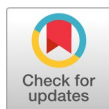


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- Author (s):** Maryyam Jabeen¹, and Dwi Nita Aryani²
- Affiliation (s):** ¹UPN Veteran, Jawa Timur, Indonesia
²STIE Malangkececwara, Jawa Timur, Indonesia
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Performing the Digital Self: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Identity Construction and Symbolic Consumption in Physical and Virtual Consumer Environments

Maryyam Jabeen* and Dwi Nita Aryani

UPN Veteran Jawa Timur, Surabaya, Indonesia

Abstract

The paper examines the evolution of the extended self-framework from its origins in material consumption to its contemporary application in digital environments. Drawing on a qualitative theoretical synthesis and critical discourse analysis, the study investigates how individuals construct, negotiate and sustain identities through the strategic curation of physical possessions and digital artefacts, including Instagram profiles, LinkedIn portfolios, and fashion displays, across global and Indonesian digital contexts. Building on Belk's extended self-theory, Goffman's dramaturgical model, and recent scholarship on digital consumer behaviour, the analysis identifies five core themes: (1) the incorporation of digital artefacts into the psychological self; (2) platform-specific persona management; (3) symbolic consumption as status signaling; (4) identity fatigue resulting from continuous impression management; and (5) the accumulation of social capital through digital visibility. These five themes guide how identity construction has evolved from material consumption to digital environments. Analysis of secondary data drawn from documented consumer practices across Southeast Asian and global social media platforms reveals that the structural motives underpinning digital self-presentation, validation seeking, identity signalling, and ideal-self negotiation, are ewmain structurally continuous with those animating material consumption. However, digital platforms amplify and complicates these processes through their affordness. The Indonesian context, characterised by exceptionally high levels of social media engagement, illustrates how globally operative identity construction are shaped by specific cultural configurations of status, belonging, and community. The paper concludes that continuous identity management across multiple platforms has become a normative dimention of consumer life. This transformation extends the theoretical scop that highlights the

*Corresponding Author: jabeenm666@gmail.com

need for further empirical Investigation.

Keywords: extended self, digital identity, consumer behaviour, social media performance, impression management, symbolic consumption, Indonesia

Introduction

How individuals construct a coherent sense of self through their relationships with objects, spaces, and social audiences has been a foundational question in consumer research for decades. Belk's (1988) seminal theory of the extended self, the proposition that possessions function not merely as tools or symbols but as constituents of personal identity, established a conceptual framework whose explanatory reach has only grown as the social world has become increasingly mediated by digital technology. Belk's core insight, that "we are what we have" (Belk, 1988, p. 139), retains its analytical power in an era in which the objects through which identity is constructed, maintained, and communicated increasingly exist in virtual form.

The digital transformation of consumer life has been dramatic in both scope and speed. Globally, there were approximately 5.24 billion social media users in 2024, representing 64.5% of the world's population, with the average user maintaining an active presence on approximately 6.7 distinct platforms (Kemp, 2024). Indonesia, the geographic focus of this paper's contextual analysis, exemplifies this trend in particularly well: As of January 2024, the country had 167 million active social media users as of January 2024, representing 60.4% of its population, Indonesia ranks as the fourth-largest social media market globally and records one of the world's highest average daily social media use at 3 hours and 28 minutes per user per day (Kemp, 2024; Maesurah, 2025). In this environment, digital platforms have ceased to be merely supplementary communication channels and instead have become primary arenas for the performance, negotiation, and contestation of social identity.

Belk (2013) recognised this transformation explicitly, extending his original framework to encompass digital artefacts, social media profiles, curated image grids, digital follower networks, and online collections as legitimate extensions of the self. Subsequent scholarship has further elaborated this digital extension, examining the psychological significance of virtual possessions (Dinh & Lee, 2022), the platform-specific nature of

digital self-presentation (Appel et al., [2020](#)), and the emerging phenomenon of identity fatigue arising from the continuous management of multiple digital personas (Rathnayake & Winter, [2022](#)). Most recently, Honarvar and Sepehrinia ([2025](#)) have argued for a systematic reconceptualism of the extended self-framework to account for the datafied, algorithmically-mediated conditions of contemporary social media environments.

