

# Digital Men and Social Media: Unpacking the Reasons Behind Scrolling

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This study explores the underlying motivations of male digital users in Indonesia for using social media platforms, particularly focusing on the interplay between entertainment, religious learning, social connection, information-seeking, and self-expression. The research aims to understand how cultural and religious contexts influence digital engagement among this demographic group.

**Methodology/approach:** A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed, involving in-depth interviews with 25 male social media users aged 18–30. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically using an inductive method. Techniques such as member checking and peer debriefing were applied to enhance credibility.

**Results/findings:** The findings reveal five overlapping motivations: (1) entertainment as emotional regulation and habit-forming behavior; (2) religious learning as spiritual reinforcement and identity expression; (3) social connection through online brotherhood and niche communities; (4) information-seeking driven by curiosity and personal growth; and (5) self-expression as a means of moral signaling and personal branding. These motivations are mediated by gender norms, religious values, and platform affordances.

**Conclusions:** Male digital users strategically utilize social media to fulfill emotional, spiritual, social, intellectual, and expressive needs. This behavior highlights the integration of technology with masculine identity and Islamic values in a digital context.

**Limitations:** The study is limited to urban settings in Java and focuses on a specific age group. It does not include platform usage logs or cross-platform comparisons.

**Contribution:** This research contributes to media and communication studies by offering a culturally grounded understanding of male digital behavior, expanding on Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), Self-Determination Theory (SDT), and Social Identity Theory (SIT) in non-Western contexts.

**Keywords:** *Cultural Identity, Digital Media, Male Digital Users, Motivation, Religious Learning, Social Media*

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## 1. Introduction

Social media has become a crucial aspect of modern existence, influencing how people interact, find information, entertain themselves, and form their personal identities. With the rise of platforms like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter (now X), users are deeply engaged in a media environment that shapes not only their social connections but also their cognitive, emotional, and cultural experiences. In light of this, grasping the reasons behind individuals' use of social media is essential for understanding its wider effects on behavior, beliefs, and community involvement. The Uses and

Gratifications Theory Falgoust et al. (2022) provides a fundamental perspective on how people actively select media to satisfy certain needs like entertainment, information gathering, or social interaction. Building on this, Self-Determination Theory Gagné et al. (2022) emphasizes the role of internal motivations such as autonomy, competence, and connection in influencing behavior. Additionally, Social Identity Theory (Islam, 2014; van Knippenberg, 2023) studies how belonging to groups and shared connections shape self-perception and online expression. Collectively, these frameworks indicate that engaging with digital content is not a passive act but rather a deliberate and identity-oriented process.

Despite an increasing number of studies on digital behaviors, past research has often concentrated on general youth demographics or female users, frequently neglecting the distinct trends and psychological factors affecting male digital users (Rahman, Rahayu, & Hendrayati, 2025). This oversight is noteworthy, as men are also highly engaged and participate in areas like religious discussions, community leadership, personal branding, and content creation. Additionally, in societies like Indonesia, which are heavily religious and collectivist, digital behavior is closely tied to cultural norms, expressions of faith, and shifting gender roles. These aspects are seldom deeply investigated in existing research on motivations behind digital media usage. In addition to its effectiveness, social media marketing offers lower costs compared to traditional marketing methods, making it an attractive option for businesses across various industries, including the food and beverage sector (Rayo, Rayo, & Mandagi, 2024).

This research aims to fill that gap by concentrating specifically on male digital users aged 18 to 30 in urban Indonesia. Unlike previous studies that generalize social media usage across different groups, this analysis provides a gender-specific and culturally relevant understanding of why men use digital platforms. It looks into five primary motivations: entertainment, religious education, social interaction, information gathering, and self-expression. These motivations are considered not just as separate categories but also as interconnected influences that shape a comprehensive digital experience. The study has two main goals. First, it intends to reveal how male digital users in Indonesia engage with social media platforms to address both personal and community needs. Second, it seeks to conceptualize these practices within a framework that combines psychological motivations, social identity, and reliance on media. By achieving this, the study aims to provide a detailed and context-specific insight into the field of digital communication, which can inform researchers, platform developers, educators, and policymakers.

