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ARTICLE

Social Studies Education Challenges: The Social Construction of Student Identity Crisis Amid Digital Simulacra in Yogyakarta

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Abstract

Social media has become an important environment in which students encounter, reproduce, and negotiate social meanings and standards of recognition, complicating understandings of identity formation in social studies education. This study examines the social construction of student identity crisis, conceptualized as a broader condition of identity tension, in the context of digital simulacra through the dialectical processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Students' experiences of flexing (the conspicuous display of status, possessions, or lifestyle) provide the empirical focus, while the implications for social studies education are also considered. An interpretivist qualitative case study was conducted in four junior high schools in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, involving 27 participants: 19 students and eight social studies teachers. Data were generated through four classroom observations, eight student interview sessions (seven group interviews and one individual interview), and one teacher focus group discussion. The data were analyzed thematically through iterative open coding, category development, cross-source comparison, and theoretical mapping. The findings suggest that, across the four schools, student identity tension is constructed through three interconnected processes rather than resulting simply from social media use. Externalization involved digital socialization, immediate social reinforcement, and mimetic digital practices. Objectivation involved the repeated visibility of platform-mediated representations, the normalization of digital standards, and diminished critical questioning. Internalization involved social comparison, self-evaluation, and performative insecurity. Some students also questioned or resisted prevailing digital standards, suggesting a reflective counter-process rather than a universal fourth stage. Conceptually, this study brings Berger and Luckmann's theory of social construction into dialogue with Baudrillard's concept of simulacra to explain how digitally circulating representations acquire social legitimacy and personal significance. The findings underscore the relevance of reflective and critical engagement with students' digital experiences in social studies education, although specific pedagogical approaches were not tested as interventions.

Keywords: Digital Simulacra; Flexing; Social Construction; Social Studies Education; Student Identity Crisis.

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1. Introduction

Digital transformation has reshaped how students construct knowledge, interact with others, and develop their social identities. Although families, schools, and communities remain central sites of socialization, social media has emerged as an additional social environment in which students acquire values, negotiate norms, and seek social recognition through ongoing digital interactions. Beyond facilitating communication, social media enables the production, circulation, and negotiation of social meanings, thereby influencing how students perceive themselves and others. This development has significant implications for social studies education, as students' identity formation is increasingly mediated by digital representations that shape perceptions of social status, belonging, and recognition. Previous research across educational and social contexts has examined identity formation in relation to educational experiences, interpersonal relationships, and community environments [1] [2] [3] [4]. Educational environments provide settings in which students negotiate, construct, and reconstruct their identities through evolving social experiences [5] [6]. These developments have implications for how social studies education understands emerging dynamics in student identity formation. More broadly, globalization has also significantly influenced how societies perceive and consume culture [7].

Berger and Luckmann's theory of the Social Construction of Reality provides a framework for understanding this process by explaining how social reality is formed through the dialectical processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization [8]. Within this framework, socialization is one process through which individuals develop ways of understanding the world, themselves, and their social positions [8] [9]. As sites of secondary socialization, schools enable students to internalize diverse social realities through interactions with teachers and peers and through school culture [10]. Previous research has shown that externalization, objectivation, and internalization play important roles in shaping students' values, morality, and personality development [11]. In this study, identity construction refers to the ongoing social process through which students develop and negotiate understandings of themselves in relation to social expectations and interactions. Digital identity refers specifically to how these understandings are represented and negotiated in digitally mediated environments, whereas performative identity refers to the presentation and management of the self in ways oriented toward social recognition. In this study, student identity crisis is used as a conceptual term for a broader condition of identity tension that emerges when externally circulating digital standards increasingly become reference points for students' self-evaluation, social recognition, and presentation of the self. Performative insecurity is treated as one empirical manifestation of this broader identity tension rather than as a synonym for identity crisis.

In contemporary digital society, social construction takes forms that differ from the social contexts originally described by Berger and Luckmann. Digital interaction allows symbols, images, and representations to be produced and circulated on a much larger scale, while social experience is increasingly mediated by the platform-based circulation and repeated visibility of digital content. From Baudrillard's perspective, this condition can be understood in terms of simulacra, whereby digital representations no longer merely represent reality but instead precede and substitute for it [12] [13] [14]. Simulacra encourage individuals to construct their experiences increasingly through symbols rather than through direct or authentic experience alone [15] [16]. These perspectives serve complementary analytical functions: Berger and Luckmann provide the dialectical framework for explaining how social reality is produced and internalized, while Baudrillard helps interpret the changing character of the digital representations through which that reality is experienced. On social media, this process can be seen in identity curation, the production of idealized images, and the reproduction of symbols of popularity, all of which contribute to the formation of digital hyperreality [17] [18]. Digital spaces can therefore function as sites of social construction through which students encounter and negotiate socially meaningful representations.

