Hyperpersonal Communication on Instagram: A Netnographic Study of Digital Identity Construction Among Female Students at the University of Darussalam Gontor

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Abstract. Joseph Walther's Hyperpersonal Model, employed in this study, examines the complex mechanisms underlying the construction of digital identity amongst female communication students at Darussalam Gontor University. In contemporary digital culture, social media platforms have evolved and transformed by showcasing their users' public identities. This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design within a netnographic framework; it empirically examines how institutional values are represented in digital spaces using the four core dimensions of hyperpersonal communication: Selective Self-Presentation, Overattribution, Asynchronous Channel, and Feedback Loop. Data analysis was conducted through digital observation of participants' Instagram feeds, visual content archives, and stories, which were then triangulated with semi-structured in-depth interviews. Empirical findings indicate that participants strategically utilise Instagram's asynchronous features to craft highly curated and idealised visual and textual narratives. This idealised projection deliberately distances their online representations from the structural realities of their physical campus environment, which is rooted in a pesantren/Islamic context. This deliberate self-presentation triggers cognitive overattribution amongst followers, who internalise this stylised digital performance as absolute reality. This perceptual bias generates a powerful feedback loop; digital validation within the accepted social sphere manifested through 'likes', comments and follower metrics acts as an intensifying mechanism that compels the female students to continuously display and maintain their hyperpersonal identities. This study contributes to the advancement of the literature on digitally mediated communication by offering critical insights into how traditional religious boundaries are renegotiated within modern virtual ecosystems.

Keywords: Hyperpersonal Model, Digital Identity, Selective Self-Presentation, Instagram, Religious Identity.

1 Introduction

Developments in information and communication technology over the past two years have fundamentally transformed the way people interact and perceive their presence in public spaces. Whereas interpersonal communication once relied heavily

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on physical proximity and face-to-face interaction, it has now shifted to the digital realm. Social media, as a product of digital transformation, is no longer viewed as a supplementary tool for communication, but has become the primary space in which individuals construct, negotiate and display their identities to a wider audience (Walther, 2011, [25]; Bungin, 2021, [25]). The internet and social media are growing at a rapid pace in Indonesia. The number of active social media users in Indonesia reached 191.4 million in early 2022 approximately 68.9 per cent of the total population representing a 12.6 per cent increase from the previous year (We Are Social, 2022, [11]). These figures indicate that Indonesian society, particularly the younger generation, is already deeply embedded in an active and evolving digital ecosystem.

Among the various social media apps available, Instagram holds a very special position. Instagram prioritises visual aesthetics as its primary language, unlike Facebook, which is based on textual social networks, or Twitter, which limits messages to 140 characters. This app allows users to take, edit and share photos and short videos using filters and effects that can transform reality into something far more idealised and artistic (Sosiawan & Wibowo, 2018, [20]). Furthermore, Instagram's asynchronous features such as the ability to upload content at any time, save stories, schedule posts, and edit post captions repeatedly before publication give users full control over the messages they wish to convey [24]. This makes Instagram not merely an online photo gallery, but a digital stage that allows users to design, curate and project their most idealised self in front of an audience [1]. For the younger generation, particularly teenagers and university students, Instagram has become a sort of 'second self' a parallel identity that is often different, or even diametrically opposed, to the reality of their everyday lives (Anjeli & Jamil, 2024 [1]; Dutta & Sharma, 2023, [6]).

However, what if this reality of daily life is combined with fairly strict rules, restrictions and norms? This is where the socio-cultural tension lies, which forms the focus of this study. Darussalam Gontor University, as a pesantren-based higher education institution, implements a residential boarding system with a highly structured code of ethics, dress code and behavioural norms. Female students are required to wear sharia-compliant clothing that covers the 'aurat', to maintain interactions with the opposite sex within certain boundaries, and to follow various disciplinary rules designed to foster a strong religious identity. Yet, at the same time, they have full access to mobile phones and the internet, which allows them to be whoever they wish to be in the digital world. On Instagram, they are free to choose beauty filters, select the most flattering camera angles, write poetic captions that are far from 'stiff', and interact with anyone without direct supervision from the university. It is this tension between institutional compliance and digital freedom of expression that gives rise to the phenomenon of hyperpersonal communication, which is highly interesting to study.