## **2. Literature Review**

In today's digital world, social media platforms have transformed from neutral communication tools to intricate environments that influence how individuals interact, learn, form group identities, and express their selfhood. To grasp the reasons that drive people to use social media—especially among specific demographic categories like male users in religious and collectivist societies—researchers must utilize existing theoretical models while also recognizing their limitations. Although many investigations have looked at what motivates online actions through traditional media and psychological theories, there is an increasing demand to reassess these theories by considering gendered and culturally specified digital behaviors. This literature review aims to critically combine current theories on digital motivation, point out the lack of focus on male users in previous research, and propose a conceptual framework tailored to studying male digital involvement in modern Indonesia.

### **2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Social Media Motivation**

A significant amount of research has employed the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) to clarify how individuals actively seek out media content to satisfy particular cognitive, emotional, and social requirements (Falgoust et al., 2022; Stacks, Salwen, & Eichhorn, 2019). In this framework, users take on an active role rather than simply receiving information; they engage with media for various reasons, including entertainment, escape, identity development, or social engagement. Recent applications of UGT have been adapted to the digital space, especially in investigations regarding motivations for using platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Reddit, and YouTube. These studies demonstrate that the pursuit of gratification is complex and often includes combinations of learning, belonging, and self-expression.

Another perspective is provided by Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which concentrates on both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. According to research by Guay, intrinsic motivation stems from essential psychological needs such as autonomy, competence, and connection. (Guay, 2022). In digital settings, users might enjoy autonomy when curating their content, feel a sense of competence through creating new content, and experience connection through online relationships and communities (Chiu, Sun, & Ismailov, 2022). SDT is especially pertinent for understanding sustained involvement and satisfaction with social media, and its relevance has been established in research regarding educational platforms, virtual communities, and online identity expression.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) focuses on how individuals form their self-concept through group affiliations, common symbols, and social comparisons (Islam, 2014). Social media provides an effective platform for such identity construction, as users align themselves with communities based on ideology, religion, culture, or gender (Islam, 2014; van Knippenberg, 2023). This identification is often expressed through likes, shares, hashtags, and interactions within online groups. Recent research has applied SIT to examine identity expression in digital religious spaces, aspects of masculine self-branding, and political engagement. Collectively, these three models—UGT, SDT, and SIT—provide powerful frameworks for investigating the diverse motivations that encourage digital engagement. Nonetheless, their application often treats "users" as a generic, non-gendered group, inadequately addressing how factors like gender, religion, and cultural background shape digital motivations. Furthermore, most research using these frameworks tends to be situated in Western or secular scenarios, overlooking how faith-driven principles or local masculine norms influence users' online aspirations and actions.

Digital engagement has evolved into a multidimensional phenomenon, influenced by psychological, social, and cultural mechanisms. The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) remains one of the most comprehensive frameworks for understanding media use motivations. It conceptualizes users as active agents who seek media to fulfill cognitive, affective, social, and integrative needs (Stacks et al., 2019). In the context of social media, UGT explains why users engage in repetitive actions such as scrolling—a behavior that provides emotional relief, escapism, and information seeking (Falgoust et al., 2022). Rather than passive consumption, scrolling serves as *micro-interactional gratification*, offering instant feedback, humor, and novelty (Masciantonio & Bourguignon, 2023).

Complementing UGT, the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) emphasizes intrinsic motivation through the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Guay, 2022). Digital platforms fulfill these needs by allowing users to control their feeds (autonomy), create and curate content (competence), and connect with online peers (relatedness) (Chiu et al., 2022). Prolonged scrolling often stems from *perceived autonomy satisfaction*, where users feel agency in choosing content aligned with their interests. Finally, Social Identity Theory (SIT) explains how online communities shape user identity through belonging and group norms (Islam, 2014; van Knippenberg, 2023). On social media, identification with ideological, religious, or gendered groups encourages behavioral conformity and moral signaling—visible in users' liking, sharing, and commenting habits. Combined, these frameworks reveal that digital interaction is not a neutral pastime but a goal-driven and identity-affirming process, particularly in culturally and religiously nuanced contexts such as Indonesia.