Against this background, the present paper pursues three interconnected objectives. First, it critically reassesses the theoretical status of Belk's extended self-framework in light of digital consumer environments, examining both its enduring relevance and the conceptual extensions required to address conditions that Belk's original 1988 formulation did not anticipate. Second, it examines how material and virtual consumption operate as complementary instruments of identity construction, focusing on the specific mechanisms of symbolic communication, selective self-presentation, and impression management, through which this construction occurs. Third, it situates these dynamics within the Indonesian context, demonstrating how globally applicable theoretical propositions are always enacted in culturally specific configurations of status, community, and social recognition. The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical framework; Section 3 reviews the existing literature on symbolic consumption, digital identity, and social media; Section 4 presents the principal findings; Section 5 describes the methodology; Section 6 offers the discussion; and Section 7 concludes.

Theoretical Framework

The Extended Self: Material Origins and Digital Extensions

Belk's ([1988](#)) foundational framework rests on the deceptively simple proposition: the boundary between the self and the external world is more permeable than phenomenological intuition suggests. Objects are not merely used by individuals; they become part of them. The car, the house, a carefully chosen wardrobe, each constitutes not only a symbol of personal identity but also a component of it. The loss of prized possessions is thus experienced not merely as material deprivation but also a diminishment of self, a form of identity injury with measurable psychological consequences.

Solomon ([2020](#)) elaborates the distinction between the functional and symbolic dimensions of consumption, noting that products simultaneously perform instrumental tasks and communicate social meanings, to both others

and consumer themselves. Physical objects thus function as "symbolic scaffolding" for the social self, which individuals continuously constructs and presents. Dinh and Lee (2022) extend this analysis to relational contexts, demonstrating that consumers extend their identities into brand relationships, creating psychological bonds that influence brand loyalty and resistance to brand switching in ways that mirror the attachment dynamics Belk described for physical possessions.

Belk's (2013) extension of the framework into digital contexts represents a substantive theoretical development rather than a mere application. The management of digital possessions, including decisions about what to post, archive, delete and curate, constitutes a form of identity work that is structurally continuous with the management of material possessions, yet distinguished by several important characteristics: it is more public, more permanent, more susceptible to algorithmic mediation, and more measurable through quantified social metrics. Honarvar and Sepehrinia (2025) argue that this quantification, the rendering of social identity into follower counts, engagement rates, and algorithmic visibility scores, constitutes a qualitatively new condition for the extended self that requires systematic theoretical attention. Prezioso and Parisi (2025) further argue that digital technologies should not merely be understood as possessions that extend the self. Rather, they function as mediational elements that actively participate in the formation of personal identity, shaping the way how individuals construct and experience their identities in digitally mediated environments.

Goffman's Dramaturgical Model as Complementary Framework

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model provides a complementary analytical lens for examining the performative dimensions of identity construction can be examined. For Goffman, social life is structured by the imperative of impression management: individuals compose scripted, contextually calibrated versions of themselves for public presentation (front-stage performance) while reserving less managed self-expressions for private settings (back-stage). Such performances do not constitute the deception but a constitutive feature of social life, enabling the coordinated social interactions upon which social order depends.

The connection to Belk's framework is direct: the possessions through which identity is extended also serve, in Goffman's terms, as theatrical props,

the material resources supporting front-stage performance. In digital environments, this dramaturgical logic is both maintained and transformed. Social media platforms create new forms of front-stage space where impression management is continuous and asynchronous and highly visible. Unlike face-to-face interactions, online performances are often directed towards diverse and sometimes indeterminate audiences. Marder et al. (2016) demonstrate that context collapse, the convergence of distinct audience groups within a single platform environment, represents a significant structural challenge to dramaturgical self-presentation that Goffman's original model, developed before the emergence of digital media, did not anticipate. Šimůnková (2019) proposes the concept of "hybrid selfhood" to explain how in which contemporary consumers negotiate their identity across online and offline domains, each with distinct performance norms and audience expectations. This conceptual innovation builds on both Belk and Goffman while addressing the novel conditions introduced by the integration of digital and material of social life. Table 1 presents an integrative summary of the theoretical frameworks informing this analysis.