Previous research suggests that students' digital identities are often constructed through idealized and selective representations that may differ substantially from their offline lives [19]. While some students maintain consistency between their offline and online identities, others construct hyperreal identities that become increasingly detached from authentic experience [19] [20]. Digital platforms can also repeatedly circulate symbols and representations that become increasingly visible and familiar within digitally mediated environments [17] [18]. In the present study, flexing is examined as a form of digitally mediated self-presentation involving displays of possessions, appearance, lifestyle, or other markers of social recognition that become relevant within students' social environments. Across educational settings, identity formation has likewise been examined in relation to experiences, social relationships, and socialization processes [1] [21]. Related educational literature has discussed reflective pedagogy, digital literacy, and critical pedagogy as approaches relevant to reflection, dialogue, and critical engagement with digital experiences [22] [23] [24] [25]. Digital capabilities have therefore become increasingly relevant to participation and assessment in contemporary education [24] [26].

Studies of digital simulacra have examined social media representation, identity curation, and hyperreality [13] [17] [19], while studies drawing on Berger and Luckmann have examined institutional socialization and value formation [11] [27] [28], and educational identity research has established identity as socially formed through social and educational experiences [6] [29]. However, these strands of research do not directly explain how repeatedly circulating digital representations become socially meaningful within the interconnected processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization and subsequently become relevant to students' self-evaluation in educational contexts. To address this unresolved analytical question, the present study connects Berger and Luckmann's theory of social construction with Baudrillard's concept of simulacra to examine how digitally mediated representations become involved in students' identity construction.

Accordingly, this study examines the social construction of student identity crisis, conceptualized in this study as a broader condition of identity tension, amid digital simulacra through the dialectical processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization. It uses students' experiences of flexing as an empirical point of entry and considers the implications of these processes for social studies education. The study conceptualizes social media as an additional site of socialization in which identities are constructed, negotiated, and socially legitimated through ongoing symbolic interaction. The study addresses the following research question: How is student identity crisis, conceptualized in this study as a broader condition of identity tension, socially constructed through externalization, objectivation, and internalization in relation to students' experiences of flexing within the four-school, and what implications do these processes have for social studies education?

The study makes three related contributions. Conceptually, it brings Berger and Luckmann's theory of social construction into dialogue with Baudrillard's concept of simulacra to interpret how digitally mediated representations become socially meaningful within identity construction. Empirically, it develops an account of how digitally circulating practices and representations become socially reinforced, normalized, and incorporated into students' self-evaluations through the interconnected processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Educationally, the study identifies implications for social studies education by highlighting the relevance of reflective and critical engagement with the social meanings students encounter in digital environments.

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design

This study employed an interpretivist qualitative case study design to investigate flexing among junior high school students and its relationship to the social construction of student identity crisis,

conceptualized as a broader condition of identity tension in the context of digital simulacra. The case was bounded by the phenomenon of student flexing across four junior high schools in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. An interpretivist approach was adopted to explore how participants interpreted their experiences, social interactions, and digitally mediated practices within their educational and social contexts. Rather than testing causal relationships between social media use and identity crisis, the study examined how identity-related meanings were produced, negotiated, and internalized through the dialectical processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization.

Four junior high schools in Yogyakarta served as the research sites: SMPN 5 Yogyakarta, SMPN 8 Yogyakarta, SMP Muhammadiyah 2, and SMP Budi Mulia 2. The sites comprised two public and two private schools, providing variation in the institutional and social contexts in which students encountered and negotiated digital social practices. The schools were purposively selected based on observations of students' social media use and the diversity of their social contexts. Data collection took place from August to December 2025.

2.2 Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their relevance to the study phenomenon. The study involved 27 participants: 19 students from the four participating schools and eight social studies teachers from MGMP IPS Yogyakarta. The four junior high schools in Yogyakarta were purposively selected based on three criteria. First, the schools provided relevant contexts for examining the phenomenon under investigation, as preliminary observations indicated that students used social media and encountered digital representations associated with self-presentation, social recognition, and lifestyle trends. Second, the schools represented variation in institutional and social contexts, comprising two public and two private schools, to enable the examination of the phenomenon across different educational settings. This public–private distinction was intended to broaden the range of contextual perspectives rather than to establish a predetermined difference between the two school types. Third, the selected schools provided access to students and social studies teachers who could offer relevant accounts of students' digital-media practices and their implications for identity construction. Taken together, these criteria were intended to identify information-rich cases through which the interconnected processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization could be explored in context. The sampling strategy prioritized contextual relevance and variation in participants' experiences rather than statistical representativeness.

The student participants were distributed across the research sites as follows: five from SMPN 5 Yogyakarta, four from SMPN 8 Yogyakarta, five from SMP Muhammadiyah 2, and five from SMP Budi Mulia 2. The student participants were enrolled in Grades 8 and 9. Grade 8 participants were drawn from SMP Muhammadiyah 2, while Grade 9 participants were drawn from SMPN 5 Yogyakarta, SMPN 8 Yogyakarta, and SMP Budi Mulia 2. The eight teacher participants were social studies teachers recruited from the participating schools and through MGMP IPS Yogyakarta.

Student participants were selected because they had actively used social media and participated in school activities. The teachers performed several complementary methodological roles. They served as informants about students' digital practices and behavior; as participants, they described their own observations and perspectives; they provided a complementary source of evidence for comparison with student accounts; and they participated in the teacher focus group discussion. Besides that, students primarily provided accounts of their own digital experiences, social media practices, and perceptions of flexing and digital self-presentation. Teachers contributed observations concerning student behavior, classroom contexts, character development, and school responses to digital practices. Together, the two participant groups provided complementary perspectives on the phenomenon under investigation. The sampling strategy aimed to capture variation in participants' experiences across two public and two private junior high schools rather than to achieve statistical

representativeness.

