

PANOPTICONS OF VIRTUAL IDENTITY ON WHATSAPP: SELF-ENCLOSURE OR SELF-ENCLOSING?

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ABSTRACT

Profile photos on social media platforms, such as WhatsApp, are often considered an extension of a person's identity. However, a growing trend among Generation Y and Z users reveals a preference for not displaying profile photos or using pseudonyms instead of real names. While this behavior may appear insignificant, it raises important questions about the underlying reasons for such decisions. This study aims to explore the factors that drive WhatsApp users to refrain from using profile photos. Adopting a descriptive qualitative approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with 13 participants to gather insights. The research utilizes Michel Foucault's concept of the panopticon to analyze the absence of profile photos as an act of self-regulation. Findings reveal that the motivations behind this behavior can be categorized into four key factors: interpersonal conflict, the desire to avoid social interactions, perceived surveillance by others, and self-discipline. Ultimately, a sense of being observed by their social

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environment prompts individuals to engage in self-regulation, such as removing their profile photo to maintain a sense of privacy and control.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, social media dominates various aspects in daily life. Commencing with the sharing of routine tasks and engaging in interpersonal communication towards the exchange of personal information. The rise of social media popularity has been significantly propelled by advancements in mobile technology (Ap et al., 2018). The integration of cameras into smartphones has revolutionized the production, adaptation, and distribution of images (Udo, 2018). Presently, young individuals extensively utilize social media for personal activities, such as sharing photos, videos, and other media (Ap et al., 2018; Udo, 2018). With internet-connected smartphones, images can be easily transmitted between users in real-time (Udo, 2018). Originally introduced by Facebook, one of the leading social media platforms, in 2004, profile photos became widely utilized by users starting from 2007. These images serve as a key indicator for uploading on multiple social networking sites. Profile photos hold significance as they depict the user's online persona and act as a means of identification for their online engagements (Ap et al., 2018).

Among the popular social media platforms, WhatsApp stands out as the preferred choice for social connection, especially among the younger, this platform relies on images for user identification (Udo, 2018), individuals have the opportunity to project their online identity (Ap et al., 2018). While WhatsApp profile pictures serve the purpose of verifying the identity of users

in chat conversations, these images also convey significant social and psychological information about the user in a visual format, with each individual displaying unique characteristics (Ap et al., 2018; Udo, 2018). Profile photos on social media platforms serve as representations of users' virtual identities, not limited to WhatsApp but across similar platforms where they facilitate user recognition and interaction. These images can indicate the temporal nature of users' identities (Udo, 2018).

Specifically on WhatsApp, profile photos are intended to express a user's self-identity, visually accompanying their name (Udo, 2018). In the realm of virtual identity, Koles et al. (2012) define it as the integration of one's self-development into the online environment, often differing from real-life identity. The creation of a 'virtual presence', including decisions about avatars and profile photos, is considered a constructed process Analogous to identity development in real life, constructing a virtual identity is an ongoing, iterative process influenced by individual, global, and community factors within specific online environments (Nagy & Koles, 2014). However, the concept of virtual identity encounters challenges when discussing users who opt not to use profile photos on their social media accounts.

This research conducted preliminary observations on the profile pictures of five WhatsApp users aged 19-22, who were active on the platform from January to February for approximately one month. The observations revealed diverse choices in profile pictures among users, including self-portraits, images with partners or family, celebrity photos, cartoon characters, pet pictures, meme images, and motivational quotes. The users demonstrated high activity levels in changing their profile pictures, although some opted to leave their profiles blank or without a WhatsApp profile picture altogether.

Based on the curiosity about WhatsApp users who have abstained from using a profile photo for an extended duration, approximately one month, conducted a targeted focus group discussion involving five participants aged between 19 and 22 years. To mitigate age-related bias, efforts were made to ensure a representative distribution of social media users in Indonesia.

According to data as of January 2022, Indonesia boasted a social media user base of 191 million individuals, with projections indicating growth to 210 million. Among these users, 30.7% fall within the 18-24 age bracket, with WhatsApp emerging as the country's most prevalent social media platform, utilized by 88.7% of Indonesians (Mahdi, 2022). Notably, WhatsApp ranks second only to YouTube in terms of usage within Indonesia (Kemp, 2023). The 18-24 age group dominates social media usage, categorized as late adolescence according to the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Indonesia (muamala.net, 2018). Teenagers within this age range often navigate social response choices while demonstrating evolving attitudes toward decision-making, a period marked by emotional instability.