## **2. 2. Literature Gaps: The Need to Focus on Male Digital Users**

While there is a wealth of research on social media usage, much of it tends to concentrate on women, influencers, or general user patterns. The experiences of men, especially young Muslim males in Southeast Asia, have not been thoroughly investigated (Latif & Setiawan, 2022). When male users are included in studies, they frequently appear in specific roles: as gamers, political participants, or passive observers (Nguyen, 2021). These representations often overlook the emotional, spiritual, and expressive aspects of male activity online. In Indonesia, where religious and cultural beliefs heavily shape youth actions, young men's engagement with social media often reflects their expressions of faith, community belonging, and self-image (Latif & Kuntoro, 2025). Men might follow religious figures, share Quranic verses, or participate in online religious groups not just for personal insight but also to demonstrate ethical leadership and societal respect. Such interactions counter the idea that men use social media only

for amusement or rational purposes. Instead, they reveal a rich and identity-focused online practice that has not been sufficiently analyzed. Furthermore, the limited research that does look into men's motivations frequently misses the interconnections between different reasons. For instance, entertainment can lead to social interactions, which may subsequently strengthen religious identity. Therefore, a straightforward or separate approach to categorizing motivations falls short. A more cohesive framework is essential to illustrate how male users maneuver through leisure, learning, expression, and belonging in interconnected ways.

Existing research on social media usage has disproportionately focused on women, influencers, or general youth populations, neglecting male digital engagement and its socio-cultural complexity (Latif & Setiawan, 2022; Nguyen, 2021). Studies often depict men as passive consumers or as actors in limited domains such as gaming and politics, thereby overlooking the emotional, moral, and expressive dimensions of their digital behavior (Hilman, 2025). Yet, male users are active participants in online religious forums, professional communities, and peer networks that mirror traditional masculine ideals of rationality, productivity, and leadership. In collectivist and religious societies like Indonesia, social media interactions are deeply intertwined with faith expression and moral identity (Anwar & Mujib, 2022; Latif & Kuntoro, 2025). Men's participation in digital da'wah, for instance, reflects an aspiration to embody *digital piety* while maintaining social credibility. Their engagement in religious or community groups, sharing of Qur'anic verses, or commentary on moral issues functions as ethical signaling (Zuboff, Longhofer, & Winchester, 2023). However, few studies integrate gender, culture, and motivation within a unified model. Existing approaches often treat motivations as discrete variables, ignoring how entertainment, socialization, and spirituality overlap in practice. Entertainment, for example, may simultaneously serve as emotional regulation, community bonding, and reinforcement of masculine identity. Therefore, a more intersectional and context-sensitive framework is required to explore how Indonesian men navigate leisure, faith, and self-presentation in digital environments.

### 2.3. Gendered and Contextual Conceptual Framework

Building on the critical analysis presented, this research develops a conceptual model based on three interconnected theories: Uses and Gratifications Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and Social Identity Theory. Each theory adds an important element:

1. Uses and Gratifications Theory focuses on user intent and content choices;
2. Self-Determination Theory addresses intrinsic motivation and mental satisfaction;
3. Social Identity Theory places digital activities within the context of collective identity formation.

These theories are applied through five main motivational areas, derived from existing literature and real-world observations:

1. Entertainment – engaging with content for leisure, fun, and enjoyment
2. Religious Learning – interaction with online religious leaders, Islamic materials, and ethical teachings
3. Social Connection – involvement in digital communities, peer networks, and faith-based groups
4. Information-Seeking – exploration of news, educational content, and topical conversations
5. Self-Expression – sharing thoughts, personal achievements, feelings, or reflections

Importantly, these categories are flexible and not strictly defined. They often overlap in real-life scenarios and highlight the complex nature of social media participation. For example, religious learning might also serve the purpose of self-expression or creating social connections. Similarly, entertainment might offer emotional comfort that enhances one's identity or beliefs. Considering the qualitative and exploratory focus of this study, specific hypotheses are not proposed. Instead, the research puts forth the following conceptual idea:

*Urban male digital users in Indonesia utilize social media platforms not just for leisure activities but as a multifaceted and evolving environment for identity formation, spiritual growth, and social connections. Their motivations are influenced by a blend of cultural norms, religious beliefs, and the characteristics of digital platforms.*

This suggestion directs the thematic examination in the following parts, providing a basis for understanding the experiences of male digital users within a context that is both culturally significant and psychologically relevant.

### **3. Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research design rooted in phenomenological inquiry, which is particularly suited for uncovering the lived experiences and meanings that participants assign to their social media use. Rather than measuring frequency or behavior in a statistical sense, phenomenology allows researchers to investigate the subjective realities, motivations, and reflections of individuals as they interact with digital platforms. This approach is essential for capturing the layered, affective, and context-specific dimensions of male digital engagement, especially within religious and cultural frameworks.