2.3 Ethical Considerations

Because the study involved junior high school students, particular attention was given to participant protection and confidentiality. Formal research permission was obtained from the Yogyakarta City and Sleman Education Offices and from all four participating schools before data collection began. Participant identities were protected by replacing names and other directly identifying information with participant codes. Research data were handled confidentially and used solely for research purposes.

2.4 Data Collection

The researcher served as the primary instrument for data collection, supported by structured protocols for observation, interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs). Data were generated through classroom observations, individual and group interviews with students, and an FGD with social studies teachers. These methods provided complementary perspectives on students' experiences and the meanings they attributed to flexing and digital self-presentation.

Four classroom observations were conducted across the participating schools. The observations focused on student interactions and practices related to digital media, particularly those associated with digital trends, social recognition, self-presentation, and responses to social media. These observations provided contextual insights into students' social interactions and digital-media practices within the school environment.

Eight student interview sessions were conducted, comprising seven group interviews and one individual interview. Based on the interview transcripts, each session lasted approximately 40–60 minutes. The interviews explored students' experiences of flexing and digital self-presentation, including how they encountered digital trends, interpreted and responded to social media representations, and related these experiences to their perceptions of themselves and others. The main questions addressed how students understood flexing and first encountered the practice; how celebrities, influencers, peers, and social media shaped their perceptions; why students might engage in flexing; whether they perceived flexing as increasingly normalized or associated with social status; how they personally responded to the practice; and how they perceived its implications for peer relationships.

In addition, one FGD was conducted with social studies teachers affiliated with MGMP IPS Yogyakarta. Lasting approximately 100 minutes, the discussion elicited teachers' observations and perspectives on student behavior, character development, digital-media practices, and school responses to the phenomenon under investigation.

Student interviews and the teacher FGD were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia. The sessions were documented through audio and video recordings and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Quoted excerpts in the Results are presented in the transcript language rather than translated into English. Individual student accounts, student group interviews, teacher perspectives, and classroom observations allowed evidence to be compared across data sources.

Data collection employed complementary methods: classroom observations informed subsequent student interviews, while issues emerging from interviews could be explored further through group-based discussion. Student group interviews and the teacher focus group discussion are treated as distinct data sources throughout the analysis and reporting.

2.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed thematically through an iterative process of data reduction, open coding, category development, theme identification, and cross-source synthesis. Student interview transcripts, the teacher FGD transcript, and classroom observation notes were initially examined as distinct data sources and were subsequently compared to identify recurring patterns and differences across sources and school contexts.

The analysis proceeded through several stages. First, the student interview transcripts, teacher FGD transcript, and observation notes were read repeatedly to develop familiarity with the data. Second, open coding was used to identify data segments concerning digital exposure, social influence, imitation, content visibility, normalization, self-evaluation, insecurity, and reflective responses. Third, related codes were grouped into broader categories according to similarities in meaning and relationships among the coded segments. Fourth, the categories were compared across data sources and school contexts to identify recurring patterns and points of difference.

Following this initial coding and category-development process, the resulting categories were interpreted in relation to the dialectical processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Through this theoretical mapping, the analysis identified digital socialization, immediate social reinforcement, and mimetic digital practices as patterns associated with externalization; repeated platform-mediated visibility, normalization of digital representation, and reduced critical questioning as patterns associated with objectivation; and performative identity internalization and performative insecurity as patterns associated with internalization.

The reflective counter-process was treated separately as an emergent pattern observed among some students rather than as a universal fourth stage of the analytical model. Coding remained iterative throughout the analysis. Codes and categories were revisited as comparisons across student interviews, the teacher FGD, classroom observations, and school contexts revealed additional relationships or required refinement of earlier interpretations.

Credibility was supported through multiple data sources, cross-source comparison, an audit trail, and reflexive memos. Student accounts constituted the primary source for understanding students' digital experiences, while teacher accounts and classroom observations provided complementary evidence concerning student behavior and the broader school context.

Cross-source comparison was used to examine convergence and divergence across student accounts, teacher accounts, and classroom observations; it did not require every pattern to appear in every data source. Teacher perspectives contributed to data-source triangulation when they converged with patterns identified in student accounts. This comparison strengthened the evidential basis of the interpretation while preserving the distinct perspectives represented by the different sources.

The audit trail documented the analytical process during coding and theme development, including revisions made as codes and categories were refined. Reflexive memos were also used throughout the analysis to record interpretive decisions, emerging conceptual relationships, and changes made during coding and theme development. Reporting of the qualitative procedures was guided by relevant domains of the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ), particularly those relating to research design, participant characteristics, data collection, analysis, reflexivity, and reporting of findings [30].