On March 4, 2022, researchers conducted a focused group discussion involving five individuals aged between 19 and 22 years. The topic of discussion revolved around the significance of the profile photo feature on social media platforms, which serves as a representation of one's virtual identity. The decision to abstain from using a profile photo is often influenced by external factors, such as peer teasing, family comments, relationship issues, or a desire for privacy. To elucidate this phenomenon, researchers identified the Panopticon concept as a suitable framework for analysis. Originating from the disciplinary concept of a central observation tower surrounded by prison cells, the Panopticon ensures constant surveillance by a guard stationed in the tower, while prisoners remain unaware of whether they are being watched. This design fosters self-discipline among inmates, as they are perpetually under the threat of surveillance. Developed by Jeremy Bentham in the 18th century, the Panopticon embodies the notion of visible yet unverifiable power.

In the virtual realm, (Timrayner, 2021) posits that the online world functions as a virtual Panopticon, where individuals are unaware of who may be observing their activities, if at all. Whether posting on social media platforms like Facebook, uploading videos on YouTube, or contributing to blogs, individuals experience a pervasive sense of being 'observed',

influencing their online identity construction and presentation. This aligns with pre-research data indicating that users feel disciplined even within their private online spaces.

This research diverges from previous studies by centering on the absence of a profile photo on WhatsApp as a manifestation of virtual identity, rather than exploring the broader meanings of virtual identity or self-representation within it. Researchers perceive an opportunity to investigate this space, particularly regarding individuals who opt not to utilize a profile photo. Consequently, the study aims to delve into the processes through which digital personas shape and construct their value systems and beliefs within their virtual identities, with a specific focus on WhatsApp users who refrain from using profile photos.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Several related studies did not focus on addressing the factors influencing individuals' decisions not to use a profile photo. The study by (Ahad & Lim, 2014) investigated the utilization and impacts of WhatsApp among students, aiming to advance understanding of its effects and usage patterns, particularly among young individuals. It underscores WhatsApp's role as a versatile mobile communication tool for students, facilitating various aspects of communication, including academic discussions and information sharing alongside personal interactions with peers and family. The research highlights the benefits derived from WhatsApp usage in academic contexts, such as facilitating study-related discussions and information exchange. However, it also identifies significant challenges associated with excessive WhatsApp usage, including the pressure to promptly respond to messages, exposure to misinformation or unregulated content, connectivity issues, and potential addiction-related behaviors, which may disrupt students' academic pursuits.

Nevertheless, the study indicates that students demonstrate awareness and caution regarding the dissemination of unregulated information or media

content. This assertion is supported by survey findings indicating that a notable percentage of respondents acknowledge increased expectations for immediate responses to messages and the potential disruption of their studies due to WhatsApp usage. In summary, Ahad & Lim's (2014) research sheds light on the multifaceted implications of WhatsApp usage among students, emphasizing both its benefits and challenges, while also highlighting students' conscientiousness regarding issues such as prompt message responses and academic disruptions.

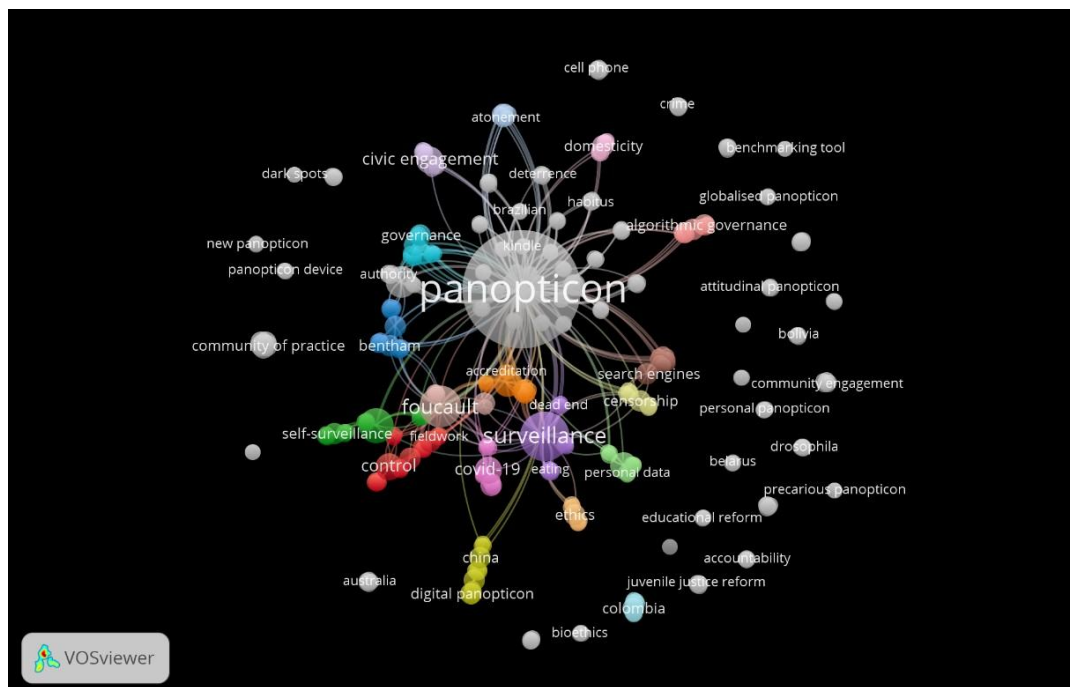
The study by (Maíz-Arévalo, 2018) delves into emotional self-presentation on WhatsApp, specifically through users' profile statuses. It explores how individuals utilize their WhatsApp status as a means of presenting themselves and shaping their image. Self-presentation, defined as the process of conveying one's self-image to others, holds significant importance in human communication and has been extensively examined in both offline and online contexts. The research aims to investigate the nature of self-presentation in users' WhatsApp profile statuses, particularly focusing on whether Spanish WhatsApp users tend to express their personal emotions as part of their self-presentation strategy. While Maíz-Arévalo's study provides valuable insights into how WhatsApp users utilize their profile statuses for self-presentation, it primarily focuses on emotional expression within this context.