Table 1

Summary of Theoretical Frameworks and Their Application to Digital Identity

Framework	Core Concept	Application to Digital Self
Belk (1988, 2013)	Possessions as extensions of identity; digital artefacts incorporated into self	Social media profiles, curated grids, follower counts as virtual possessions
Goffman (1959)	Dramaturgical performance; front-stage vs. back-stage identity	Platform-specific personas; asynchronous impression management on Instagram/LinkedIn
Bourdieu (1986)	Social capital from networked participation and visibility	Digital visibility as pathway to social recognition and status in networked consumer culture
Rathnayake and Winter (2022)	Mobile digital self as portable identity object	Always-on self-presentation and identity fatigue across multiple platforms

Each framework approaches digital identity from a different perspective help to explain rather than competing, they complement one another. Belk's extended self-theory explains how possessions, including digital artefacts, become part of personal identity. Goffman's dramaturgical perspective shifts the focus to performance, showing how people present and adjust that identity for different audiences. Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis extends this perspective by examining how wider social and cultural discourses shape these performances. Bourdieu's concept of social capital and the work of Rathnayake and Winter (2022) help explain why digital visibility brings both social recognition and psychological pressure. Considered together, these perspectives provide a useful framework for examining identity construction, symbolic consumption and digital self-presentation within contemporary digital environments.

Literature Review

Consumption as Identity Construction

Symbolic consumption, the acquisition and display of goods for their identity-communicating rather than purely functional properties not merely a marginal or irrational feature of consumer behaviour but a structurally central one. When consumers select among functionally equivalent products on the basis of brand associations, or arrange digital content into aesthetically coherent displays, they are engaged in a purposeful social process of meaning-making that Belk (2013) characterises as the core activity of the extended self. A carefully curated Instagram grid communicates one's social position, aesthetic sensibility, and lifestyle aspiration to its audience in ways that are analytically comparable to mobile identity objects. Rathnayake and Winter (2022) extend this analysis to the specific conditions of mobile social media, arguing that the body has become a "mobile, portable identity object" whose curated digital image is continuously available for social scrutiny. This portability transforms the timing and processes of identity work.

Symbolic Consumption

Fashion constitutes a consumption domain in which the symbolic function is particularly evident. Clothing communicates social affiliation, cultural positioning, and identity aspiration with an immediacy that few other consumer products can match. This communicative function is not incidental but central to fashion consumption; many purchases are

motivated primarily by what they communicate about the wearer to relevant social audiences. In the digital era, Belk (2013) notes that the signaling role of fashion has been simultaneously amplified and complicated: what was previously a local performance within a bounded social network is now a global performance, exposed to indefinitely larger and more diverse audiences via social media.

In the Indonesian context, fashion's communicative role carries particular complexity. Indonesian consumers must negotiate their fashion related self-presentation projecting across multiple cultural registers, projecting identities that are comprehensible globally within local status hierarchies while also performing sophistication within globally circulating aesthetic standards (Sulhaini et al., 2022). This dual orientation creates a distinctive form of symbolic work in which the extended self must be simultaneously meaningful in both local and global context. Yao (2025) further notes that social media amplifies cross-cultural dynamics of fashion communication by making local identity performances globally visible, creating new forms of cultural exchange and tension.

The Digital Frontier

Selective Self-Presentation

The shift of identity performance into digital environments has not merely replicated prior patterns in a new medium; it has reconfigured the conditions under which identity work occurs. Social media platforms function less as real-time performance spaces and more as curated exhibition spaces, archives of self-representation that audiences may encounter any point in time, disconnected from the contexts of their original production. This temporal dimension fundamentally distinguishes digital self-presentation from face-to-face interaction.

Three platform affordances are particularly significant for identity construction. First, asynchronicity enables users to construct and revise self-presentations before publication, eliminating the spontaneity characteristic of face-to-face interaction and creating conditions for what Appel et al. (2020) term "culturally controlled" self-representation. Second, editability, the availability of filters, cropping, caption editing, and content deletion, provides tools for refining digital self-representations to project idealized images. Third, audience segmentation enables users to maintain distinct profiles tailored to different audiences: professional competence for

LinkedIn, aesthetic sensibility for Instagram, everyday relatability for TikTok. Davison (2012) argues that these platform architectures do not merely facilitate identity construction but actively structure and constrain its possible forms.