Research into computer-mediated communication (CMC) has developed rapidly since the emergence of the internet in the 1990s. Initially, experts tended to be pessimistic about the quality of online interactions. For example, the 'cues-filtered-out' perspective argued that online communication, due to the lack of non-verbal cues such as body language, facial expressions and tone of voice, is naturally colder, more impersonal and less effective than face-to-face communication (Culnan & Markus, 1987, [4]). However, this view was subsequently challenged by Joseph Walther (1992) through the Social Information Processing Theory (SIP), which states that even when social cues are limited, users of CMC can still form interpersonal impressions

equivalent to those in face-to-face communication, albeit over a longer period of time [22]. Furthermore, Walther (1996) developed a more extreme idea through the Hyperpersonal Model, suggesting that in certain situations, communication via digital media can generate more affection, idealisation and intimacy than face-to-face communication [23].

Four main theoretical components working in tandem give rise to this phenomenon: (1) the sender's selective self-presentation, (2) an asynchronous channel that allows for optimal message editing, (3) the message recipient's tendency to over-attribute due to a lack of information (Cognitive Overattribution), and (4) a feedback loop that consistently reinforces hyperpersonal behaviour. This model was first developed for text-based CMC, such as email and chat rooms, but some researchers have subsequently applied it to visual-based platforms, such as social media. They argue that visual features do not replace the selective mechanisms of self-presentation (Walther & Whitty, 2021), [27]).

Most current research on CMC centres on secular Western cultural contexts, with a primary focus on urban adolescents or professional employees working in companies (Ellison et al., 2014 [8]; Herring & Kapidzic, 2015, [9]). Research into the dynamics of hyperpersonal communication in religious higher education settings is very rare, particularly in Indonesia, where the majority of the population is Muslim. As demonstrated by two previous studies directly relevant to this topic, there is a need for further research.

Firstly, the study by Anjeli & Jamil (2024, [1]) entitled 'Construction of Self-Identity of Teenagers Using Instagram Social Media: A Phenomenological Study at the Islamic University of North Sumatra (UINSU)' [1]. This phenomenological study involved UINSU students and found that Instagram plays a significant role in strengthening their religious identity, particularly through the sharing of da'wah content, quotations from the Qur'an, and Islamic motivational messages. The research has revealed the motivations behind sharing religious content, as well as how the campus environment influences religious expression in the digital space. However, this study focuses solely on content and motivation and does not technically address how hyperpersonal communication mechanisms such as message editing, the use of asynchronous features, feedback loops, and the creation of exaggerated impressions in the minds of the audience work together to shape the digital identities of students at an Islamic university. In other words, the research primarily answers the questions 'what is shared and why', but does not address the question 'how does this mediated communication process, both technically and psychologically, shape identity'. Furthermore, the phenomenological approach employed emphasises the informants' subjective experiences through interviews, without conducting in-depth digital observation of interaction patterns and visual curation practices on Instagram.

Secondly, a study by Qurniawati et al. (2025, [18]) entitled "Communication Analysis Through Computer-Mediated Communication on the Instagram Account @Widyhartono" [18]. This study utilised Social Information Processing Theory (SIP) to analyse the communication strategies of an Instagram account belonging to a food vlogger named Dr Widy Hartono. The findings revealed that the account emphasised a friendly tone of voice, the use of emojis as substitutes for non-verbal cues, and consistency in posting content to maintain audience engagement. This research makes an important contribution to understanding how individuals construct a public persona

on social media within the context of culinary marketing. However, there are significant contextual differences compared to the study under examination. The subject of Qurniawati et al.'s research is a male public figure an adult who works as both a doctor and an influencer, operating in the fields of promotion and entertainment. Meanwhile, the research subjects in this study are female students in a boarding school environment who face restrictions on physical expression, strict dress codes and gender interaction norms; these constraints actually lead them to use Instagram as a space for escape and identity negotiation. Furthermore, the study by Qurniawati et al. utilised the SIP as its primary framework, rather than the Hyperpersonal Model in its entirety; consequently, the aspects of recipient overattribution and the reinforcing feedback loop have not been analysed in depth.

From these two gaps, a fundamental research question emerges: How do the four components of hyperpersonal communication namely, Selective Self-Presentation, Asynchronous Channel, Cognitive Overattribution, and Behavioural Confirmation Loop interact to shape the digital identities of female Communication Studies students at UNIDA Gontor on Instagram, amidst the tension between adherence to institutional religious values and freedom of expression in the virtual space? This question is significant because it not only examines the relevance of the Hyperpersonal Model in a non-Western context but also opens new avenues for understanding how young Muslims in Indonesia negotiate their identities between modernity and tradition.

To answer this question, this study employs netnography as its primary method. Netnography, as defined by Kozinets (2020, [13]), is an adaptation of ethnography specifically designed to examine online cultures and communities [13]. This method enables the researcher to conduct comprehensive digital observation by studying feeds, stories, reels, comment sections and direct messages, and to explore the meanings behind the informants' posts. The netnography approach is appropriate because the phenomenon of hyperpersonal communication cannot be understood through interviews alone; rather, the researcher must witness first-hand how female students curate the aesthetics of their feeds, select filters, write captions, respond to comments, and adjust their digital behaviour based on the social feedback they receive [6]. By combining digital observation, visual documentation and in-depth interviews, netnography can provide an in-depth analysis for studies of digital communication [17].

