

Identity Management Strategies of Sexual Minorities through Personal Branding on Social Media in Makassar

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze identity management strategies through personal branding on social media in Makassar City. The study employed a qualitative descriptive approach and was conducted from April to May 2026. The research involved five informants selected through purposive sampling based on the criteria of individuals belonging to sexual minority groups, residing in Makassar City, and actively using Instagram and/or TikTok. Data were collected through digital documentation, non-participant observation, and in-depth interviews, then analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña model, which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that social media serves as a strategic space for identity management through personal branding by creating consistent content, utilizing lifestyle symbols, and maintaining active interactions with audiences. The informants consciously constructed digital identities that reflected their personal characteristics, social roles, and activities, such as content creators, active university students, and individuals with extensive social networks. The identities presented primarily emphasized a positive social image as part of their identity management strategy in the digital environment. From the perspective of Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory, these practices represent a form of impression management, in which social media functions as the front stage for displaying carefully constructed identities, while more personal aspects of life are reserved for the back stage. This study demonstrates that social media functions not only as a communication platform but also as an important space for identity management, personal branding, social recognition, and the maintenance of social presence in the digital era.

Keywords: *Personal Branding; Social Media; Impression Management*

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of information and communication technology has brought significant changes to social life, including the ways individuals construct and represent their identities. Social media no longer functions merely as a communication platform but has evolved into a social space where individuals can build self-image, negotiate identity, and gain social recognition. For Generation Z, who have grown up in the digital era, social media has become an inseparable part of everyday life, serving not only to maintain social relationships but also as a platform for self-presentation and personal branding.

Social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok provide users with opportunities to showcase their lifestyles, achievements, and desired self-images through various forms of digital content. This phenomenon demonstrates that social media has evolved into an important medium for constructing social identity in digital spaces (Hartono, 2024). In this context, personal branding has become a significant concept that refers to the strategic process through which individuals create and maintain a particular impression of themselves by communicating consistently within the digital public sphere (Gemintang, 2025).

The construction of self-image on social media is not merely an individual behavior but also an intentional social strategy aimed at shaping public perception. Individuals employ various social symbols, including lifestyle, social activities, and personal experiences, to gain social recognition, enhance their social status, and expand their social networks (Ramadhan & Siregar, 2022). Consequently, social media functions as a symbolic space that enables users to manage self-representation according to the identities they wish to project.

However, for sexual minority groups, the process of identity construction in digital spaces involves distinct dynamics. Previous studies indicate that many individuals with minority sexual orientations continue to conceal their sexual identities because of social pressure, stigma, and discrimination, suggesting that the actual population is likely larger than official survey estimates indicate (Worldmetrics, 2026). This condition highlights the continuing challenges faced by sexual minority groups in openly expressing their identities.

In addition to experiencing the same pressures for self-actualization as the majority population, sexual minority individuals also encounter stereotypes and social discrimination. These circumstances encourage them to adopt various strategies to develop a positive self-image and achieve greater social acceptance (Rahmadani & Mulyadi, 2022). In this regard, social media has become an important arena where individuals can utilize visual symbols, including photographs, videos, and fashion styles, to communicate the identities they wish to present to their audiences (Setiawan, 2022).

A growing body of research has demonstrated the important role of social media in the identity negotiation process among sexual minority groups. Abidin (2020) found that social media users consciously manage their digital self-representations to construct specific self-images and obtain social recognition. This finding is reinforced by Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin (2020), who argued that Instagram users tend to curate content that highlights attractive lifestyles, visual aesthetics, and personal achievements, indicating that digital identity is a socially

constructed representation designed through strategic self-presentation.

Furthermore, Noon et al. (2025) found that social media can create positivity bubbles digital environments that provide individuals with minority sexual orientations a sense of safety to express their identities more openly. Positive comments, likes, and supportive interactions among users provide social validation, strengthening both self-confidence and identity in digital environments.