Another study conducted by (Ap et al., 2018) investigated the relationship between users' personality traits and their WhatsApp display images (profile photos). The study aimed to identify patterns indicating a correlation between an individual's personality and their changes in display images over time, based on the Big Five personality traits: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness to experience, and neuroticism. Using a purposive sample, data was collected over a period of six weeks, during which participants display images on WhatsApp were monitored daily and categorized into four groups: images of the user themselves, images with social interactions, images featuring celebrities, and instances where no

display image was used. The research employed a descriptive qualitative approach with content analysis to address the research problem, considering unique features such as auto-base accounts prevalent in Indonesian society. The findings of the study indicated that individuals' personality traits indeed influenced their choice of display images on WhatsApp. However, this research suggested that personality traits alone may not be the sole determining factors behind users' choices of display images and their behavioral changes in this regard. Therefore, there could be other significant factors influencing these choices and behaviors, warranting further investigation.

Through bibliometric analysis, this research examined approximately 115 Scopus-indexed journals spanning from 2017 to 2022 that explored the concepts of panopticons and virtual panopticons. Utilizing tools such as Publish or Perish, Mendeley, and VOS Viewer, the analysis revealed several key findings.

Figure 1: Bibliometric Analysis

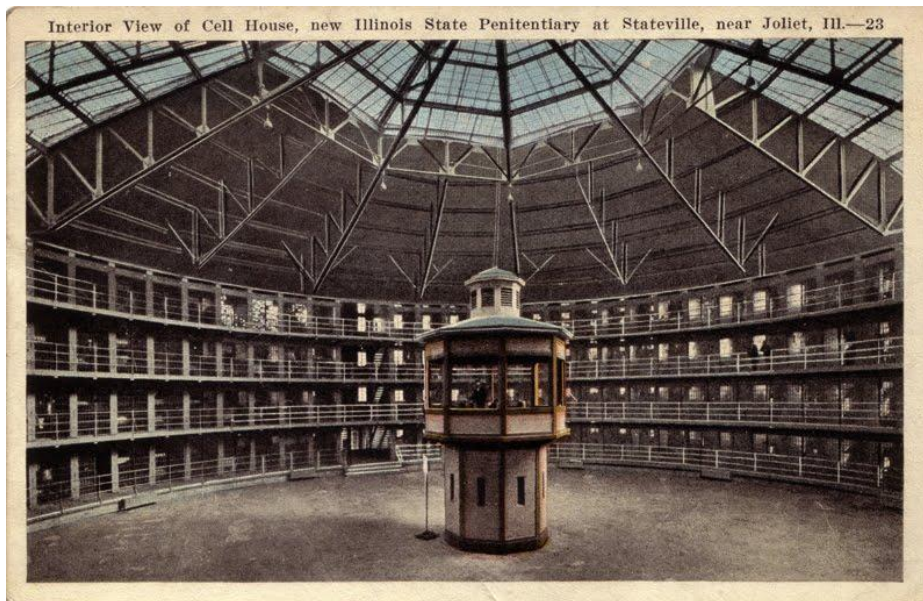


Source: VOS Viewer

Panopticons

The concept of the panopticon originates from the 18th-century English philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham, who envisioned it as a prison where a single guard could observe all the prisoners without them being able to see each other or the guard. This design aimed to enable constant surveillance of prisoners' activities, fostering a sense of uncertainty about being watched. French philosopher Michel Foucault expanded on Bentham's concept, proposing that it would lead to automatic control of behavior and consciousness. Foucault was intrigued by Bentham's model, which has since been applied in various institutional settings such as prisons, schools, hospitals, workplaces, and urban spaces, featuring a central guard tower surrounded by cells (Sheridan, 2016; Timrayner, 2021; Waycott et al., 2017).