Consequently, this study possesses several points of novelty that distinguish it from previous research. Firstly, theoretically, this study is one of the first in Indonesia to operationalise the four components of the Hyperpersonal Model within the context of female students at a pesantren-based university. Whilst Anjeli & Jamil (2024) focused more on religious content and motivation, this study shifts the focus to the technical and psychological mechanisms of hyperpersonal communication, specifically how editing, the timing of uploads, and the management of feedback systematically shape digital identity.

Secondly, contextually, unlike Qurniawati et al. (2025, [18]), who studied male food vloggers within the realm of marketing, this study examines female students who face structural tensions between the discipline of a pesantren-based campus and digital freedom. This paradox yields new insights into how religious identity and modern social life are not in conflict, but can instead be creatively integrated within digital narratives, as seen in informants who combine sharia-compliant attire with modern styles or quote classical texts in poetic captions.

Thirdly, methodologically, the use of netnography provides a more comprehensive approach than a purely phenomenological study that relies solely on interviews. This approach combines digital observation, visual recordings and in-depth interviews. This method enables researchers to capture 'what the informants say' and 'what they practise' in digital spaces. This includes visual curation, which is often implicit and not fully realised by the informants themselves.

Fourthly, this research makes a practical contribution to understanding how pesantren-based campuses can respond to the phenomenon of identity digitalisation, as well as how female students can be empowered to use social media critically without losing their religious identity.

Through this distinctive theoretical, contextual and methodological approach, this study is expected not only to fill a gap in the CMC literature, but also to provide a relevant intellectual contribution to the development of communication studies in Indonesia, particularly in understanding how young Muslims navigate their identities in a digital age that is fluid and full of paradoxes.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC): Conceptual Evolution and Contemporary Relevance

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) is defined as the exchange of information between people via computer networks, which may take the form of text images, audio or video [15]. This concept was first introduced in the early days of the internet, when online communication was still governed by text-based interfaces such as email and chat rooms. Technological developments subsequently gave rise to various CMC platforms, both synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous (non-real-time), each with its own characteristics and distinct effects on the quality of social interaction [15]. In the context of this research, Instagram is regarded as a form of visual CMC that combines textual elements (captions, comments) and visual elements (photos, videos, stories), thereby providing communicative cues not found in purely text-based CMC. An understanding of CMC forms the basis of this research, as it positions Instagram as the primary medium for hyperpersonal communication.

2.2 The Hyperpersonal Model: A Theoretical Framework for Mediated Communication that Transcends Face-to-Face Interaction

The Hyperpersonal Model developed by Joseph Walther (1996, [23]) is an extension of Social Information Processing Theory (SIP), which posits that communication via digital media can surpass the levels of intimacy, idealisation and affection generated by direct face-to-face communication [23]. This model operates through four interrelated theoretical components in sequence: (1) Selective Self-Presentation at the sender level, where individuals have full control to filter and construct messages in an idealised manner, (2) Asynchronous Channel, where the non-immediate nature of the medium provides a time lag for planning and optimising messages, (3) Cognitive Overattribution, where message recipients tend to fill information gaps with hyperbole

that idealises the sender, and (4) Behavioural Confirmation Loop, where positive feedback from the audience continuously reinforces hyperpersonal behavior [27]. Although this model was originally formulated in the context of text-based CMC, modern research has extended its application to visual digital platforms such as social media, with the view that visual features enrich the selective mechanisms of self-presentation [27]. In this study, the Hyperpersonal Model serves as the primary theoretical framework for exploring the process of digital identity formation among female university students via the Instagram platform.

2.3 Selective Self-Presentation: Strategies for Curating Identity in the Digital Space

Selective self-presentation is the communicator's ability to select and display the most favourable aspects of the self within a CMC environment [24]. Unlike face-to-face communication, which demands spontaneous responses, CMC affords the sender the opportunity to filter, edit and re-compose messages before they are sent, thereby enabling individuals to present the most ideal version of themselves [24]. In the context of Instagram, selective self-presentation is not limited to the choice of words in captions, but also encompasses the selection of photographs, the application of filters, the choice of camera angles, and the overall aesthetic arrangement of the feed [20]. Research shows that Instagram users consciously select their content to construct a desired image in the eyes of their audience, often presenting a version of themselves that differs from their everyday lives [1]. In this study, selective self-presentation was the first component analysed to understand how female students at UNIDA Gontor construct their digital representations amidst the pressures of life at a boarding school.