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

3.1.1 Externalization: Digital Self-Expression and Socialization

Thematic analysis identified three interrelated patterns within externalization: digital socialization, immediate social reinforcement, and mimetic digital practices. These patterns describe how flexing practices become part of students' social experiences through early engagement with digital media, reinforcement within their immediate social environments, and imitation of digitally circulating representations. The data indicate that social media has been embedded in students' everyday experiences since elementary school. Student participants reported beginning to use smartphones and social media at a relatively young age. Three participants stated:

"Punya HP sendiri tuh, kelas 2." (Student S1; Student S2)
"Kayaknya masih kecil gua, pernah megang Blackberry deh." (Student S1)
"Pegang gadget, iya dari kecil." (Student S3)

Student accounts also showed mimetic digital practices, in which public figures, content creators, and influencers became references for clothing, consumer choices, and the presentation of personal life on social media. Participants described such figures as reference points for everyday choices and self-presentation. One student explained:

> *"Jujur, dari artis Thailand, jadi waktu itu pernah lewat di TikTok saya ada artis Thailand gitu. Dia kayak jadi brand ambassadornya Onitsuka, terus akhirnya saya minta beli." (Student S7)*

Teachers provided complementary accounts of students' early digital socialization and the reinforcement of flexing practices within their immediate social environments. One teacher described how children may be given digital devices at an early age for practical reasons within the family:

> *"Tadi malam saya ngaji, supaya bapaknya bisa ngaji anaknya dikasih HP." (Teacher T1)*

Teacher accounts also supported the pattern identified as immediate social reinforcement, in which digital practices are reinforced through significant social relationships. One teacher explained:

> *"Saya mengamati juga yang pertama flexing itu tidak hanya di kalangan pelajar, sampai guru pun juga ada yang flexing gitu, jadi masih ada gitu, masih ada guru yang bener-bener pamer gitu."*
> *(Teacher T1)*

Another teacher added:

> *"Keluarga sangat memengaruhi pola-pola flexing anak-anak." (Teacher T2)*

Classroom observations documented students' social-media-related practices and responses to flexing within school contexts. They also indicated that flexing-related behavior was treated as commonplace within students' immediate social environments.

Across these sources, the evidence indicates that digital media has become part of the early social environment in which students encounter symbols of popularity, lifestyle, and social recognition. Within digital socialization, students encounter these representations from an early age. Through immediate social reinforcement, family members, teachers, and peers can reinforce the meanings attached to such practices and make them appear ordinary in everyday life. Through mimetic digital practices, representations perceived as valuable or desirable become references for everyday choices and self-presentation.

Across these patterns, students reproduce socially circulating digital practices through repeated engagement, social reinforcement, and imitation. Evidence across data sources suggests that repeated imitation and social reinforcement become involved in students' everyday identity-related practices.

3.1.2 Objectivation: Normalization of Digital Representations

Thematic analysis identified three patterns associated with objectivation: repeated platform-mediated visibility, normalization of digital representation, and reduced critical questioning. These patterns describe how repeatedly encountered digital representations become increasingly familiar and are experienced as ordinary features of students' social environments.

3.1.3 Repeated exposure and platform-mediated visibility

Student participants reported encountering the term *flexing* through social media and continuing to encounter the practice across various digital platforms.

One student stated:

> *"Tau kata-kata flexing dari medsos. Akhirnya tahu arti flexing juga dari medsos." (Student S1)*

Another student stated:

> *"Media sosial kan gampang kesebar." (Student S8)*

These accounts document students' experiences of repeated visibility and circulation of digital content.

3.1.4 Normalization of digital representation

Students explicitly described *flexing* as increasingly normal or commonplace within their social media environments.

One student stated:

> *"Jujur it's normal karena kalau buat kita ya karena kita juga kadang-kadang sering ngelihat pelajar-pelajar kayak kita ini juga mau post something kayak gitu hal biasa sih itu udah hal normal buat pelajar." (Student S11)*

Another student stated:

> *"Di media sosial sekarang sudah mulai dinormalisasikan, jadi di mana-mana pasti kita melihat orang flexing." (Student S12)*

Teachers also observed that possessions, appearance, and lifestyle are increasingly used as markers of social success among students.

3.1.5 Reduced critical questioning

Teacher and student accounts showed relative familiarity or indifference toward flexing practices. One teacher stated:

> *"Anak-anak kalau ditanya dia tuh malah nggak tau loh potensi dia sendiri tuh apa. Karena yang diurusin cuma masalah fisik dan materi." (Teacher T3)*

Students' responses to flexing posts tended to be relatively indifferent:

> *"Bodo amat" "Sebenarnya kayak, itu hak kamu, kamu mau flexing ya silakan, gitu." (Student S9;*
> *Student S10)*

The evidence concerning repeated visibility reflects students' reported encounters with recurring digital representations rather than providing evidence of the technical mechanisms through which platform algorithms select or rank content. Accordingly, repeated platform-mediated visibility refers

to students' repeated exposure to particular representations and their increasing salience within their social media environments.

Participants' accounts suggest that repeated encounters with these representations contributed to perceptions of their prevalence and social significance. As the representations recurred across students' digital environments, they increasingly served as familiar reference points through which students interpreted social reality. This pattern illustrates the normalization of digital representations.

The evidence categorized as reduced critical questioning does not imply a general absence of critical thinking among students. Rather, students' expressions of familiarity and indifference, considered alongside teachers' observations, suggest that repeated exposure may render certain digital practices familiar without consistently prompting critical scrutiny. Taken together, these patterns indicate how digital representations may acquire the appearance of ordinary social reality within students' social environments.