Figure 2: Panopticon Prison Illustration



Source: *The Architecture of Surveillance: The Panopticon Prison* (Cutieru, 2020)

In the 21st century, French philosopher Michel Foucault expanded upon the concept of the panopticon as a metaphor for societal control extending to all individuals. Foucault proposed that citizens internalize authority embodied by laws and institutions, with power derived from constant observation. He likened

this disciplinary surveillance to a medieval village during quarantine, where strict separation and patrols were enforced to prevent villagers from leaving their homes, under the threat of death. This regime, termed a "disciplinary blockade," mirrored the absolute control akin to that of a dungeon, where inmates regulate their behavior under the constant gaze of authority figures. Foucault argued that Bentham's Panopticon instills a sense of self-regulation in prisoners, leading them to conform to institutional norms even beyond their confinement. This phenomenon, termed the "main effect" of the panopticon by Foucault, fosters a conscious awareness and perpetual visibility, ensuring the automatic functioning of power (Cutieru, 2020; ethics.org.au, 2016).

Rayner in (Waycott et al., 2017) suggests that the online world resembles a virtual panopticon, where users coexist in an asymmetric relationship within a confined digital space marked by visibility. The crucial aspect is that individuals often remain unaware of who is monitoring their online activities, or if they are being observed at all. When users engage in various online activities like posting on social media or contributing to blogs, they feel a constant sense of surveillance that influences how they portray themselves online (Waycott et al., 2017) However, unlike the traditional panopticon, there are no distinct roles of guards and prisoners in the virtual space; rather, individuals simultaneously act as both observers and subjects, monitoring and implicitly judging one another's content (Timrayner, 2021). Schwartz and Halegoua (2015) in (Waycott et al., 2017) stated that social media users present a highly curated version of themselves through various means such as images, videos, status updates, profiles, friends list, visible conversations, tastes and interests, and comments that appear in their profiles. In this way, Bentham's panopticon continues to evolve, and social media serves as its domain. While social media platforms may initially appear to offer a resolution that reality TV lacks, they essentially introduce users to a virtual panopticon (Avrick, 2017). In online sharing activities, the focus extends beyond self-affirmation and self-creation (Timrayner, 2021).

Virtual Identity

Hagger & Chatzisarantis (2006) characterize individual identity, or personal identity, as a set of relatively stable attributes inherent to the individual (Nagy & Koles, 2014). Lin and Hall define identity as a dynamic process influenced by various factors such as environment and time (Shao et al., 2017). Identity plays a crucial role in society, shaping individuals' perceptions through physical appearance, race, language, self-presentation, skin color, and other factors (Sakti & Yulianto, 2018). Before the digital era, identity development was constrained by physical realities and limited past experiences (Nagy & Koles, 2014).

An individual's displayed attributes contribute to their identity, and cultivating a positive self-identity is important for self-respect (Briandana et al., 2021). Identity encompasses all aspects of self-management, forming a comprehensive self-portrait. Personal identity acknowledges an individual's unique traits, cultural background, group affiliation, while social identity pertains to one's knowledge of belonging to a cultural group (Sakti & Yulianto, 2018). The concept of identity serves as a foundational element across various disciplines, including communication and psychology, and is referenced extensively in other fields (Nagy & Koles, 2014). The subsequent section of this research delves into the unique aspects of identity development within virtual contexts and further explores the concept of virtual identity.

Individuals must construct a virtual identity to represent their presence online (Koles & Nagy, 2012). Through avatars and associated profiles, users in cyberspace can craft their virtual identities to align with their desires and expectations (Nagy & Koles, 2014). One way of manifesting a virtual identity is by utilizing a WhatsApp profile photo. WhatsApp profile photos serve as a means for users to express various aspects of self-identity, including philosophical, psychological, cultural, political, and ideological beliefs (Udo, 2018). When individuals choose to establish a virtual presence, they inadvertently adopt a virtual identity, necessitating decisions during the avatar and profile creation

process (Nagy & Koles, 2014). Defined as one's self-development integrated into the online realm, virtual identity may diverge from real-life identity (Koles & Nagy, 2012).