#### **3.1 Research Site and Participants**

The research was conducted in three urban centers in Indonesia: Jakarta, Bandung, and Yogyakarta. These cities were selected due to their high internet penetration rates, diverse demographic composition, and vibrant digital ecosystems. They also reflect varying degrees of religious expression and urban masculinity, making them ideal for exploring culturally embedded patterns of digital engagement. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on male digital users aged 18–30 who are active on at least two social media platforms. A total of 25 participants were recruited through university networks, online communities, and referrals. The sample aimed for diversity in terms of educational background, profession (students, content creators, young professionals), and platform preference (e.g., TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter/X).

#### **3.2 Data Collection**

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted between February and April 2025. Interviews lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and were conducted in either Bahasa Indonesia or English, depending on the participant's preference. All interviews took place either face-to-face or via encrypted video calls (Zoom/Google Meet), ensuring flexibility and accessibility. The interview guide included open-ended questions designed to elicit rich narrative responses, such as:

“What motivates you to use social media on a daily basis?”

“Can you describe a moment when social media helped you express your beliefs or identity?”

“Which platforms do you use most, and why?”

“How does your religious or cultural background influence your online behavior?”

To enhance the depth of responses, participants were encouraged to share screenshots, post examples, or digital habits from their daily use.

#### **3.3 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Research, and all procedures adhered to standard ethical research guidelines. Each participant received an informed consent form, detailing the study's aims, their right to withdraw at any time, and guarantees of confidentiality. Names and identifiers were removed or pseudonymized during transcription and analysis. Data were stored securely on password-protected servers and accessible only to the research team. Participants were also debriefed after each interview and were invited to ask questions or withdraw their contributions post-interview if desired. The study followed a strict no-harm principle, particularly given the personal and occasionally spiritual nature of the conversations.

#### **3.4 Data Analysis**

Interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's six-step framework (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Coding was conducted inductively, allowing themes to emerge naturally from the data rather than being imposed a priori. Initial codes were grouped into larger thematic categories corresponding to motivational domains: entertainment, religious learning, social connection, information-seeking, and self-expression.

To ensure trustworthiness and rigor, the study employed several validation strategies:

- a. Member checking: Summaries of the findings were sent to participants to confirm accuracy and resonance with their experiences.
- b. Peer debriefing: Two fellow researchers reviewed the coding structure to identify bias or blind spots.
- c. Triangulation: Findings were compared across participants from different backgrounds and platforms to ensure consistency.
- d. Inter-coder agreement: A second coder independently analyzed 20% of the transcripts, achieving a Cohen's kappa coefficient of 0.87, indicating strong reliability.

### 3.5 Reflexivity

The researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the process to document assumptions, positionality, and potential biases. As a fellow digital user and member of the same generational cohort as most participants, the researcher's positionality offered both access and interpretive depth. However, care was taken to bracket personal experiences and prioritize the voices of participants.

## 4. Result and discussions

This section presents the findings from 25 in-depth interviews with male digital users in urban Indonesia, analyzed thematically in alignment with the conceptual framework outlined earlier. Five major motivational themes were identified: (1) entertainment, (2) religious learning, (3) social connection, (4) information-seeking, and (5) self-expression. These themes are not rigid categories but dynamically interlinked modes of digital engagement, shaped by socio-cultural values, individual psychology, and platform-specific affordances. Each subsection below explores a thematic domain with illustrative quotes, theoretical interpretation, and comparative insights from relevant literature.

### 4.1 Entertainment: Managing Mood, Habit, and Masculine Leisure

Entertainment emerged as the most consistent and accessible motivation. Nearly all participants described social media as a "mental break," a space to detach from academic, professional, or personal stressors.

*"Saya buka TikTok kalau lagi suntuk, atau sebelum tidur. Itu kayak jeda, nggak usah mikir berat."* (R2, 22, undergraduate student)

In line with the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Ruggiero, 2000), participants used platforms such as TikTok, YouTube Shorts, and Instagram Reels for emotional relief, laughter, and distraction. However, a deeper pattern emerged in how this entertainment was gendered. Male users described humor in ways that validated their masculinity—preferring memes, physical comedy, or parody content featuring male influencers.