2.4 Asynchronous Channel: A Technical Feature Enabling Message Optimisation

The asynchronous nature of CMC refers to users' ability to send and receive messages at different times, without the same demand for an instant response as in face-to-face communication [23]. In the context of Instagram, this asynchronous feature allows users to plan, edit and schedule posts carefully before they are published [24]. Research indicates that CMC users motivated by interpersonal factors tend to spend more time composing messages and carry out more in-depth editing to optimise the impression they wish to convey [24]. This asynchronous time lag is a necessary condition that enables selective self-presentation to operate optimally, as users have the space to craft messages without pressure. In this study, the use of Instagram's asynchronous features such as the archive, post scheduling, and caption editing is analysed as the second component of the Hyperpersonal Model.

2.5 Cognitive Overattribution: Excessive Idealisation in the Audience's Mind

Cognitive overattribution is the tendency of message recipients in CMC to fill information gaps with excessive assumptions that idealise the message sender [23]. The lack of contextual cues such as physical appearance, tone of voice and body language encourages recipients to form impressions based on the minimal cues available, which often results in a view that is more idealised than the sender's actual reality [27]. This

process is known as stereotypical idealisation, whereby the recipient constructs an excessively positive image of the communicator based on the content presented [15]. In the context of Instagram, overattribution is evident in comments that idealise the poster's life, such as 'your life is absolutely perfect' or 'it must be brilliant studying there', which often contrast with the reality. In this study, overattribution is analysed as a third component to understand how viewers interpret the visual management of UNIDA Gontor female students.

2.6 Behavioural Confirmation Loop: A Feedback Cycle that Reinforces Hyperpersonal Behaviour

The behavioural confirmation loop is a mechanism whereby positive feedback from viewers reinforces the sender's hyperpersonal behaviour. In CMC, digital validation such as 'likes', comments and an increase in the number of followers acts as social reinforcement that encourages the sender to continue presenting an idealised version of themselves. This cycle is self-reinforcing: the greater the validation received, the stronger the urge to maintain and raise the standards of self-presentation that have been established. Research shows that Instagram users tend to archive posts with low engagement and replicate the format of content that receives a high response in subsequent posts. In this study, the feedback loop is analysed as the fourth component to understand how digital validation reinforces the construction of hyperpersonal identity among female students at UNIDA Gontor.

2.7 Social Information Processing Theory (SIP): The Theoretical Foundation of Mediatised Communication

Social Information Processing Theory (SIP), developed by Walther (1992, [22]), states that whilst non-verbal cues are limited in CMC, users can still form interpersonal impressions equivalent to those in face-to-face communication, provided the interaction lasts long enough [22]. SIP argues that CMC users gather social information gradually through text messages, so that interpersonal relationships can develop over time even without physical presence [18]. This theory forms the foundation for the development of the Hyperpersonal Model, which goes a step further by suggesting that CMC can actually surpass the effectiveness of face-to-face communication under certain conditions [23]. In this study, SIP is used as a supporting theoretical framework to understand how female students build relationships and form interpersonal impressions through interactions on Instagram, before being analysed further through the hyperpersonal framework.

2.8 Netnography: A Methodology for Studying Digital Culture and Online Communities

Netnography is an adaptation of ethnography specifically designed to study online cultures and communities [13]. This method enables researchers to conduct

comprehensive digital observation, analyse visual and textual content, and understand the meanings behind communication practices taking place on social media [6]. Kozinets (2020, [13]) emphasises that netnography does not merely observe what is visible on the surface, but also delves into the interactions, communication patterns, and cultural values that emerge within virtual communities [13]. A netnographic study of the Instagram account @singlemomsindonesia, for example, successfully revealed how a community of single mothers uses Instagram as a medium for exchanging messages to strengthen and support one another amidst negative social stigma [17]. In this study, netnography was used as the primary method to conduct an in-depth observation of visual management, interaction patterns, and feedback cycles occurring on the Instagram accounts of female students at UNIDA Gontor.

2.9 The Construction of Adolescent Identity on Instagram: Phenomenology and Digital Practices

Research into the structure of adolescent identity on Instagram has shown that this platform plays a significant role in shaping and reinforcing self-identity, particularly amongst students in religious university environments [1]. A phenomenological study at the State Islamic University of North Sumatra (UINSU) found that students use Instagram to reflect upon and strengthen their religious identity, particularly through the sharing of da'wah content, quotations from the Qur'an, and Islamic motivational messages [1]. However, this research also revealed that the use of Instagram can give rise to conflicts between religious identity and the desire for free expression, particularly when there is pressure to comply with religious norms that conflict with personal expression on digital platforms [1]. These findings suggest that Instagram is not merely a mirror of identity, but rather a space for active negotiation between campus values and modern self-expression. This study serves as one of the key references for identifying a research gap to be addressed by a study on hyperpersonal communication at UNIDA Gontor.