At the individual level, several elements distinguish one person's virtual identity from another's (Nagy & Koles, 2014). Gorini et al. in (Nagy & Koles, 2014) stated avatars, particularly, play a central role in shaping individuals' sense of identity as they navigate virtual environments, gaining significance as users become more immersed. At the micro level, the term "connection" is relevant. Concerning identity development at the micro level, narrative scripts, virtual intimacy, virtual communities, and virtual material culture are categorized as connectors between individual users and the global community. Moving to the macro level, it encompasses elements associated with a broader global community within a virtual society (Nagy & Koles, 2014).

Virtual identities are intricate and adaptable conceptual constructs, which may mirror or diverge entirely from an individual's real-life identity, and are likely influenced by various motivators. These identities encompass both structural components, such as graphical and textual elements representing an individual's avatar and profile, and presentation aspects, like how one appears to others within virtual communities. Moreover, virtual identities are subject to continuous refinement through social interactions and feedback received from other users (Koles & Nagy, 2012).

METHODOLOGY

This study aims to investigate the reasons behind the absence of profile photos among WhatsApp users. The qualitative approach employed seeks to uncover the complexities of the research problem by delving into the meanings attributed by various individuals or groups within social contexts (Creswell, 2014). The research paradigm adheres to constructivism, viewing social science as an analysis of socially significant actions, allowing for a comprehensive examination of actors who shape their own social

environments. Employing a descriptive method, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of a social context or aims to explore and clarify a particular phenomenon or social reality (Creswell, 2014). The data collection technique was carried out through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation methods. In-depth interviews were conducted online with selected to the 13 informants. These informants have fulfilled several criteria of WhatsApp users:

1. Participants who do not use profile photos;
2. Participants who haven't used one for ≥ 1 month;
3. Participants who have never used one at all, and those who only use it at certain times.

The process of recruiting informants involved sending a questionnaire to the College Menfess (@collegemenfess) Twitter account, which offers a mention confession feature. This auto-base account with 1.1 million followers is a forum for students to share their aspirations. Despite its name implying a focus on college-related content, the followers of this Twitter account extend beyond the student demographic. Essentially, the account is accessible to the public, allowing anyone to follow it. The researcher has also been granted access to send direct messages to this auto-base account, enabling their messages to be automatically posted on the account's timeline.

The research location was conducted in a hybrid manner, involving both face-to-face and online interviews. Due to the nature of qualitative research and the process of data collection and analysis of the phenomenon under study, this qualitative study had a relatively long duration. The preliminary observations began in March 2022 while the interview process completed in October 2022.

Figure 3: Process for Sending Direct Messages to Autbase Accounts



Source: Twitter College Menfess

After conducting interviews with 13 informants, the researcher proceeded with the transcription process, which involves converting audio files into text using the InqScribe platform. Once all interview audio had been transcribed, analysis was conducted using the NVivo platform. NVivo serves as a tool for analyzing textual data, including interview transcripts, articles, and conference proceedings. The researcher organized the transcript data in NVivo by classifying them according to the informant's name. During the coding process, all interview transcripts were categorized using NVivo.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis of the interview transcripts with the 13 informants, the researcher generated various codes, including parent, child, and grand-child codes:

Table 1: First-Cycle of NVivo Coding

Parent Code	Child Code	Grand-Child Code
Alasan Tidak Menggunakan Foto Profil	Bingung Dalam Pemilihan Foto	
	Bosan	
	Burnout	
	Foto Profil Dianggap Tidak Penting	
	Insecure atau Kurang Percaya Diri	
	Konflik dengan Orang Terdekat	Menjadi Selingkuhan
	Lebih Percaya Diri Ketika Tidak Menggunakan Foto Profil	
	Menutup Diri	
	Merasakan Ketenangan	
	Overthinking	Gelisah
	Sesuai Mood	Malas
	Tidak Ada Foto	
	Tidak Ingin Menggunakan Foto	
	Energi Sosial Interpretasi Diri via Foto Profil	
	Keterpaksaan Menggunakan Foto Profil	Berhubungan dengan Dosen
Berkaitan dengan Kesopanan		
Berhubungan dengan HRD		
Menghindari Interaksi	Risih	
	Tidak Ingin Terlihat	Agar Dipandang Misterius Menyembunyikan Identitas
Pendisiplinan Diri	Tidak Suka Basa-Basi	
	Enggan Mendapat Komentar	
	Membatasi Diri	
	Mengurung Diri	
	Menyendiri	

Pengawasan Dari Orang Lain	Dianggap Memblokir
	Ditanya Perihal Tidak Menggunakan Foto Profil
	Spekulasi Orang Lain
	Tidak Suka Jika Mendapatkan Perhatian
	Merasa Terganggu