3.1.6 Internalization: Digital Comparison and Self-Evaluation

At the internalization stage, thematic analysis identified performative identity internalization and performative insecurity, alongside a reflective counter-process through which some students questioned and resisted digital standards. The evidence shows that material possessions, physical appearance, and social-media responses become reference points through which some students evaluate themselves and others.

3.1.7 Performative Identity Internalization and Performative Insecurity

Some students described insecurity associated with digital evaluation and appearance. One student described becoming insecure following comments made in social media spaces:

> *"Aku pernah ngefoto kan foto bareng terus dikomen katanya kok kamu hitam banget yang lainnya berwarna putih… jujur iya, insecure apa aku sehitam itu." (Student S7)*

A teacher provided a complementary observation:

> *"Tidak bisa melihat dirinya sendiri dan tidak percaya diri… karena yang diurusin cuma masalah fisik dan materi." (Teacher T3)*

3.1.8 Self-comparison

Students also described comparing themselves with other people's lives on social media. One student stated:

> *"Kok dia hidup gampang banget sih… jadi kayak seolah mengecilkan diri sendiri." (Student S13)*

A teacher similarly described material success becoming a reference point through comparison with peers' social-media representations:

> *"Ukuran keberhasilan itu kalau berkaitan dengan itu (flexing) yang saya amati. Mungkin ukurannya materi gitu ya, karena ketika mereka melihat temennya itu di media sosial seperti ini, maka menurut mereka, teman saya ini sukses, orangnya berhasil." (Teacher T4)*

3.1.9 Concern about social evaluation and self-evaluation

Students described feeling concerned about how others might judge them when posting content. One student stated:

> *"Cuma pasti kadang-kadang overthinking, mereka bakal kira apa kalau misalnya kita post kayak gini." (Student S11)*

Across these accounts, digital social standards function as reference points for self-evaluation. Material possessions, physical appearance, perceived success, and responses from other social-media users become relevant to how some students evaluate themselves and anticipate how they may be evaluated by others.

The resulting insecurity is interpreted here as performative insecurity because students' sense of self-worth becomes connected to how their digitally represented selves are perceived or might be perceived by others. These patterns constitute the process identified as performative identity internalization within the analysis.

3.1.10 Reflective Counter-Process

Some students described insecurity or pressure associated with social comparison; some also described adaptive efforts to mitigate these experiences. These students began to recognize that digital representations did not necessarily reflect actual circumstances.

One student observed that seemingly luxurious content might actually be:

> *"Bisa jadi boongan, kawe (barang palsu), settingan." (Student S9)*

Some students developed strategies to reduce social pressure by becoming more cautious about what they posted, discussing their decisions with friends, and limiting comparisons with others. They also began discussing their social media experiences more openly without consistently associating them with status symbols:

> *"Tidak flexing ya tidak apa-apa lah. Kalau satu flexing, semua flexing gitu kan tidak enak juga dilihatnya. Jadi kayak kesannya semuanya harus di-posting, punya barang branded apa langsung di-posting gitu, nanti kayak malah nimbulin standar baru gitu." (Student S14)*

These responses suggest that some students increasingly recognized that digital representations are constructed and do not necessarily reflect reality accurately. Rather than treating this process as a fourth stage of the model, the study interprets it as an emergent reflective counter-process through which some students reconsider the standards against which they evaluate themselves.

Table 1. Table 1. Cross-Source Thematic Synthesis of Empirical Patterns in Student Identity Construction

Analytical Process	Cross-Source Evidence	Empirical Synthesis
Externalization - Digital Socialization	Student interviews and the teacher FGD indicate that smartphones and social media had become part of students' everyday lives from an early age. Classroom observations also documented students' social-media-related practices within school contexts.	Digital media formed part of students' early socialization environment, introducing symbolic references to lifestyle, popularity, material possessions, and social recognition.
Externalization - Immediate Social Reinforcement	Student interviews and the teacher FGD describe how family members, teachers, and peers can reinforce flexing practices through everyday interactions and serve as reference figures for students.	Digital practices gain familiarity through reinforcement within students' immediate social environments.
Externalization - Mimetic Digital Practices	Students described influencers, public figures, and viral trends as references for clothing, consumer choices, lifestyle, and self-presentation.	Through imitation, selected digital representations were incorporated into students' everyday choices and forms of self-presentation.

Analytical Process	Cross-Source Evidence	Empirical Synthesis
Objectivation - Repeated Platform-Mediated Visibility	Students reported repeatedly encountering flexing and related content across social media platforms; teacher accounts provided complementary observations of digital trends as behavioral reference points.	Repeatedly encountered representations were described as increasingly visible and socially salient within students' digital environments.
Objectivation - Normalization of Digital Representation	Student interviews and the teacher FGD indicate that flexing and curated self-representations were increasingly regarded as ordinary features of students' social media environments.	Participants described repeatedly circulating representations as increasingly familiar, ordinary, and socially meaningful.
Objectivation - Reduced Critical Questioning	Students expressed relatively indifferent responses to flexing, while teachers observed greater attention to material and physical markers in some student behavior.	Expressions of familiarity and indifference were interpreted as reduced questioning of familiar digital representations and performative trends.
Internalization - Performative Identity Internalization	Students described using material possessions, appearance, popularity, and social acceptance represented online as references for understanding and evaluating themselves.	Digital social standards became reference points within students' self-understandings and identity presentation.
Internalization - Performative Insecurity	Students described overthinking, social comparison, and insecurity in relation to perceived expectations concerning appearance, lifestyle, and social acceptance.	Performative insecurity was associated with the incorporation of digital standards into self-evaluation and is treated as one empirical manifestation of the broader identity tension examined in this study.
Reflective Counter-Process	Some students questioned the authenticity of digital representations, reduced social comparison, and expressed less willingness to conform to pressure to display material possessions or lifestyles.	Reflective responses were evident when some students reconsidered digital standards and placed greater emphasis on lived experience than on digital representation alone.