2.10 Instagram as a Medium for Marginalised Communities: A Netnographic Study of the Single Mums Community

A netnographic study of the Instagram account @singlemomsindonesia shows that Instagram can function as an effective medium for messaging within specific communities, in this case single mothers in Indonesia. This study found that the most frequently appearing themes were stories and motivational messages for single mothers, with the primary function of the messages being a social one aimed at fostering a sense of community and providing emotional support. The most commonly used form of message was the poster, which was deemed effective for conveying messages visually. This research also revealed that the existence of virtual communities on Instagram has a positive psychological impact on their members, making them feel they are not alone and enabling them to receive support from others. These findings are relevant to the study on female students at UNIDA Gontor, as both highlight how groups with limited means of expression, whether due to negative social stigma or university regulations use Instagram as an alternative space to express their identity and seek social validation.

3 Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach using the netnography method to understand how female students on the Communication Studies programme at Universitas Darussalam Gontor construct their digital identities through Instagram. The netnography method was chosen as it enables the researcher to observe communication practices, self-representation and social interactions taking place within the social media environment in depth (Kozinets, 2020, [13]).

Netnography is a qualitative research method adapted from ethnography to understand human social interactions and experiences in the digital world, ranging from forums and social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter to video-sharing platforms [12]. This method does not merely observe online content, but involves the researcher's participation in the digital world through communication, association and contact, whilst adhering to ethical guidelines such as disclosing one's identity and obtaining appropriate consent [12]. Unlike traditional ethnography, which views communities as fixed concepts, modern netnography adopts the concept of consociability that is, relationships that are more fluid, instrumental, and time-bound, centred around shared interests or events rather than strong bonds such as those found in families [12]. This shift aligns with the theory of network individualism, which posits that individuals now function as nodes within multiple loose networks (family, work, hobbies, social media) rather than as members of tightly-knit groups [12]. Understanding of this network structure is enriched by six archetypes of online conversation (e.g. polarised crowds, brand clusters, broadcast networks) which help researchers determine the focus of their study such as whether it is sufficient to examine a single major site or whether it is necessary to expand to various information sources [12].

In practice, netnography is carried out through a systematic 12-step process, beginning with the researcher's self-reflection, field investigation, data collection (text, audio, video), and culminating in the interpretation and integration of findings [12]. This method is divided into four forms: symbolic (focusing on cultural meaning), digital (using big data analysis and social media), auto (reflection on the researcher's personal experience), and humanistic (seeking positive social change through polyphonic representation and engaging a broad audience) [12]. Its application on Instagram, for example, enables researchers to observe how brand trust and consumer engagement are formed through interactions in the online environment, with the aid of tools such as Instagram Analytics and Google Analytics to codify user behaviour data [12]. This method has proven useful across disciplines ranging from sociology, marketing and media studies to nursing, education and tourism, as it is capable of revealing personal narratives, online rituals, power dynamics and innovations that are not easily captured by quantitative methods or conventional interviews [12].

The research subjects were selected using purposive sampling, namely female students from the Communication Studies Programme at Darussalam Gontor University who have active Instagram accounts, regularly post content in the form of feeds, stories and reels, and are willing to act as research informants. Purposive

selection of informants was carried out to ensure that the data obtained aligns with the research objectives and focus (Creswell & Poth, 2018, [3]).

Research data was collected using three techniques. Firstly, digital observation of the informants' Instagram activity, including profile displays, visual posts, captions, stories, reels, and emerging patterns of interaction. Secondly, semi-structured in-depth interviews to explore the informants' motivations, experiences, and considerations regarding the presentation of their personal identity on Instagram. Thirdly, documentation in the form of visual archives and screenshots of Instagram content relevant to the research focus. The use of various data sources in netnography enables researchers to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the social practices occurring in the digital space (Kozinets, 2020, [13]).

Data analysis was conducted on an ongoing basis throughout the data collection process, progressing through the stages of data condensation, data presentation, and the drawing and verification of conclusions (Miles et al., 2014, [16]). Subsequently, the data were interpreted based on the four dimensions of Joseph Walther's Hyperpersonal Communication Model, namely selective self-presentation, overattribution, asynchronous channels, and feedback loops. To enhance the credibility of the findings, this study employed source triangulation by comparing the results of digital observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation.