Crucially, idealized digital self-presentations should not simply be dismissed as inauthentic fabrications. Belk (2013) argues that they typically reflect aspirational self-images, projections of possible selves, rather than cynical misrepresentations. Chan (2022) develops this point through the concept of the "digitalized self," characterising the curated digital persona as a co-constitutive component of identity that both reflects and shapes the lived self in ways that cannot be clearly separated. Bartoli et al. (2023) similarly show that digital self-disclosure practices have become deeply integrated into overall self-concept management, creating bi-directional relationships between digital and material identity.

Virtual Possessions and Psychological Investment

If Belk's extended self-framework proposes that psychological investment in digital possessions reflects their identity-constitutive function, then the growing evidence of psychological investment in digital artefacts provides strong support for the framework's extension into digital domains. Research across the past decade consistently demonstrates that social media metrics, follower counts, engagement rates and interaction volumes carry genuine psychological significance for users, with fluctuations in these metrics producing emotional responses that parallel those associated with changes in valued material possessions (Belk, 2013; Rathnayake & Winter, 2022). The suspension or deletion of a social media account can produce responses analogous to the loss of a prized material possession: a sense of identity loss, diminished self, and grief.

Dinh and Lee (2022) provide empirical evidence for this psychological investment in the context of consumer-brand relationships, demonstrating that users who experience strong digital self-extension within brand communities exhibit elevated emotional bonding and reduced brand-propensity to switch brands, effects that mirror the loyalty dynamics associated with material possessions in Belk's original framework. Kalyvaki et al. (2023) extend these findings to avatar-based identity in metaverse environments, finding that users' psychological investment in their digital avatars functions as a significant form of self-extension with measurable

consequences for consumption behaviour.

Social Comparison and Identity Formation

The visibility that social media affords creates structural conditions for social comparison that are qualitatively different from those of pre-digital social life. Access to continuously updated and curated presentations of others' lives creates an environment in which upward social comparison that is comparison with individuals perceived as better off, is a near-constant feature of social media use. Solomon ([2020](#)) notes that social comparison theory predicts specific psychological costs from this exposure, particularly when comparison targets are perceived as similar to the comparer, since such comparisons are most threatening to individual's self-evaluations. These dynamics are intensified by the quantification of social performance through digital metrics. Follower counts and engagement measurements render social standing directly comparable across users in a way that face-to-face interaction does not permit. Appel et al. ([2020](#)) identify this metrics-based social comparison as among the most psychologically consequential features of contemporary social media environments, noting that the resulting cycles of Social comparison and self-presentation can generate persistent self-evaluation instability. Thompson ([2024](#)) observes that this represents a theoretical frontier for the extended self-framework: the implications of having one's identity extension becoming measurable, comparable, and subject to algorithmic amplification or suppression were not part of Belk's original conceptual landscape and require further theoretical development.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design that combines theoretical synthesis with critical discourse analysis (CDA). This methodological approach is appropriate for the paper's conceptual objectives, which focus on the theoretical interpretation and extension of existing frameworks rather than the collection and analysis of new primary empirical data. Qualitative synthesis enables the systematic integration of findings from a heterogeneous literature, while CDA provides analytical tools for examining the discursive logics embedded in documented consumer practices and platform facilitated communications (Fairclough, [2003](#)).

The theoretical synthesis component involved a structured review of the literature published between 2013 and 2025, focusing on the intersections among the extended self, digital consumer behaviour, identity construction, and social media use in Southeast Asian contexts.

Database searches were conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar using search terms such as "digital extended self," "digital identity and consumer behaviour," "social media and self-presentation," "impression management and social media," and "identity construction Indonesia." Inclusion criteria required that sources: (a) to be published in peer-reviewed journals articles, edited volumes, or academic dissertations (b) substantively address either the extended self-framework or digital identity construction; and (c) were published within the 2013–2025 window to ensure theoretical relevance to the contemporary literature. A total of 47 sources were reviewed, of which 20 were cited in the final analysis.