*"Saya suka konten lucu tapi yang relate sama cowok. Misalnya yang bahas soal hidup anak kos, atau kerjaan."* (R8, 25, freelance editor)

This aligns with the cultural performance of relatable masculinity on digital platforms (Masciantonio & Bourguignon, 2023). Entertainment becomes not just a hedonic experience but a medium through which normative masculinity is reinforced.

Additionally, many participants acknowledged the habitual nature of consumption. They described "scrolling without thinking," suggesting passive immersion tied to routine rather than intention.

*"Kadang sadar-sadar udah 1 jam scroll TikTok. Niatnya cuma 5 menit."* (R4, 21, university student)

This observation echoes Anderson's findings on dopaminergic loops and habitual media engagement (Anderson, 2024). Entertainment thus functions not only as gratification but also as cognitive offloading, raising questions about autonomy and time regulation in digital leisure.

## 4.2 Religious Learning: Digital Piety and Accessible Morality

A surprising and significant theme was the strong presence of religious learning as a core motivation. Participants regularly engaged with Islamic content, ranging from short sermon videos to motivational quotes and live-streamed discussions with ustadz or religious influencers.

*“Saya ikut Ustadz Hanan Attaki, karena bahasanya gampang dimengerti. Kadang cuma lima menit tapi ngena.”* (R9, 24, junior civil servant)

This finding supports existing literature on algorithmic religiosity—the way digital platforms circulate religious content that matches user preferences and behavioral history (Anwar & Mujib, 2022). Social media allows young men to access religious discourse in a casual and on-demand format that fits their digital habits.

Importantly, religious learning was not limited to knowledge acquisition but also tied to moral self-regulation and social display.

*“Kalau lagi ngerasa jauh dari agama, saya cari video pendek soal istighfar. Biar inget lagi.”* (R15, 29, bank employee)

This aligns with the Self-Determination Theory, particularly the need for relatedness and competence—where the act of learning religion digitally fulfills psychological needs while reinforcing spiritual discipline (Guay, 2022). Several respondents reported sharing religious content publicly—reposts of dakwah reels, Quran quotes, or prayer reminders—suggesting a form of digital moral signaling (Zuboff et al., 2023). While participants did not always label it as “riya” (showing off), they recognized the performative dimension:

*“Bukan pamer, tapi kalau bisa jadi pengingat buat yang lain, kenapa enggak?”* (R21, 27, NGO staff)

Religious content in this context becomes both a spiritual resource and a symbolic asset, supporting group belonging and individual virtue performance. The merging of sincerity and visibility illustrates a distinctly masculine form of digital piety, one that balances moral growth with social respectability.

## 4.3 Social Connection: Topic-Oriented Belonging and Digital Brotherhood

The third motivation was the desire for connection and belonging, but framed differently than in literature on female users or general social capital. Rather than relational intimacy, male users emphasized topic-centered communities—gaming, motorbikes, crypto, religion—where they could engage without emotional vulnerability.

*“Saya gabung di grup Discord buat ngobrol soal motor. Nggak kenal siapa-siapa, tapi berasa akrab.”* (R6, 23, graphic designer)

This form of interest-based bonding is consistent with gendered patterns in digital interaction (Hilman, 2025). Unlike affective expressions common in female networks, male connection tended to be instrumental, competitive, or educational—but still emotionally meaningful. Religious communities also played a key role in fostering what respondents called “digital brotherhood.”

*“Teman-teman ngaji saya banyaknya dari Instagram. Dari situ jadi bikin grup WA, terus ketemuan offline.”* (R11, 26, online seller)

Such connections go beyond parasociality and move toward hybrid communities, bridging digital and offline spaces. Drawing on Social Identity Theory, these online spaces reinforce group cohesion through shared values, language, and practices (van Knippenberg, 2023). Group names like “Pemuda Hijrah Bandung” or “Muslim Brotherhood Circle” not only index religious identity but also gendered

collectivity. Interestingly, this connection also served mental health functions, with some respondents describing peer groups as sources of accountability or encouragement.

*“Kalau lagi down, temen-temen kajian di grup itu yang paling suportif. Bisa cerita tanpa malu.”* (R18, 28, technician)

This finding supports Roslan’s argument that digital dakwah communities serve as alternative emotional support systems Roslan, Borhan, Ashaari, and Ghani (2025), especially in contexts where traditional masculinity discourages vulnerability.