In Makassar City, the use of social media among gay individuals demonstrates interesting dynamics in the construction of self-image within digital spaces. This phenomenon is reflected in the experiences of five informants who actively utilize social media to construct their digital identities. These informants were selected because they consistently present their lifestyles, professional activities, and social interactions in ways that reflect personal branding practices through carefully curated visual content and digital narratives.

Based on preliminary observations, the researcher found that the five informants use social media not only as a communication tool but also as a front stage for constructing particular identities. They demonstrate a high level of awareness in managing impressions through the careful selection of symbols and visual representations presented to their followers. This phenomenon indicates the existence of complex social strategies in social media use that extend beyond information sharing, functioning instead as systematic efforts to develop personal branding within the social context of Makassar City.

Therefore, this study is important for understanding how individuals from sexual minority groups in Makassar City utilize social media as a social strategy for developing personal branding. It is expected to provide a deeper understanding of how members of sexual minority groups construct their identities, gain social recognition, and adapt to the social dynamics of the digital era.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory, introduced in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, conceptualizes social life as a theatrical performance in which individuals act as performers who strategically present themselves to influence how they are perceived by others (Goffman, 1959). This process, known as impression management, involves the deliberate use of appearance, behavior, language, and symbolic cues to construct a desired social image (Manning, 1992). Goffman distinguishes between the front stage, where individuals consciously perform identities for public audiences, and the back stage, where they can express aspects of themselves that are not intended for public display.

In digital environments, these concepts remain highly relevant, as social media enables users to carefully curate their self-presentation by selecting the information, activities, and visual content they share while keeping more personal aspects of their lives private. Consequently, social media functions as a space for strategic identity construction, allowing individuals to manage their online representations in ways that support their personal branding and social objectives (Cover, 2020; Manning, 1992).

This dramaturgical framework is complemented by Goffman's (1963) concept of stigma, which explains how individuals who possess an attribute that is discrediting in the eyes of society such as a minority sexual orientation in a

predominantly heteronormative context develop strategies of information control to manage the visibility of that attribute. Read alongside personal branding theory, which emphasizes consistency, authenticity, and visibility as the core elements of a successful self-brand (Peters, 2020), Goffman's concepts help explain why the informants in this study foreground socially desirable roles (student, content creator, professional) on the front stage while treating their sexual identity as backstage information disclosed only within trusted circles.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to gain an in-depth understanding of identity management strategies through personal branding on social media among sexual minority groups in Makassar City. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables researchers to explore participants' subjective meanings, impression management, and the construction of digital identities within their natural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2019). The study was conducted from April to May 2026. The research setting included both virtual spaces, consisting of the Instagram and TikTok accounts of five informants, and physical locations in Makassar City where in-depth interviews were conducted.

The study focused on identity management strategies through personal branding, including the factors influencing digital identity construction, the use of lifestyle symbols, social media content management, and the implementation of personal branding elements displayed by the informants in digital spaces (Peters, 2020). The primary data consisted of social media documentation (photographs, videos, captions, comments, and likes) and in-depth interview data collected from the five informants, while secondary data were obtained from relevant scientific literature. In this study, the researcher served as the primary research instrument, supported by an interview guide, a content analysis coding sheet, and digital documentation tools (Sugiyono, 2020).

The informants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: individuals belonging to sexual minority groups, residing in Makassar City, actively using Instagram and/or TikTok, consistently demonstrating personal branding practices on their social media accounts, and willing to participate in the study. Data were collected through digital documentation, non-participant observation of social media activities, and semi-structured in-depth interviews to obtain comprehensive information regarding the informants' digital identity management strategies (Flick, 2019). Data trustworthiness was ensured through source triangulation, theory triangulation, and prolonged engagement to enhance the credibility of the findings (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020). Data were analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña interactive model, which includes data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification, carried out continuously throughout the data collection and research process (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Personal Branding Displayed by Five Informants from Sexual Minority Groups on Social Media