3.2 Discussion

The findings suggest that the identity tension conceptualized in this study as student identity crisis is associated with three interrelated processes: externalization, manifested in digital socialization, immediate social reinforcement, and mimetic digital practices; objectivation, reflected in repeated platform-mediated visibility, normalization, and reduced critical questioning; and internalization, expressed through digital comparison, self-evaluation, and performative insecurity. Across these processes, social media constitutes part of the social environment in which students encounter, reproduce, interpret, and evaluate digital representations. The significance of these findings extends beyond students' exposure to social media to the ways in which digitally circulating meanings become embedded in everyday practices, acquire familiarity and social legitimacy, and serve as reference points through which students understand and evaluate themselves.

3.2.1 Student Identity Construction Through Digital Socialization and Externalization

The findings on externalization show that students' engagement with digitally circulating practices develops within a social environment characterized by early digital exposure, reinforcement through immediate social relationships, and imitation of representations perceived as desirable. Early access to digital media provides the context in which students repeatedly encounter representations of lifestyle, popularity, material possessions, and social recognition. These representations acquire additional social meaning when similar practices are reinforced by family members, teachers, peers, and other socially significant figures. Mimetic digital practices then show how some of these representations move from being observed to being reproduced in students' everyday choices and forms of self-presentation.

This interpretation is consistent with studies across different educational contexts that describe identity formation in relation to experience, social relationships, and social environments [1] [3] [6]. The findings likewise suggest that students do not construct identities independently of their social environments. However, the findings draw attention to digitally mediated environments as an additional context in which socially meaningful representations are encountered and reproduced. This does not imply that social media replaces families or schools as sites of socialization. Rather, students' identity-related practices develop across overlapping social environments in which offline relationships and digitally circulating representations can reinforce one another.

Within Berger and Luckmann's framework, these findings can be interpreted through the dialectic of social construction [8] [31]. In the present data, externalization is most clearly reflected when students reproduce socially circulating representations through imitation, everyday choices, and self-presentation. Early digital socialization and social reinforcement provide the social context within which these practices acquire meaning, while mimetic practices show how students participate in reproducing meanings that already circulate within their environments. Previous applications of social-construction perspectives in educational research have emphasized value formation and institutional socialization [11] [28]. The study adds to this discussion by showing how digitally circulating representations can become involved in everyday social practices through which students negotiate identity.

The contribution of this finding therefore lies in identifying relationships among digital socialization, immediate social reinforcement, and mimetic digital practice within students' identity construction. The findings do not indicate that digitally mediated socialization operates separately from schools, families, or peers; instead, they suggest that identity construction occurs across these interconnected settings. For social studies education, this finding indicates the relevance of considering students' digital experiences when examining how social norms, recognition, lifestyle, and identity are constructed. This is an educational implication derived from the findings rather than evidence that a particular instructional approach would produce specific outcomes.

3.2.2 Digital Simulacra and the Objectivation of Digital Representations

The objectivation findings show how repeatedly encountered digital representations can become increasingly familiar and socially meaningful within students' social environments. Students described encountering flexing and related representations repeatedly across social media, while both student and teacher accounts indicated that these practices were increasingly regarded as ordinary or commonplace. Repeated visibility is analytically significant because of its relationship to normalization: representations that are encountered continually can become familiar enough to function as shared reference points concerning appearance, lifestyle, popularity, and social status.

The finding described as repeated platform-mediated visibility should be understood within the limits of the evidence. The data document students' experiences of repeatedly encountering particular content within platform-mediated environments, but they do not provide technical evidence concerning how recommendation algorithms select or rank that content. Repeated platform-mediated visibility therefore refers here to experienced patterns of circulation and repeated exposure rather than to a demonstrated causal effect of algorithms on student behavior. Accordingly, the findings support an interpretation of digital visibility and social salience, not a technical explanation of platform operations.

The normalization identified in this study can be interpreted in relation to Baudrillard's concept of simulacra [12] [13] [14]. Previous studies have discussed identity curation, idealized representation, and hyperreality in digital environments [17] [18] [19]. The findings are consistent with this literature in showing that digital representations can acquire significance beyond their status as individual posts or images. In the students' social environments examined here, continually circulating

representations can become familiar, socially recognizable, and increasingly taken for granted.