#### **4.4 Information-Seeking: From Curiosity to Critical Filtering**

Beyond entertainment and socialization, many participants relied on social media as their primary source of information, including religious knowledge, world affairs, professional updates, and self-development resources.

*“Saya lebih sering update berita dari Twitter dan Instagram ketimbang nonton TV. Cepat dan langsung.”* (R19, 23, architecture student)

Information-seeking on platforms like Twitter/X, YouTube, or Reddit was highly topical—ranging from Gaza conflicts, local elections, crypto markets, to Islamic jurisprudence. This behavior aligns with updated views of Media Dependency Theory where users increasingly rely on digital platforms for real-time awareness (Boyd-Barrett, 2021). Crucially, many participants showed critical awareness, verifying content before accepting or reposting it.

*“Saya nggak langsung percaya. Biasanya saya bandingin dari dua atau tiga akun, atau cek Google News.”* (R3, 22, communication major)

Such reflexivity marks a shift away from the assumption that digital natives are gullible or uninformed. It highlights the information literacy embedded in everyday scrolling practices—especially as misinformation becomes increasingly sophisticated. This also aligns with research by Ardhiansyah, which states that content significantly influences one's views (Fauzaan & Nurhadi, 2025). However, information fatigue also emerged as a recurring theme, particularly around political or emotionally charged content.

*“Lihat berita politik kadang bikin stres. Makanya saya batasi akun-akun yang saya follow.”* (R16, 30, digital freelancer)

This selective disengagement illustrates what Ewing, Nienstedt, Wright, and Chambers (2023) call bounded attention economies—where users actively shape their information environment for emotional sustainability. Male users demonstrate not only curiosity but also strategic curation, a practice rarely associated with masculine digital culture in earlier studies.

#### **4.5 Self-Expression: Performing Identity, Morality, and Masculinity**

Self-expression on social media was often seen as a way to present one’s values, achievements, and personal growth, rather than raw emotional display. Participants posted about academic success, family, business ventures, gym routines, or Islamic reflections.

*“Saya share quotes dari buku atau video ceramah. Bukan buat gaya-gayaan, tapi buat nunjukkan prinsip saya.”* (R7, 24, business owner)

Such expressions are a form of aspirational identity work—not merely sharing for attention, but to perform a coherent self aligned with values (Zuboff et al., 2023). For male digital users, this often involved a careful balance between authenticity and controlled vulnerability. Religious content, again, became a powerful medium for self-expression. From sharing prayer routines to posting reflections after Friday sermons, participants framed such posts as both reminders to self and signals to community.



*“Kalau saya post soal hijrah atau kajian, itu juga untuk jaga komitmen. Sekalian ngajak yang lain.”* (R10, 25, videographer)

This dual function echoes the Self-Determination Theory, particularly the need for internal consistency and external accountability (Guay, 2022). Digital platforms thus serve as personal journals and public pledges. Yet, some participants admitted to being platform-conscious—strategizing content according to audience or norms. Instagram was for curated stories, TikTok for humor, Twitter/X for venting or opinions.

*“Saya lebih bebas di Twitter, karena nggak banyak keluarga yang follow.”* (R12, 20, political science student)

This platform-switching reflects the notion of context collapse—where users manage multiple identities by separating audiences across apps (Falgoust et al., 2022; van Knippenberg, 2023). For men, this meant selectively performing different versions of the self: professional, pious, humorous, critical—depending on platform logic and perceived peer surveillance.

#### **4.6 Synthesis: Digital Sphere Multifaceted Masculinity**

When combined, the aforementioned five elements show that Indonesian males who use digital devices do not use social media in fragmented or shallow ways. Instead, it is essential to view their digital habits as interrelated manifestations of affect, aspiration, identity, and community. A comprehensive media ecosystem is created by the independent and cooperative actions of each motivator, which includes self-expression, social interaction, religious education, amusement, and information seeking. A new paradigm of digitally-mediated masculinity, based on Islamic morality, social responsibility, and performative control, lies at the heart of this ecosystem. In order to preserve their standing in peer networks, religious groups, and aspirational success models, male users filter content. They manage conflicts between piety and pleasure, autonomy and compliance, and sincerity and visibility. To put it briefly, their usage of social media turns into a platform for negotiating both content and character.

