent space for LGBTQ+ youth, simultaneously reproducing stigma while opening up opportunities for resistance and emancipation. Digitally mediated stigma emerges not only through explicit hate speech but also through symbolic representations that reinforce heteronormative norms. Labeling and stereotyping practices based on conservative morality demonstrate how symbolic power operates systemically through biased algorithms and moderation policies. In this context, LGBTQ+ youth are not entirely passive objects, but rather active actors, shaping strategies of resistance through identity performativity in digital spaces. Through curated self-representation practices, hashtag use, and the production of affirmative content, they creatively negotiate their identities within a space full of limitations. The

formation of safe online communities, educational campaigns, and cross-identity solidarity are manifestations of digital agency that are crucial in building psychosocial resilience. However, the complexity of power relations in digital spaces demands vigilance against the risks of surveillance, symbolic violence, and social exclusion. Therefore, transforming digital spaces into a more equitable space requires collaboration among stakeholders in designing inclusive policies, education, and technology. An intersectional approach is necessary to understand the dynamics of digital identity, which are influenced by class, culture, religion, and local norms. Thus, social media is understood not only as a communication tool but also as a terrain for identity politics. Within this framework, LGBT+ youth's digital resistance is not only a form of personal expression but also a crucial contribution to shifting the social order towards a more equal and just society

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