Critical Discourse Analysis Procedure

The critical discourse analysis component focused on publicly available digital content and documented consumer practices circulating on publicly accessible social media platforms, including OOTD posts, lifestyle vlogs, and professional profile presentations on Instagram and LinkedIn, alongside published empirical reports and academic case studies addressing digital identity behaviour in Indonesian and comparable Southeast Asian contexts. Following Kozinets's ([2010](#)) framework for netnographic research involving publicly available digital content, this material was treated as a methodologically appropriate and ethically accessible data source for analysing the discursive logics of digital self-presentation without direct interaction with individual participant, as no private or personally identifying information was collected or analysed. The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns of digital self-presentation across the documented materials rather than conducting in-depth case studies of individual users or specific social media accounts.

The Analysis draws on Fairclough's ([2003](#)) three-dimensional approach to keep the analysis remained grounded and systematic. The first level focused on the text itself, captions, profile descriptions, images, and other symbolic content posted by users on social media. We paid attention to linguistic choices and visual elements, with broader thematic patterns. The second level looked at discursive practice, particularly how this content

is produced, shared, and interpreted by audience. This covers things like how a post is circulated within a platform environment, who ends up seeing it, and how audiences interpret it once it's out there. The third level placed these practices in a broader sociocultural context, consumer culture, platform norms, and specifically sociocultural context of Indonesian social media context. Here the question was less about individual posts and more how they collectively communicate meanings related to identity, status, and belonging. Working through these three levels enabled the analysis to move beyond surface reading of digital self-presentation and connect individual online behaviour and its relationship to broader cultural patterns. '

Instead of looking at single posts on their own, we focused on patterns that kept showing up across the reviewed literature and publicly available digital material. We compared similar kinds of self-presentation, lifestyle sharing, fashion posts, professional branding, audience interaction, across different platforms to determine which discursive patterns were consistently observed. This kind of comparison helped tie individual examples within broader patterns in digital consumer behaviour.

The analysis proceeded through three analytical stages. In the first stage, each data source was examined for evidence of five themes identified in the theoretical framework: (1) identity extension through digital artefacts; (2) platform-specific identity management; (3) symbolic consumption as status signaling; (4) psychological costs associated with identity management; and (5) social capital accumulation through digital visibility. In the second stage, cross-source comparisons were conducted to identify convergent and divergent patterns across different platform contexts and socio-cultural settings. In the third stage, findings were synthesised and interpreted in relation to the theoretical frameworks outlined in Section 2, with particular attention to areas of theoretical tension, extension, and limitation.

Findings

The synthesis of theoretical frameworks and the analysis of documented consumer practices across the reviewed secondary sources yield five principal findings, summarised in Table 2 and elaborated in the following subsections.

Table 2

Summary of Key Findings from Theoretical Synthesis and Critical Discourse Analysis

Theme	Key Finding	Supporting Evidence
Digital Identity Extension	Virtual artefacts (profiles, likes, followers) function as psychological extensions of self equivalent to material possessions	(Belk, 2013 ; Dinh & Lee, 2022 ; Honarvar & Sepehrinia, 2025)
Platform-Specific Persona Management	Users maintain differentiated identities across platforms calibrated to distinct audiences (professional, social, familial)	(Appel et al., 2020); Marder et al., 2016 ; Šimůnková, 2019)
Symbolic Consumption & Status Signalling	Digital display of fashion/lifestyle operates as symbolic labour for social positioning, especially in Indonesia	(Maesurah, 2025)
Identity Fatigue & Psychological Costs	Continuous self-management creates context-collapse anxiety, social comparison stress, and identity fatigue	(Marder et al., 2016 ; Rathnayake & Winter, 2022 ; Thompson, 2024)
Social Capital Accumulation	Digital visibility and platform engagement serve as primary mechanisms for social capital accumulation in high-engagement markets	(Chan, 2022 ; Yao, 2025)