Source: NVivo

Following the completion of coding the interview transcript, the researcher proceeded to conduct a coding and analysis matrix. The objective of this matrix is to explore the interrelationship between different codes, thereby determining their relevance. The analysis yielded the following outcomes:

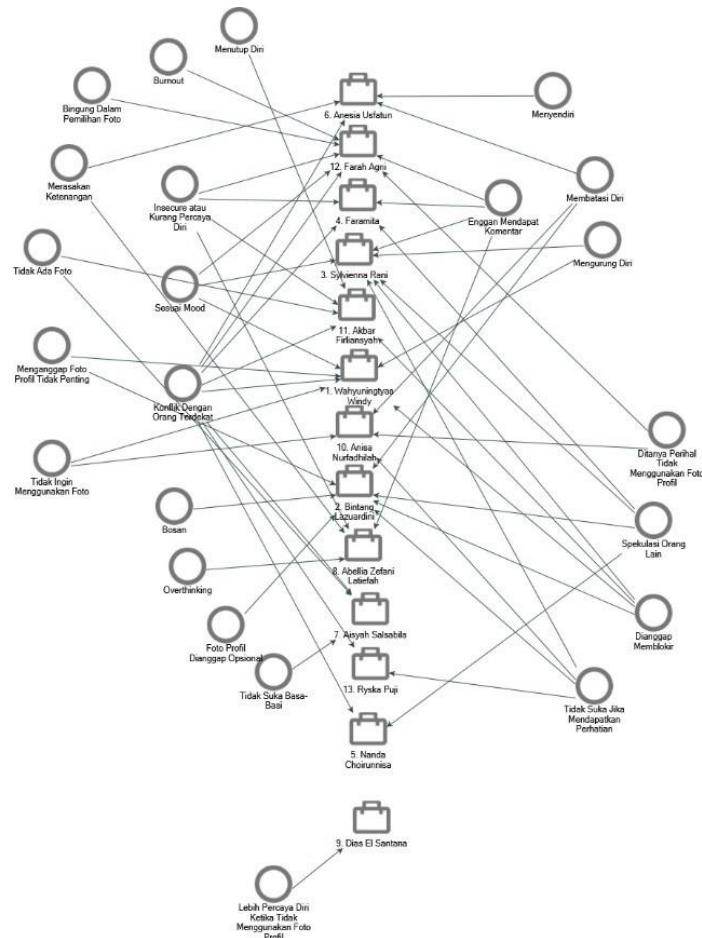
1. Word Tree;
2. Word Cloud;
3. Cluster Analysis; and
4. Project Map.

These analytical techniques were employed to elucidate the context of the informant's responses during the interviews. Specifically, the researcher utilized a word tree analysis to discern the context surrounding the discussion of profile photos.

During the interviews, "people" emerged as the most frequently mentioned term by the informants. To delve deeper into this finding, researchers conducted a word tree analysis to discern the context of the informants' discussions.

In an effort to understand the relationship between the word's "profile" and "person," researchers conducted cluster analysis. This allowed researchers to ascertain whether the informants' statements were interconnected. The analysis results indicated that the words mentioned by the informants were indeed correlated, facilitating further analysis by the researchers.

Figure 6: Project Map Coding



Source: NVivo

Each informant provided unique explanations for their decision not to use a profile photo. Through analysis, it was observed that certain informants shared similar reasons for abstaining from using profile photos. The predominant reason identified was conflicts with others, followed by various other rationales such as self-isolation, feeling burnt out, struggling to select suitable photos, experiencing a sense of tranquility, or simply considering profile photos as nonessential. Additionally, feelings of insecurity, lack of confidence, and mood fluctuations

were commonly cited reasons among the informants. Concerns about unwanted attention, perceived barriers to social interactions, and discomfort with others' scrutiny were also prevalent themes. Moreover, informants expressed apprehensions about speculation and inquiries regarding their choice not to use a profile photo. In terms of disciplinary coding, the foremost reason mentioned by informants was the aversion to receiving comments, followed by motives related to self-restriction, isolation, and solitude.

Interpersonal Conflict

The prevalent motives include interpersonal conflicts, avoidance of social interactions, and concerns about surveillance and oversight from others. The primary reasons cited by informants for not using a profile photo include conflicts with individuals in their immediate circles (such as family members, colleagues, and partners), a desire to avoid social interactions, and concerns about being monitored or disciplined by others. As informant 1 mentioned experiencing "domestic conflict" during her in-depth interview. While informant 2 and 3 expressed, "I just had a problem with my partner", "...there are problems with my boyfriend like problems with my family". Meanwhile Informant 3 said "Before, I encountered an issue with a friend, prompting them to casually scrutinize my account".