This study was conducted at the Communication Studies Programme, Darussalam Gontor University, Mantingan Women's Campus, Ngawi, East Java, Indonesia, between May and July 2026. This study involved female students from the Communication Studies Programme at Darussalam Gontor University as informants, selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with several informants who had active Instagram accounts, whom the researcher has initialised as HS, AA, AP, and NE.

Table 1. Netnography Data Analysis Matrix & Hyperpersonal Model

No	Component	Operational Indicators	Object of Digital Observation	Focus of In-Depth Interviews
1	*Sender* (Selective Self-Presentation)	Efforts to filter and construct an ideal/positive self-image	Use of filters, aesthetic themes in social media feeds, choice of clothing differing from the university's daily dress code	Considerations when choosing photos, such as whether the photos reflect one's true self in the halls of residence
2	*Channel* (Asynchronous Affordances)	Utilising Instagram features to craft messages indirectly (*delayed communication*)	The 'Archived' feature, poetic captions, and scheduling posts for 'golden hours'	Time spent editing content; reasons for preferring Instagram over face-to-face interaction

3	*Recipient* (Audience Overattribution)	The tendency for followers to overestimate and regard visual content as absolute reality	Excessively complimentary comments, followers' assumptions about a carefree/luxurious campus life	Followers' responses: are some misunderstanding and assuming real life is as perfect as it appears on Instagram?
4	*Feedback* (Reinforcing Loop)	Digital validation that reinforces and perpetuates the informant's hyper-personalised behaviour	Number of likes, positive comments, increase in followers, intensity of interaction in replying to comments	Feelings when receiving many 'likes'; actions taken if 'likes' are few; whether feedback influences standards for subsequent content

Source: Adapted from Walther (1996, [23]) by the researcher, 2026

3.2 **Research Site and Context**

UNIDA Gontor Putri Campus in Mantingan is one of the campuses of Universitas Darussalam Gontor (UNIDA Gontor), located on Jl. Raya Ngawi–Solo, Dadung, Sambirejo, Mantingan District, Ngawi Regency, East Java. This campus stands out compared to other universities in Indonesia because it runs on a boarding system designed for effective and efficient learning, where Arabic and English serve as the languages of instruction and daily communication between lecturers and students. The Putri (women's) campus is directly integrated with the Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor Putri boarding school environment, so students live within a pesantren atmosphere, studying general academic subjects while also being shaped in Islamic character and values. UNIDA Gontor itself has 7 faculties and 18 study programs, all accredited by Indonesia's National Accreditation Board, covering fields like Tarbiyah (Education), Ushuluddin (Islamic Theology), Syariah (Islamic Law), Humanities, Science and Technology, and Health Sciences.

4 Findings and Discussion

This section presents the actual findings of the netnographic research on four female Communication Studies students at UNIDA Gontor, hereinafter referred to by the initials HS, AA, AP, and NE, followed by an analysis using Joseph Walther's (1996, [23]) Hyperpersonal Model framework, enriched with the concepts of selective self-presentation, behavioural

confirmation, and relationship maintenance from previous studies. The discussion is organised according to the four theoretical components, concluding with a contextual and distinctive dimension of the findings: the negotiation of religious-institutional identity.

4.1 Selective Self-Presentation: Visual Curation as a Digital Communication Strategy

Digital observation of the Instagram accounts of the four informants identified systematic and consistent patterns of selection. In contrast to the reality of dormitory life, which is governed by strict dress codes and behavioural norms, the informants' visual representations on Instagram displayed far more diverse and aesthetically pleasing expressions. All informants utilised photo filters and colour grading, selected strategic camera angles, and wrote carefully planned captions [23].

This pattern reflects what Walther (1996, 2007, [23,24]) conceptualised as 'selective self-presentation' the communicator's ability to select and present the most advantageous aspects of the self within a CMC environment [23]. This finding aligns with Walther's (2007, [24]) research, which demonstrated that CMC users utilise message-editing capabilities, extended composition times, and resource allocation to refine their self-presentation [24]. Informants HS and AA, in particular, presented a feed aesthetic consistent with earth-tone and minimalist themes, whilst Informants AP and NE tended to present a narrative of modern religiosity, blending Islamic symbols (aesthetic sharia-compliant clothing, quotations from the Qur'an) with contemporary visuals that were far from 'stiff'.

The interview results reinforce these observational findings. The informants acknowledged a deliberate distinction between their physical appearance on campus and their digital representation a strategy that Ellison, Heino and Gibbs (2006, [7]) identified as an effort to manage impressions in online environments, but which has now extended to various social media contexts, including amongst female students at Islamic boarding schools [7]. Dormitory life has its own set of rules, whilst Instagram is perceived as a space where informants can express themselves more freely within boundaries they set for themselves. This finding aligns with Walther's (2007, [24]) argument that carefully crafted CMC messages result in the construction of a self-image that goes beyond the capacity for spontaneous face-to-face expression [24].