Digital Artefacts as Psychological Extensions of the Self

Consistent across the reviewed literature is the finding that digital artefacts, social media profiles, curated content archives, follower networks, and engagement metrics carry genuine psychological significance as extensions of identity. Honarvar and Sepehrinia ([2025](#)) identify this as the most robustly supported empirical claim within the contemporary extended self-literature, noting that studies across diverse cultural and demographic contexts consistently document psychological investment in virtual possessions that is structurally comparable to investment in material possessions. The psychological response to the loss or damage of digital self-representations, account suspension, viral criticism, or public identity

failure mirrors. Belk's (1988) original characterisation of possession loss as a form of identity injury. This finding supports the core theoretical extension proposed by Belk (2013) and suggests that the psychological stakes of digital identity management are higher than early digital self-presentation research acknowledged. This interpretation is further supported by Prezioso and Parisi (2025), who suggest that digital artefacts do not merely represent identity but actively contribute to its ongoing construction through technological mediation.

One pattern appears consistently across the reviewed studies. Digital artefacts are no longer just communication tools. They have become part of how people construct and maintain their identities in everyday life. People invest considerable efforts in these practices. They select photographs, keep previous posts and carefully manage their profile. They do this because these practices reflect their real identities and desired modes of their self-representation. The same pattern is evident across the studies reviewed here. And it backs up the main point: the digital world hasn't displaced Belk's idea of the extended self. It has simply broadened the idea in which the extended self is expressed and constituted.

Platform Architecture Shapes Identity Performance

A second consistent finding concerns the role of platform architecture in structuring identity performance. Social media platforms do not provide neutral spaces for pre-formed identity expressions; they actively shape what kinds of self-presentations are possible, valued, and visible. Appel et al. (2020) demonstrate that platform affordances including the tools, metrics, and interaction formats made provided by individual platform, systematically influence the character of self-presentation that users adopt. Davison (2012) extends this argument, showing that users develop platform-specific identity competencies over time, learning to calibrate self-presentations to platform-specific norms and audience expectations. The finding has significant implications for Goffman's dramaturgical framework: because, in digital environments, the stage itself, shaped by platform architecture and designs exerts substantial influence over the performances it hosts. The evidence also shows further demonstrates: platform design shapes how people present themselves. People don't necessarily present themselves in the same manner across Instagram, LinkedIn, and TikTok. Each platform encourages/demands a different form of interaction, and each one comes with its own audience expectations. So

identity performance isn't just shaped by social norms but also by the technological architecture of the platform by the technology people are using to communicate in the first place.

Symbolic Consumption as Status Signalling Persists in Digital Form

The analysis confirms that symbolic consumption, the use of goods and their digital representations as resources for social positioning, operates as a structurally central feature of digital consumer behaviour. In the Indonesian context, practices such as OOTD (Outfit of the Day) content on Instagram exemplify this dynamic: they function not merely as forms of aesthetic self-expression but as performances of social belonging, cultural literacy, and status positioning within local and transnational hierarchies of taste. Maesurah (2025) documents how Indonesian social media users actively employ platform presence to negotiate status and belonging within community networks, with digital visibility functioning as both a precondition and a performance of social recognition. In urban centres such as Jakarta and Surabaya, Instagram use is widespread among adults aged 18–34, and OOTD content remains among the most-shared categories of lifestyle posting (Kemp, 2024). This finding shows that symbolic consumption continuous to shape identity, both offline and online. Sharing fashion, travel experiences, or recent purchases is limited to the display of possessions. Such posts also communicate taste, belonging, and social position. Across the Indonesian studies reviewed here, these everyday forms of sharing emerge as routine practices through which people express identity and connect with others online.

Identity Fatigue Emerges as a Structural Feature of Digital Self-Management

A fourth finding, representing a significant theoretical development over Belk's original framework, concerns the psychological costs associated with continuous digital identity management. Rathnayake and Winter (2022) document what they term "identity fatigue", a persistent form of cognitive and emotional exhaustion arising from the demands of maintaining coherent, platform-appropriate self-presentations across multiple digital environments. Marder et al. (2016) identify context-collapse anxiety, the fear that content addressed to one audience will be encountered by another, as a pervasive source of self-censorship and performative constraint for social media users. Thompson (2024) situates

these findings within a broader critique of the extended self-framework, arguing that the "always-on" nature of digital self-extension creates forms of identity management labour that was not anticipated by Belk's original framework.