This supports and broadens the study's conceptual claim that social media is a multifaceted platform for social positioning, moral identity, and personal development for male digital users in urban Indonesia. The confluence of religious principles, societal norms, and the interactive affordances of digital platforms shapes their motives. This study shows how digital activities are ingrained in larger masculine subjectivities that are emotive, strategic, and culturally responsive, in contrast to previous presumptions that depict men as emotionally detached or tech-utilitarian. This necessitates rethinking the theory of masculinity in digital communication, particularly in non-Western, religious contexts.

#### **4.7 Platform Preference and Behavioral Modulation**

One emergent theme that cut across participants' responses—but which deserves its own analytical space—is the strategic selection and differentiated use of digital platforms. Male users did not treat social media as a homogenous space; rather, they exhibited nuanced platform preferences depending on content type, audience sensitivity, and self-presentation goals.

*“Di Twitter saya lebih ekspresif, karena teman-teman dekat nggak banyak yang follow. Tapi di Instagram harus lebih ‘rapi’ karena dilihat keluarga juga.”* (R12, 20, political science student)

This reflects a form of behavioral modulation based on audience composition and algorithmic expectations—what Knippenberg (2023) terms context collapse. On platforms with a perceived “professional” or “family-facing” audience, such as Instagram or Facebook, participants curated polished personas aligned with societal norms. In contrast, platforms like Twitter or Reddit offered discursive freedom, allowing for sarcasm, critique, or sensitive political commentary.

*“TikTok itu buat cari hiburan atau dakwah singkat. Tapi kalau mau share opini, saya pilih Twitter. Lebih bebas.”* (R22, 25, creative worker)

Such behavioral compartmentalization illustrates what Barta (Barta & Andalibi, 2024) describe as affordance awareness—users internalize each platform’s structure, culture, and feedback loop to determine what version of themselves to present. For male digital users, this awareness is also tied to masculine codes of appropriateness, emotional control, and moral responsibility. Notably, religious content was often posted or consumed on TikTok or Instagram, while reflexive thought pieces or debates took place on Twitter. The short-form, audiovisual nature of TikTok made it ideal for bite-sized spiritual engagement, while Instagram allowed for aspirational religiosity through aesthetic visual framing (e.g., Quran quotes with calming backgrounds, vlog-style reflections) (Jalasi & Ambad, 2020).

*“Saya share potongan ceramah di story. Tapi feed Instagram lebih ke foto-foto yang estetik aja.”* (R6, 23, graphic designer)

These findings suggest that male users perform platform-based self-regulation, modulating their expressions not just for personal comfort but also for social and algorithmic readability. The platform is not a neutral space but a structuring agent that shapes visibility, identity, and the perceived legitimacy of emotional or moral content. This differentiated use reflects the strategic navigation of masculinity in algorithmic spaces, where users attempt to be relatable, righteous, and respectable—all while remaining coherent across fragmented audiences. The result is a multilayered digital masculinity that is adaptable, performative, and attuned to the technological textures of each platform.

#### **4.8 Religious Digitality and Public Piety**

Beyond the personal function of religious learning and spiritual maintenance, many participants engaged in acts of public piety—sharing dakwah content, quoting Islamic scholars, and reposting Quranic verses—as a means of reinforcing communal belonging and public virtue.

*“Kadang saya repost dakwah Ustadz di story. Bukan buat gaya, tapi biar orang lain juga dapat manfaat. Saya juga lebih semangat kalau tahu teman-teman juga ikut.”* (R3, 22, communication major)

This suggests a form of religious digitality that is simultaneously sincere and performative. Following Bourginoun Masciantonio and Bourguignon (2023) notion of symbolic capital, public displays of piety can function as moral currency, earning recognition and validation within peer circles, especially in Islamic-majority societies like Indonesia (Anadza & Pasopati, 2021). Participants performed what Alhabash’s embodied piety not only in mosques or physical spaces, but also through Instagram stories, TikTok reposts, and WhatsApp statuses (Alhabash, Smischney, Suneja, Nimmagadda, & White, 2024).

These practices resonate with studies in Malaysia and Pakistan, where young men increasingly use social media to craft a “visible pious self” (Ali, Khan, Anwar, Fazal, & Ahmad, 2025). However, in the Indonesian context, this visibility is often voluntary but strategically curated—balancing between modesty (tawadhu’) and the desire for influence or moral leadership.