4.2 Utilisation of Asynchronous Channels: Instagram as a Space for Message Design

The 'Channel' component of the Hyperpersonal Model emphasises the crucial role of asynchronous features in enabling curated communication [23]. The findings of this study confirm that all informants actively utilise Instagram's asynchronous characteristics to carefully design their digital content. Digital observations identified the use of the 'Archived' feature to hide older posts deemed aesthetically unappealing, the selection of posting times during 'golden hours' (between 18:00 and 21:00), and the drafting of captions requiring repeated editing before publication.

Interview data revealed that informants spent varying amounts of time on a single content-editing session: Informant NE spent around 2 hours; Informant AP spent the longest time selecting a song that matched the vibe; Informant AA spent 5-10 minutes depending on the concept; and Informant HS spent around 15 minutes, with the caption being the aspect given the most thought. This level of time investment would be impossible in spontaneous face-to-face communication.

This pattern suggests that the informants use Instagram not merely as a platform for sharing content, but as a strategically managed medium of communication [23,24].

Walther's (2007, [24]) research found that the time spent composing positive messages with immediacy and affection in communication, and that more mindful users tend to edit their messages more extensively to perfect them [24]. These findings also reinforce the argument put forward by Madell and Muncer (2007, [14]) that control over message composition is the most important aspect of the hyperpersonal model in explaining the appeal of the internet and text messaging to young people [14]. The asynchronous time lag provided by the platform serves as a technical prerequisite that enables selective self-presentation to operate optimally, as postulated by Walther (1996, [23]) [23].

4.3 Cognitive Overattribution: The Formation of a Virtual Reality in the Audience's Mind

An analysis of the comment sections on the informant's posts revealed a consistent pattern of overattribution amongst followers. Followers displayed a tendency to overestimate the informant's life based on selected visual representations, constructing a perception of campus life that was 'perfect', 'free' and 'luxurious' a perception that differed from the reality of life in the halls of residence. Comments such as "your life is absolutely perfect", "it must be brilliant studying there", and "how lovely that you're free to look your best" serve as qualitative indicators of the process of stereotypical idealisation identified by Walther (1996, [23]) [23].

This phenomenon aligns with the Hyperpersonal Model, supported by Tong and Walther's (2015) research on the confirmation and disconfirmation of expectations in CMC: the scarcity of contextual cues available on the Instagram platform encourages followers to fill information gaps with positive assumptions that often exceed the sender's reality [21]. Research by Kapidzic and Herring (2011, [10]) also found that message recipients in CMC tend to engage in overattribution based on the minimal cues available, including writing style, punctuation and visual choices [10].

Informants confirmed in interviews that they were aware of this gap; a number of informants even admitted to having received questions from followers asking whether campus life was really as luxurious as it appeared on Instagram, a question which proves that the process of overattribution had taken place. Research by Walther, De Andrea and Tong (2011, [21]) also found that, under certain conditions, recipients of CMC messages can develop highly idealised perceptions of the communicator, which in turn influences the quality of the interaction that takes place [25].

4.4 Behavioural Confirmation Loop: Digital Validation as a Reinforcement Mechanism

The Feedback component in the Hyperpersonal Model operates as a self-reinforcing feedback loop. The findings of this study indicate that digital metrics (likes, positive comments, and an increase in the number of followers) serve as social validation that consistently reinforces the informants' hyperpersonal behavior [23]. All informants reported experiencing significant emotional impacts from audience engagement: their self-confidence increased when posts

received a high level of response, whilst they experienced digital anxiety when audience engagement was low.

Digital observational data revealed that posts with low engagement tended to be archived by the informants, whilst content formats that received a high response were repeatedly replicated in subsequent posts. This adaptive pattern confirms the existence of a continuous behavioural confirmation loop as described by Walther (1996, [23]): digital validation from the audience reinforces the informants' commitment to maintaining the same ideal visual standards, forming a self-perpetuating cycle that further intensifies the hyperpersonal nature of the informants' digital communication [23,21].

Research by Snyder and Swann (1978, [19]) on behavioural confirmation suggests that a person's beliefs about others can become reality through an interactive process influenced by initial expectations [19]. In a digital context, research by Tong and Walther (2015, [21]) extends these findings by demonstrating that behavioural confirmation also occurs in CMC environments with minimal non-verbal cues, through linguistic strategies such as the use of personal pronouns, complex sentences, and mindfulness in message composition [21]. Research by Ellison, Vitak, Gray and Lampe (2014, [8]) also found that relationship-maintenance behaviours on Facebook, such as responding to friends' questions and sending birthday wishes, significantly predict an increase in bridging social capital, a finding that reinforces the importance of reciprocal interactions in building social capital on digital platforms [8].