This process also provides an analytical connection between Baudrillard's account of representation and Berger and Luckmann's concept of objectivation. The connection is analytical rather than causal: Berger and Luckmann help explain how socially produced meanings can acquire an appearance of objective social reality, while Baudrillard helps interpret the character of the representations circulating within contemporary digital environments. Here, repeated visibility and normalization show how digital representations can come to be experienced as ordinary features of students' social worlds. The findings do not demonstrate that digital representations completely replace lived reality, but they show how such representations can become socially consequential reference points within everyday identity construction.

The findings concerning reduced critical questioning require similar interpretive caution. Students' expressions of indifference and teachers' observations regarding the increasing salience of material possessions and physical markers suggest familiarity with these practices but do not establish a loss of critical-thinking capacity. Accordingly, the findings support an interpretation of familiarity and limited questioning rather than demonstrating a causal effect of repeated exposure.

The contribution of the objectivation findings lies in explaining how repeated digital visibility and normalization may contribute to the process through which digital representations acquire social significance in students' everyday environments. In relation to the literature reviewed in this study, these findings highlight the role of familiarity and normalization in shaping how such representations are understood as socially meaningful. For social studies education, the findings underscore the relevance of examining how digital representations become visible, familiar, and socially accepted. Such examination may provide opportunities for critical engagement with digital representations, although this study did not evaluate the effectiveness of specific pedagogical approaches in developing students' critical capacities.

3.3 Internalization, Digital Comparison, and Performative Insecurity

The internalization findings show a further shift from representations that are socially familiar to standards that become personally relevant to students' self-evaluation. Students described comparing themselves with others in relation to material possessions, appearance, lifestyle, perceived success, and social acceptance. They also expressed concern about how their own posts might be evaluated by others. These findings indicate that some digitally circulating standards function not only as external representations but also as reference points through which students interpret and assess themselves.

This interpretation remains consistent with previous research that understands identity formation as a socially situated process [1] [3] [6]. It is also compatible with studies cited in the manuscript that describe digital identity as selective, curated, or shaped through idealized representations [17] [18] [19]. The contribution of the present findings is to show how these socially circulating standards become connected to students' own processes of comparison and self-evaluation within the empirical context examined here.

In Berger and Luckmann's terms, this pattern can be interpreted as internalization, in which socially produced meanings become subjectively meaningful [8] [31]. In this study, this process is visible when material possessions, appearance, perceived social success, and anticipated responses from others become criteria through which some students evaluate themselves. The resulting insecurity is interpreted as performative insecurity because students' self-evaluations become connected to how their digitally presented selves are perceived or might be perceived by others.

Performative insecurity should, however, be distinguished from the broader concept of student iden-

tity crisis used in this study. The findings provide direct evidence of insecurity, social comparison, anticipated social evaluation, and changes in self-evaluation. These patterns are treated as empirical manifestations of broader identity tension rather than as evidence that every student experiences a uniform or clinically defined identity crisis. This distinction keeps the interpretation proportionate to the qualitative evidence.

The internalization findings therefore contribute an empirically grounded account of how socially normalized digital standards can become reference points for self-evaluation. The significance of this finding lies in linking external digital representation with students' subjective experiences without treating the relationship as deterministic. Students respond differently to the standards they encounter, and the findings do not suggest that exposure to digital representations produces insecurity in all students.

3.3.1 Reflective Counter-Process and Educational Significance

The findings indicate that internalization is neither necessarily complete nor uncontested. Some students questioned the authenticity of digital representations, recognized that seemingly desirable lifestyles could be staged or misleading, and described efforts to reduce social comparison or resist pressure to display possessions and lifestyles. These responses are interpreted as a reflective counter-process rather than a fourth stage of the model. Because this counter-process was observed only among some participants, it should not be understood as a universal response to digital identity pressures.

These findings suggest that students may critically interpret and reconsider socially circulating digital standards rather than simply internalizing them. However, the empirical evidence does not establish why some students developed reflective responses while others did not, nor does it demonstrate that specific educational interventions produced these responses. Accordingly, the findings support an interpretation of reflective capacity within the case examined, but do not establish a causal explanation of its development.

The reflective counter-process can be considered alongside the educational literature already cited on digital storytelling and platform-based learning [22] [32], youth-oriented educational engagement [33], media and civic literacy [34] [35] [36], and critical approaches to digitally mediated education [37] [38] [25]. In light of these findings, this literature provides possible educational directions for helping students examine digital standards, distinguish representation from lived experience, and reflect on how social recognition shapes self-evaluation. However, these pedagogical approaches were not tested as interventions in this study and should therefore be understood as implications rather than demonstrated educational outcomes.

3.3.2 Contribution to Social Studies Education

Taken together, the findings provide an empirically grounded conceptual account of how digital socialization, immediate social reinforcement, imitation, repeated visibility, normalization, comparison, and self-evaluation are interconnected in the construction of the identity tension conceptualized in this study as student identity crisis. Berger and Luckmann's dialectical framework provides the analytical structure for understanding how socially produced meanings are externalized, objectivated, and internalized, while Baudrillard's concept of simulacra offers a complementary perspective for interpreting the digitally mediated representations through which these meanings circulate. The study's contribution lies not in claiming that digital media independently causes identity crisis, but in explaining how digitally circulating representations may acquire social significance and personal relevance within students' everyday social environments.