Digital Visibility as Social Capital

The fifth principal finding concerns the relationship between digital visibility and social capital accumulation. Across the reviewed literature, consistent evidence emerges that platform presence, engagement metrics, and curated digital identity function as forms of Bourdieuan social capital, resources that can be accumulated, deployed, and converted into other forms of social advantage. In the Indonesian context, Chan ([2022](#)) documents how maintaining an active, coherent, and visible digital presence has become a normative pathway to social recognition, community belonging, and professional opportunity. Yao ([2025](#)) extends this analysis to cross-cultural contexts, showing how digital visibility can generate new forms of cultural capital that operate across national boundaries while retaining local inflections. The implication is that digital self-presentation constitutes a form of social labour with real-world consequences for individuals' social positioning.

Discussion

The findings of this study carry several implications for consumer research theory, cultural analysis, and marketing practice. Considered in relation to the existing literature, they confirm both the continuing relevance of Belk's extended self-framework and clarify the conceptual developments required to bring it into productive engagement with contemporary digital conditions.

Theoretically, the most important implication concerns the scope and character of the modifications required by digital contexts. The five findings identified in Section 4 collectively demonstrate that while the core logic of the extended self namely, identity construction through relationships with objects, is preserved in digital environments, its conditions of operation have been fundamentally altered. The quantification of social identity through metrics (Finding 1 and 5), the architectural determination of performance possibilities by corporate platform design (Finding 2), and the emergence of identity fatigue as a structural feature of digital self-management (Finding 4) all represent conceptual developments that were

not encompassed by Belk's original framework. Honarvar and Sepehrinia's (2025) call for a systematic theoretical refashioning of the framework for datafied societies is thus well-supported by the present analysis, and represents a productive agenda for future theoretical work.

The finding that platform architecture actively shapes identity performance (Finding 2) has particular theoretical significance, as it introduces a structural constraint on identity expression that Goffman's dramaturgical model, as originally formulated did not anticipate. If the theatrical stage is itself designed and maintained by corporate actors with commercial interests in particular forms of self-presentation, the dramaturgical model requires amendment to account for the political economy of digital performance spaces. Davison (2012) and Bartoli et al. (2023) begin to address this gap, but a fully theorised account of the corporate mediation of digital identity performance remains an open theoretical project.

The Indonesian contextual analysis illuminates the cultural specificity of globally applicable identity dynamics. The finding that digital visibility functions as social capital (Finding 5) in Indonesian consumer culture is consistent with global patterns documented in the extended self-literature, but its specific form namely, the use of OOTD sharing and lifestyle documentation to perform membership in communities of taste and status, reflects the particular configurations of social distinction that operative in Indonesian urban contexts (Maesurah, 2025). This finding supports the argument for culturally specific research within globally theorised frameworks: general dynamics always take locally specific forms, and the locally specific forms carry both applied relevance and theoretical significance that purely abstract analysis cannot generate.

These findings can also be interpreted through Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, which links discourse to social practice. At the textual level, individual construct identity through symbolic elements such as captions, images, hashtags, and profile biographies. These elements work together to construct and communicate identity in ways that are socially meaningful. At the level of discursive practice, these posts are produced, shared, and interpreted within the platform communities. The audience itself continually reshapes the meaning of the content. And at the broader social level, digital identity is shaped by consumer culture, by platform rules, by the constant pressure to remain visible and gain

recognition. Viewed together, these three levels provide a more complete understanding of how identity is constructed and negotiated in digital environments.

From a practical standpoint, the findings carry clear implications for marketing strategy, particularly in high social media engagement markets such as Indonesia. Finding 3 which indicates that symbolic consumption operates as a central mechanism of digital self-presentation, suggests that marketing strategies focused exclusively on functional product attributes may overlook important motivational drivers of consumption in identity-intensive digital cultures. Effective marketing in such contexts must engage with the identity aspirations, social anxieties, and status dynamics that shape symbolic consumption, participating in the identity work that consumers perform on digital platforms rather than merely advertising products within those spaces. Recent studies of digital influencers further illustrate how digital platforms facilitate the extension of identity through curated self-presentation, audience interaction, and strategic visibility management. Such practices reinforce the argument that digital artefacts function as important resources for constructing, expressing, and communicating the self within contemporary online environments (Lima et al., [2025](#)). The psychological costs identified in Finding 4 including comparison anxiety, context-collapse stress, and identity fatigue, also indicate an addressed consumer need for marketing approaches and products that support more sustainable and psychologically manageable forms of digital self-presentation.