Based on observations of the informants' social media accounts and in-depth interviews with the five participants, the findings indicate that each informant demonstrated distinct personal branding characteristics shaped by their occupational background, social activities, and the self-image they intended to project to their audiences. Their personal branding was developed through various forms of content consistently shared on Instagram and TikTok. Through these posts, the informants sought to present specific identities in order to gain attention, obtain social recognition, and establish relationships with their followers on social media. *"I like to dress neatly and keep up with fashion trends. When I post on Instagram, usually choose photos that I think look good so that people can see the confident side of me."* (Angga). Angga's Personal Branding as a Fashionable and Confident Individual. Based on the interview and social media observations, Angga constructed a personal brand that emphasized being fashionable, confident, and up-to-date with current fashion trends. This was reflected in posts featuring his personal appearance and carefully curated clothing styles that reinforced this desired image.

How the Informants Construct Their Digital Image on Social Media

The interview and observational findings revealed that the process of constructing a digital image was not carried out spontaneously but rather through deliberate and consistently implemented strategies. Each informant employed unique approaches to managing their social media accounts in order to present identities aligned with their desired self-image. These strategies were reflected in the selection of content types, visual presentation, caption writing, and interactions with followers.

For the informants, social media served as an important platform for presenting themselves to the public. Through Instagram and TikTok, they attempted to highlight positive and attractive aspects of themselves in order to create particular impressions among their audiences. From the perspective of dramaturgical theory, these activities represent the front stage, where individuals perform identities that they intend others to perceive.

Maintaining Consistent Content

One of the primary strategies adopted by all informants was maintaining consistency in the type of content they shared. Angga consistently uploaded fashion- and lifestyle-related content, Ardi primarily shared university and organizational activities, Arif focused on point-of-view (POV) and humorous content, Bintang highlighted fashion content alongside her work as a sales promotion girl (SPG) at a shopping mall, while Ucil regularly posted content documenting personal transformation and lifestyle-related activities. Such consistency enabled each informant to strengthen a recognizable and coherent personal brand among their audiences.

Paying Attention to Visual Presentation

In addition to maintaining consistent content, all informants placed considerable emphasis on the visual quality of their posts. Clothing selection, shooting locations, lighting, and photo and video editing were carefully managed to create visually appealing content. Among the participants, Angga demonstrated the

greatest concern for visual presentation, considering visual appearance to be particularly important because it is the first aspect noticed by audiences and therefore plays a crucial role in creating positive first impressions.

Displaying Activities that Reinforce Self-Image

The informants also developed their digital identities by showcasing activities that reinforced the images they wished to project. Ardi frequently shared organizational and academic activities to portray himself as an active university student. Abay highlighted travel-related activities to strengthen his professional image as a tour leader. Meanwhile, Ucil predominantly shared content related to his work as a content creator and social media influencer, thereby reinforcing his identity as a digital creator.



Figure 1. Instagram Story Post Showing Organizational Activities on @Ardi

Ardi uploaded a series of visual photographs documenting campus organizational activities, including moments of formal presentations or discussions, collaborative interactions among organization members, and community service activities involving children. These posts were accompanied by the English caption, *"a small step, a warm experience."* From the perspective of Goffman's dramaturgical theory, this phenomenon can be interpreted as a form of front stage performance, where individuals consciously present social roles that they wish to emphasize before an audience. Through the deliberate selection of uploaded content, Ardi actively constructs an identity as a university student who is actively involved in organizations and concerned with social issues.

Selecting Information Shared on Social Media

The findings also indicate that the informants did not disclose every aspect of their personal lives on social media. Instead, they carefully selected information they considered appropriate for public consumption. Personal information or content that might generate negative responses was generally withheld from public view. Rather, they preferred to share activities that reinforced the self-image they intended to construct. In this study, Ardi chose to disclose information related to his sexuality only through Instagram's Close Friends feature, thereby limiting access to selected audience.

Forms of Identity Displayed by Informants from Sexual Minority Groups on Social Media

Based on observations of the informants' social media accounts and in-depth interviews, the findings revealed that the identities displayed on social media were not explicitly centered on their sexual orientation. Instead, the informants primarily presented socially desirable identities that were more likely to be accepted by broader audiences. They utilized Instagram and TikTok as front stage platforms to present personal characteristics they wished to be recognized for publicly. Through photographs, videos, captions, and interactions with followers, they constructed identities as productive, creative, independent, professional individuals with attractive lifestyles. *"I usually post activities that I'm actually doing, especially when I'm hanging out with friends or taking part in activities that I think are interesting enough to share."* (Angga).