The resulting model should not be understood as a fixed sequence through which every student

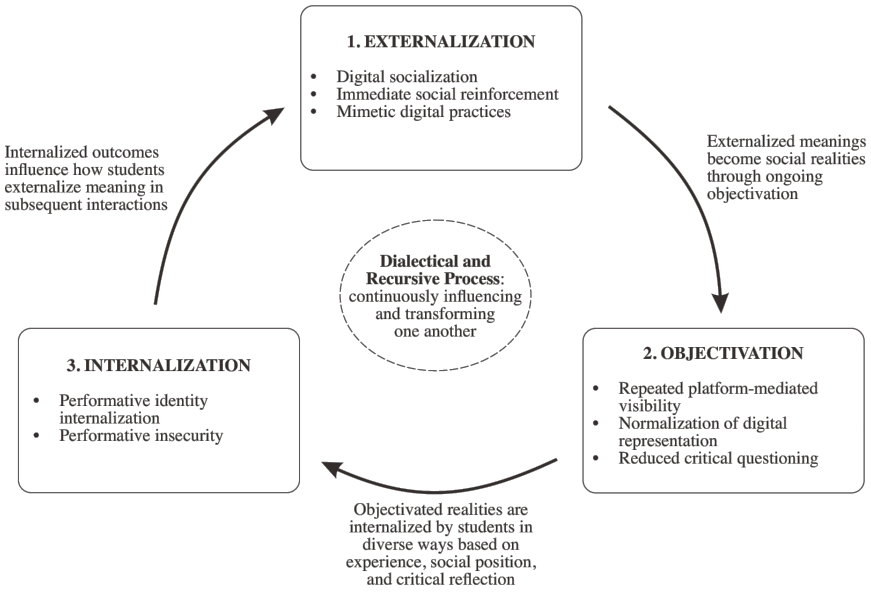


Figure 1. A Dialectical Model of Student Identity Tension amid Digital Simulacra.

necessarily progresses. The three dialectical processes are analytically interconnected, and students may encounter, reproduce, question, and reinterpret digital representations in different ways. Figure 1 represents the three central dialectical processes; the reflective counter-process identified among some students is not treated as a fourth stage. The study does not establish a longitudinal sequence or demonstrate that the same pattern occurs universally across students or educational contexts. Rather, the model summarizes relationships identified within the four-school case examined in this study.

For social studies education, the findings suggest that digitally mediated experiences are relevant to the study of socialization, identity, social recognition, representation, and the construction of social reality. Within the scope of this study, the educational challenge lies in engaging these experiences as material for examining how social meanings and standards of recognition are produced, normalized, and related to students' self-evaluation. The findings therefore support considering students' digital experiences in reflective and critical educational discussions. Reflective pedagogy, critical digital literacy, and critical pedagogy may provide useful conceptual directions for such work, but their effectiveness was not examined in the present study. The educational significance of the findings is that they identify issues that social studies education may need to engage with, rather than demonstrating the effectiveness of any specific pedagogical response.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that, across the four junior high schools examined in Yogyakarta, student identity crisis, conceptualized as a broader condition of identity tension, is socially constructed through the interconnected processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization rather than arising simply from social media use. Externalization is reflected in students' reproduction of digitally circulating representations through imitation, everyday choices, and self-presentation, shaped by digital socialization and immediate social reinforcement. Objectivation is evident in how repeated encounters with digital representations contribute to their familiarity, normalization, and perceived social significance. However, these findings concern students' experiences of repeated

platform-mediated visibility rather than the technical operation or causal effects of algorithms. Internalization is reflected in students' use of material possessions, physical appearance, perceived success, and social acceptance as reference points for social comparison and self-evaluation, which are associated with performative insecurity among some participants. Nevertheless, some students questioned or resisted prevailing digital standards, indicating a reflective counter-process rather than a fixed or universal progression through the three dialectical processes.

The study's theoretical contribution lies in bringing Berger and Luckmann's dialectic of social construction into dialogue with Baudrillard's concept of simulacra to explain how digitally circulating representations may acquire social significance and personal relevance in students' identity construction. The resulting conceptual model provides an empirically grounded interpretation of the relationships identified within the case examined, rather than proposing a universal developmental sequence or demonstrating that digital media independently causes identity crisis. This distinction positions the model as a contextually grounded conceptual contribution that may inform further theoretical and empirical investigation.

For social studies education, the findings highlight the relevance of engaging critically with students' digitally mediated experiences when examining socialization, representation, social recognition, and self-evaluation. Reflective pedagogy, critical digital literacy, and critical pedagogy represent potential approaches to facilitating such engagement. However, because these approaches were not implemented or evaluated as interventions in this study, their effectiveness cannot be established from the present findings.

The study is limited to four junior high schools in Yogyakarta and was not designed to produce statistically representative findings. Accordingly, the findings and conceptual model should be interpreted in relation to the educational and sociocultural contexts examined rather than generalized uncritically to other settings. Future research could examine the applicability of the model across diverse educational and cultural contexts. Longitudinal studies could investigate how students' identity-related interpretations and responses evolve over time, while digital ethnographic research could provide more detailed insights into how digital representations circulate, acquire social significance, and are negotiated within students' everyday online interactions.

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