In addition to interpersonal conflicts, individuals' decisions to refrain from using a WhatsApp profile photo are also shaped by factors such as lack of self-confidence, overthinking, and mood instability. Some participants expressed that deleting their profile photo was a way to cope with disappointment or insecurity and regain a sense of calmness. Furthermore, some participants revealed that they felt more confident without a profile photo, considering it as not particularly significant. They expressed that their identity remains intact even without a visible photo. Interestingly, some participants reported feeling inner peace or spiritual calmness when abstaining from using a profile photo. This could be seen as a form of self-care or coping mechanism in response to conflicts with others,

triggering feelings of insecurity and anxiety. Overall, the decision to delete profile photos was often driven by external factors, such as conflicts with others, leading participants to discipline themselves and seek control over their emotions and interactions.

Avoiding Social Interactions

Deleting profile photos serves as a strategy to restrict interactions in virtual environments, essentially hiding one's virtual identity. Reasons for this decision vary, ranging from discomfort with socializing, reluctance to be noticed, aversion to engaging in small talk, to cultivating an air of mystery. Participants expressed feeling drained or lacking energy to engage in cyber interactions, leading them to opt for removing profile photos as a means to limit their online engagement.

Informant 4 said "I am lazy because people who are not important keep chatting, so I would rather avoid it. There are others who are not really close to me, so it is bothering. Informant 6 expressed "It is somewhat uncomfortable because, in my opinion WhatsApp is a bit private." While informant 8 mentioned, "At least by not using a profile photo, I do not make a status, they do not show when I am active." But it is different to informant 9 and 10, "It is like disappearing, hiding, just avoiding to be seen", "If I do not use a profile photo, my account comes across as sundered, mysterious, so I am like a really unpredictable figure." Another point of view explained by informant 11 and 12, "My social energy has depleted, so I am feeling lazy, that is what matters now", "I feel like being active on social media isn't really me, I do not know why I feel this way."

Feeling Surveillance by Others

The informant chooses to distance themselves in the virtual realm by omitting their WhatsApp profile photo. An additional reason behind this decision is the informant's aversion to receiving attention from others. They dislike being observed and are uncomfortable when they feel they are being "watched" by

numerous people. Informants expressed their discomfort when others regularly focused on their profile photos. Due to feelings of discomfort, anxiety, concern, and vulnerability, they opt not to display a profile photo. "With them being able to comment, it is unusual, meaning they are aware that I have never been online, never updated, and suddenly they comment like that, so I feel like, why?" Informant 13.

This aligns with Foucault's concept of the panopticon, where attention or supervision serves as a component of the panopticon (Cohen, 2019; Sheridan, 2016). These concerns are depicted as an influence that prompts informants to consciously or subconsciously regulate their behavior. Social media platforms essentially render our actions and engagements visible to a multitude of people, akin to a virtual panopticon. The attention directed towards the informant epitomizes the virtual panopticon, where they exist and are observed within a virtual space characterized by visibility (Timrayner, 2021; Waycott et al., 2017).

The central tenet of the virtual panopticon is the uncertainty surrounding who is monitoring one's online activities, when they are being monitored, or even if their networking endeavors are under scrutiny (Waycott et al., 2017). Researchers encountered this phenomenon during interviews with informants. They reported receiving direct or indirect messages from others regarding their profile photos, often unaware of such attention. The informant perceives comments from others regarding their profile photo as a form of surveillance, oblivious to the fact that many individuals have been paying attention to their profile photo all along.

Self-Discipline

Self-discipline is marked by their decision not to use a profile photo. They attempt to discipline themselves in their private space. One of the most commonly expressed reasons is their reluctance to receive comments from others. They eventually decide to seclude themselves, limit themselves, even to isolate themselves. Yes, in their own private space. This has an impact on their

virtual identity. By not displaying a photo as an identifier, it becomes difficult for others to recognize them.

Interestingly, this is exactly what they hope for. The ignorance of others about their identity. The informants truly present a highly curated version of themselves. WhatsApp profile, which should be entirely the user's choice, in this case, are influenced by the intervention of others. The construction of virtual identity here is formed not only from personal selves but also from the participation of others. This is a manifestation of the virtual panopticon. The informants also expressed that they often monitor and pay attention to other users regarding the absence of profile photos.