4.5 Negotiating Religious-Institutional Identity: The Digital-Physical Paradox

The most significant finding of this study is the unique dimension of identity negotiation within the context of an Islamic university. Female Communication Studies students at UNIDA Gontor face a distinctive tension: on the one hand, they are bound by the university's strict code of ethics, dress code and behavioural norms; and on the other hand, the Instagram platform provides digital agency that allows for more flexible self-expression. This tension gives rise to what can be conceptualised as a digital-physical paradox: the informants' online representations and offline lives operate within two distinct yet non-mutually exclusive registers of identity [12].

Research on adolescents and self-presentation on social media by Kapidzic and Herring (2011, [9]) found that adolescent girls tend to choose profile photos that portray them in a seductive (sexually attractive) manner, whilst adolescent boys are more varied in their choice of photos [10]. These findings align with the context of this study, in which female informants from an Islamic boarding school environment demonstrate a more complex negotiation between the demands of religious modesty and the desire to appear visually attractive, a dynamic that has not been extensively explored in previous CMC literature [10].

Interestingly, this negotiation does not necessarily constitute a violation of religious values. A number of informants, notably AP and NE, creatively integrate religious identity and modern aesthetics into their Instagram content by showcasing sharia-compliant clothing with a contemporary twist, quoting classical Islamic texts in poetic captions, and constructing a digital narrative as 'intellectual modern Muslim women'.

Research into the construction of self-identity among teenage Instagram users in an Islamic campus environment (Anjeli & Jamil, 2024, [1]) found that Instagram plays a significant role in

reinforcing students' religious identities, with motivations for sharing religious content including the dissemination of knowledge, motivation, and da'wah [1]. These findings expand upon the traditional conception of CMC by adding a religious-cultural dimension that has not been extensively explored in previous literature on the Hyperpersonal Model, whilst also affirming that the construction of hyperpersonal identity within an Islamic context can be integrative and transformative, rather than merely a simulacrum of physical life.

5 Conclusion

This study answers the question of how the four components of the Hyperpersonal Model namely, selective self-presentation, asynchronous channels, cognitive overattribution, and behavioural confirmation loops interconnect to shape the digital identities of female Communication Studies students at UNIDA Gontor on Instagram. The findings indicate that these four components do not operate in isolation, but rather function as a continuous cycle: full control over the curation of visuals and captions (selective self-presentation) is made possible by the time lag provided by Instagram's asynchronous feature (asynchronous channel), which in turn encourages followers to fill in the information gaps with excessive idealisation (cognitive overattribution), and this idealisation is in turn reinforced through likes, comments and follower growth (behavioural confirmation loop), which leads the informants to maintain this idealised self-presentation with increasing consistency.

The most distinctive finding of this study is the dimension of religious-institutional identity negotiation. Rather than positioning pesantren norms and digital freedom of expression as two opposing poles, the informants demonstrated that both can be woven into a single coherent digital narrative, for example through modern-style sharia-compliant clothing and poetic captions that draw upon Islamic heritage. In other words, hyperpersonal communication amongst female students at pesantren-based universities does not always take the form of an escape from institutional values, but can also serve as a space for the creative yet authentic reinterpretation of religious identity.

Theoretically, this study extends the relevance of Walther's Hyperpersonal Model to non-Western contexts rich in religious values, a domain that has been largely overlooked by CMC literature, which has traditionally been dominated by secular and urban settings. Methodologically, the netnographic approach, combined with in-depth interviews, has proven capable of capturing the gap between what informants say and what they actually practise in digital spaces something that is difficult to achieve through a phenomenological approach alone. In practical terms, these findings can serve as input for the management of pesantren-based campuses in designing digital literacy programmes that are not repressive, but rather empower female students to use social media critically without losing their religious identity.

This study has a number of limitations that need to be noted. The limited number of informants four female students and the fact that the research was conducted at only one campus mean that these findings cannot yet be widely generalised to all female students in other pesantren environments. Furthermore, this study focused on Instagram as the sole platform observed, and therefore has not captured the possibility of different hyperpersonal communication patterns on other social media platforms. Future research is recommended to expand the number of informants and the research locations, to compare hyperpersonal dynamics among male students in the same environment, and to examine how similar patterns emerge on other platforms such

as TikTok, in order to enrich our understanding of the negotiation of digital-religious identity among Indonesia's young Muslim generation.

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