Finally, the identification of identity fatigue as a structural feature of digital self-management (Finding 4) raises important questions about the long-term sustainability of intensive digital identity labour. As Rathnayake and Winter ([2022](#)) note, the "always-on" character of the digital extended self creates cognitive and emotional demands that are no direct precedent in Belk's material possessions framework. Understanding the psychological mechanisms through which consumers manage, resist, or succumb to these demands, and the conditions under which they seek relief, whether through digital detox, platform abandonment, or the adoption of more selective self-presentation strategies, represents a significant and practically important agenda for future consumer research.

Positionality and Limitations

Several methodological limitations should be acknowledged. The study does not include primary empirical data collection such as interviews, surveys, ethnographic observations, or original digital datasets, and its conclusions are therefore situated at the level of theoretically-grounded inference rather than direct empirical validation. The analytical framework has not been tested against specific Indonesian population groups (generational cohorts, rural versus urban consumers, or different socioeconomic strata) whose experiences of digital identity management may differ substantially from the patterns identified in the existing literature. The reliance on publicly available secondary data, while methodologically justifiable, introduces may introduce a selection bias toward the most visible and publicly documented forms of digital self-presentation, potentially underrepresenting practices occurring in private, or restricted digital spaces. Future research should address these limitations through primary qualitative data collection including interviews, ethnographic observation, and longitudinal analysis, digital trace, involving demographically and geographically diverse Indonesian participants. However, theoretical synthesis and critical discourse analysis constitute established methodological approaches particularly in consumer research when the primary objective is theoretical refinement rather than empirical generalisation (Belk, [2013](#); Fairclough, [2003](#)).

Conclusion

This paper has traced the evolution of the extended self framework from its foundational examination of material possession to its contemporary engagement with digital self-presentation, arguing that the framework's core insight namely that identity is constructed through, and not merely reflected in relationships with objects, retains its analytical power even as its conditions of application have been profoundly transformed. The five principal findings of the analysis, the incorporation of digital artefacts into the psychological self, the structuring influence of platform architecture on identity performance, the persistence of symbolic consumption as status signalling, the emergence of identity fatigue, and the role of digital visibility in social capital accumulation, collectively characterise the contemporary digital self as a phenomenon that is simultaneously continuous with and qualitatively distinct from the material extended self theorised Belk theorised in 1988.

The paper has demonstrated that digital self-presentation involves both

the incorporation of virtual artefacts into the self (Belk's mechanism) and their strategic deployment as instruments of impression management (Goffman's mechanism), and that these two processes are mutually reinforcing rather than alternative processes. The Indonesian contextual analysis has shown how these global theoretical dynamics take locally specific forms in a digital culture characterised by high platform engagement, strong norms of community belonging, and the use of fashion and lifestyle display as instruments of social positioning.

Several important theoretical frontiers remain open. The implications of algorithmic mediation for the extended self-including how recommendation systems, content moderation, and engagement optimisation shape the visibility and social reception of digital self-presentations require sustained theoretical and empirical attention. The emergence of AI-generated personas, avatar-based identity construction metaverse environments (Kalyvaki et al., [2023](#)), and the prospective extension of the self into AI companions and digital assistants (Belk, [2025](#)) represent emerging conditions for the extended self that existing frameworks have only begun to address (Rowland & Estevens, [2025](#)). The principle that identity construction is always mediated by objects and always performed for social audiences will remain foundational to this inquiry, but the objects, audiences, and stages of this performance will continue to evolve in ways that demand continuous theoretical renewal.

Author Contribution

Maryyam Jabeen: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, writing-original article. **Dwi Nita Aryani:** supervision, writing -review & editing.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

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