Researchers also found that not only emptying the profile photo, sometimes they use a profile photo out of necessity. Again, influenced by external factors. Others have a strong influence on the decision to use a profile photo or, in other words, their virtual identity is constructed by the intervention of others. Some informants expressed that they often feel compelled to use a profile photo for the purpose of contacting lecturers. Others admitted it was for work-related purposes. These reasons strengthen Foucault's argument that the panopticon is a blockade of discipline

Discussion

Social media is the domain of the panopticon. In the findings of this research, others have successfully regulated the behavior of informants by providing comments (positive or negative). From these comments, it eventually led the informants to empty their profile photos. Supervision is also often carried out by the informants. This is the purpose of the panopticon. However, as a distinction, in the virtual panopticon, there are no guards or prisoners. We are all both guards and prisoners. Observing each other. As time goes by, along with the feeling of being watched, these informants discipline themselves as if they were in the panopticon prison. Even after they are released from prison. Foucault refers to this phenomenon as the primary effect of the panopticon, namely to

promote the consciousness of inmates and create permanent visibility that guarantees the automatic functioning of power (Timrayner, 2021). Informants seem to have no control over their private space. This is consistent with what Mark Zuckerberg has stated, that social media is conscious and permanent visibility. Even when we are not being watched, the feeling will always be there.

WhatsApp profile photos can serve as a means for users to express various forms of self-identity, perceptions, philosophical tendencies, psychological, cultural, political, and even aspirations (Udo, 2018). The research findings demonstrate that WhatsApp profile photos, intended as users' virtual identities, are formed or constructed through a series of processes. Internal and external factors contribute to the formation of virtual identities. Internal factors originate entirely from the individual, such as personal preferences. External factors can include the environment and other people. These two factors ultimately shape identity. In this study, identity is manifested in the form of WhatsApp profile photos.

These internal and external factors lead individuals to decide whether to use a profile photo or not. In the research findings, many informants are reluctant to use a profile photo. The reasons vary. In this regard, external factors play a significant role in the decision not to use a profile photo. The external factors referred to are comments from others. Regarding internal factors, many informants admit to frequently lacking confidence, while others feel bored and do not have a photo.

From the complexity of these factors, one conceptual entity about virtual identity is formed. They present themselves in virtual space based on their respective versions. The virtual identities they display are the result of curated factors. This "version" eventually becomes ingrained in them and becomes an identity. Consistent with what (Sakti & Yulianto, 2018) stated, identity is a collection of all self-portraits in organizing oneself as a whole.

Numerous factors contribute to shaping one's identity. The substantial influence of these triggering factors, particularly external ones, led the informants to perceive them as disruptions, indicating significant intervention

from external entities. Consequently, to uphold the identity they have cultivated from the outset, they opted not to utilize a profile photo. The lack of a profile photo, often viewed as a means of individual monitoring and self-discipline, actually suggests alternative implications—individual strategies aimed at preserving their virtual identity. These strategies encompass refraining from using a profile photo under specific circumstances, abstaining from using one for an extended period (≥ 1 month), and abstaining from using one altogether since the inception of WhatsApp usage.

CONCLUSION

The construction of virtual identities on WhatsApp is a nuanced process influenced by a dynamic interplay of internal and external factors. Individuals actively shape their identities based on personal preferences, values, and characteristics. However, external influences, such as feedback and interactions with peers, significantly impact these identity constructions, particularly in the context of profile photo usage. Profile photos serve as a curated representation of the self, where decisions regarding their presentation are often shaped by comments, opinions, and judgments from others.

The study highlights the presence of disciplinary mechanisms resembling the concept of the panopticon, wherein the feeling of being constantly observed leads users to engage in self-regulation. This self-regulation may manifest as refraining from using profile photos altogether, reflecting how users navigate the pressures of virtual scrutiny and the desire for authentic self-representation.

Despite providing valuable insights, the study faced several limitations. These include a relatively narrow participant demographic and methodological constraints. Addressing these limitations opens avenues for future research to explore a more diverse participant pool and adopt innovative methodological approaches. Additionally, further studies could

examine other features of WhatsApp beyond profile photos to better understand their implications for virtual identity formation and the broader phenomenon of identity construction in digital spaces.

By addressing these areas, future research could expand on the current findings, offering a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics surrounding virtual identities and the role of digital platforms like WhatsApp in shaping them.

LIMITATION AND STUDY FORWARD

This research focuses on the phenomenon of the absence of a WhatsApp profile image, which serves as a virtual representation of a user's identity. This research contributes to the existing literature on virtual identity analysis and the panopticon concept. By offering insights into the complexities of identity construction in virtual spaces, it seeks to advance scholarly discussions in these areas. It can serve as a valuable resource for future research endeavors in the field of communication science, providing a foundation for further exploration and analysis.

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This study offer valuable insights into the significance of virtual identity, shedding light on the complexities surrounding profile photos and virtual identities. This research provides a new perspective for social media stakeholders, offering a deeper understanding of these dynamics and their implications.

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