Angga primarily presented himself as a stylish individual who was socially active and maintained extensive friendships. His social media posts were dominated by activities with friends, casual gatherings, and everyday moments that highlighted his social interactions. Through this content, Angga sought to portray himself as an open, friendly, and approachable person who easily connected with those around him.

The Use of Lifestyle Symbols as a Branding Strategy

The use of lifestyle symbols emerged as one of the most prominent strategies employed by the five informants in developing their personal branding on social media. These symbols were expressed not only through photographs and videos but also through everyday activities, occupational choices, fashion styles, places they visited, and the ways they interacted with their followers. By presenting these lifestyle symbols, the informants sought to create specific impressions that aligned with the images they intended to project within digital spaces.

From the perspective of Goffman's dramaturgical theory, these lifestyle symbols constitute elements of the front stage, where individuals consciously select particular aspects of their lives to present before an audience in order to create desired impressions.



Figure 2. Instagram Video Content Posted on @Arif

Based on the observed post, Arif uploaded a humorous Point of View (POV) video recorded at Batu Kitab, Mount Lompobattang. The use of the "POV" label in the video, together with its distinctive filming style, reflects the characteristic content consistently produced by Arif. The video not only showcases the natural scenery but also incorporates humorous elements that have become a defining feature of his social media presence. *"I usually create POV or parody content because it best matches my personality. I want people who watch my videos to immediately recognize that the content is mine."* (Arif).

According to Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory, Arif's actions represent a form of self-presentation on the front stage, where individuals perform identities they wish their audiences to perceive. In this case, Arif presents himself as a creative, humorous individual who keeps up with digital content trends through the consistent production of POV videos that have become his signature style. His consistency in producing the same type of content demonstrates an effort of impression management, whereby he strategically shapes audience perceptions so that followers can easily recognize and remember him through a distinctive content style that differentiates him from other social media users.



Figure 3. Photograph Posted on Angga's Instagram Account (@Angga)

Based on the observed photograph, Angga shared a moment of gathering and dining with several friends at a café or restaurant. The post reflects social interaction and togetherness within his circle of friends. Through this upload, Angga not only documented his ongoing activities but also conveyed that he maintains broad social relationships and actively interacts with many people.

According to Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory, this photograph represents the front stage, a setting in which individuals present the identities they want their audiences to perceive. In this post, Angga consciously portrays himself as someone with an active social life by documenting moments spent with friends. This behavior also illustrates impression management, as he strategically shapes the perceptions of his followers so that they view him as an individual with an extensive social network who is able to establish meaningful relationships with diverse people. Consequently, this post forms part of Angga's self-presentation strategy in developing his personal branding on social media.

In contrast to the other informants, Ardi predominantly shared activities related to university life, particularly while completing academic assignments and participating in campus activities. According to Ardi, these activities constitute the largest part of his daily life and are therefore appropriate to share with the public.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, social media serves as a strategic space for the five informants from sexual minority groups in Makassar City to develop personal branding, present their identities, and gain social recognition. The motivations underlying their personal branding efforts include the desire to establish a social presence, enhance self-confidence, expand social networks, and showcase their abilities and achievements.

Through consistent content management, the use of lifestyle symbols, and active engagement with audiences, the informants constructed distinctive self-images that reflected their individual characteristics and activities. Although they received support and appreciation from their audiences, they also encountered criticism and social stigma, which prompted ongoing identity negotiation between their digital and offline lives.

From the perspective of Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory, these practices represent a form of impression management, in which social media functions as the front stage for presenting carefully constructed identities, while more personal aspects of life are reserved for the back stage. Thus, social media functions not only as a communication platform but also as an important space for individuals from sexual minority groups to develop personal branding and maintain their social presence in the digital era.

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