*“Kalau kita share yang baik, siapa tahu bisa jadi pahala jariyah. Tapi harus hati-hati juga biar nggak kelihatan sok suci.”* (R14, 26, pharmacist)

The fear of being seen as “showing off” (riya) complicates the equation. This tension illustrates how religious expression in digital space is negotiated—between piety and platform logic, sincerity and visibility, modesty and influence (Salim, Jatnika, & Yudiana, 2023). Rather than dismissing these acts as mere virtue-signaling, they should be understood as a form of digitally mediated moral agency, rooted in both faith and social navigation (Alam, Nofitri, & Ma’ruf, 2021).

### **5. Conclusions**

## 5.1 Conclusion

This study delved into why young men in urban Indonesia use social media, applying a blended theoretical lens that combines Uses and Gratifications Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and Social Identity Theory. Through detailed interviews with 25 participants from Jakarta, Bandung, and Yogyakarta, the research uncovered five overlapping reasons for social media engagement: entertainment, religious learning, social connection, information-seeking, and self-expression. Rather than seeing these motivations as isolated or straightforward, the study reveals a rich and layered digital environment shaped by individual needs, cultural norms, religious beliefs, and the unique features of each platform. Entertainment served as both a source of fun and emotional balance. Religious content wasn't just educational—it also helped users affirm their values and signal their beliefs to others. Social ties were built through interest-based groups and faith-driven communities, offering emotional support and identity validation. Meanwhile, seeking information often reflected a thoughtful, literate approach to navigating the digital world, and self-expression enabled users to shape their public image, share aspirations, and reinforce their values. These insights push back against the stereotype of male users as passive or emotionally disengaged. Instead, the study paints a picture of digital masculinity that is expressive, purpose-driven, and rooted in cultural and spiritual context. Social media isn't just a pastime—it's a space for exploring identity, demonstrating values, and connecting with community, especially among young Muslim men for whom piety and online presence are increasingly intertwined.

## 5.2 Practical and Theoretical Implications

### 5.2.1 Practical Implications

#### 1. For Platform Designers & Content Creators

Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube can create features that promote positive self-image and emotional well-being—like personalized dashboards, curated religious/spiritual content, or challenges that blend entertainment with self-improvement.

#### 2. For Religious Organizations & Digital Da'wah Movements

Short, relatable, and visually engaging religious content resonates deeply. Faith-based groups should keep investing in content that connects with youth, ensuring theological authenticity. Working with male influencers who reflect accessible, grounded masculinity could improve both reach and relevance.

#### 3. For Digital Literacy & Education Campaigns

Many participants showed a strong ability to filter information, which opens doors for peer-led digital literacy efforts. Young men can act as informal educators within their communities, helping spread accurate information and promote responsible digital behavior.

#### 4. For Policymakers & Mental Health Advocates

Recognizing the emotional side of male digital behavior should influence national strategies for youth mental health. Campaigns should use narratives that feel authentic to young men, encouraging emotional openness while still respecting cultural expectations.

### 5.2.1 Theoretical Implications

This research extends the use of UGT, SDT, and SIT by showing how they can function simultaneously within individual digital behaviors—suggesting that online motivation is not linear but layered and interwoven. It also contributes to the study of gender and digital culture by proposing a form of masculinity that is ethical, aspirational, and rooted in community—challenging dominant Western models that often portray men as emotionally distant. Finally, the study adds to the conversation on “platformed religiosity,” illustrating how faith expression online is shaped by algorithms, performance, and deep personal meaning.

## 5.3 Limitations and Future Research

There are some limitations to this study. First, it focused only on urban male users from Java, which means it may not reflect experiences in rural areas or in eastern parts of Indonesia, where digital access and cultural dynamics differ. Also, while the study included various job backgrounds and platforms, it didn't explore how factors like social class, sexual orientation, or political beliefs might influence digital behavior. For future research, several directions could be explored:

### a. Gender Comparisons

Applying the same theoretical framework to compare male and female users could reveal similarities and differences in motivations and digital practices.

- b. Longitudinal Studies  
Tracking users over time could uncover how their motivations and behaviors evolve alongside major life changes.
- c. Platform-Specific Ethnographies  
Immersive studies focusing on specific platforms (e.g., TikTok da'wah content or Instagram male influencers) could offer deeper insights into how masculinity is performed and perceived online.
- d. Quantitative and Behavioral Data Integration  
Adding tools like sentiment analysis or digital trace data (e.g., via NoLimit or Talkwalker) could help validate interview data and offer a fuller picture of user behavior.

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