

THE EXPERIENCES OF DEAF PEOPLE IN USING SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

Social media is widely used, but in-depth exploration is still needed regarding accessibility for deaf people. Previous research has indicated that some platforms lack accurate accessibility features. Nevertheless, deaf people continue to use social media to obtain information and communicate. This study aims to describe the experiences of deaf people in using social media to express their identity and feeling. There were five participants who are deaf individuals as members of deaf community in East Jawa which actively used social media, and were aged above 17 years old. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's reflective thematic analysis. The findings revealed five major themes: (1) social media as a more accessible visual world, (2) feeling connected and socially present, (3) self-expression and identity negotiation in digital space, (4) vulnerability and the need for safety in online interactions, and (5) meaningful adaptation through resilience and agency. Participants used platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and WhatsApp to communicate with both local and international deaf communities, obtain information, and express personal and professional identities. Nevertheless, they experienced challenges related to written language limitations, misunderstandings in text-based interaction, lack of captions, and account restrictions due to platform norms. Participants responded by using multimodal communication strategies (text, video calls, sign language videos), seeking social support, and setting interaction boundaries. These findings highlight that social media serves as both an empowering and contested space for deaf individuals, emphasizing the need for inclusive platform design and digital literacy support.

Keywords : deaf experience, social media, adaptation strategy, phenomenology

Introduction

Social media has become a widely used communication space today and is important even for the deaf community. Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube enable deaf individuals to express themselves and their cultural identity in various life experiences and build social networks. Research by Azahari et al. (2021) shows that social media functions as an information space that strengthens interactions within the deaf community, while Setyaningsih et al. (2024) highlights how deaf influencers utilize social media to educate the public about sign language and cultural awareness. The study explains that social media helps deaf people build cross-regional social networks through visual platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, which enable nonverbal communication. However, even though digital platforms provide great opportunities for social participation, there are still significant technical barriers, such as a lack of accessibility features and text limitations on videos (Mack

et al., 2020). On the other hand, social media is important to use as a tool for empowerment and a space to fight discrimination and marginalization faced by deaf people (Saunders, 2006). Digital platforms enable deaf individuals to access information and build supportive communities (Ellcessor, 2016).

Deaf people primarily share content in written English on social media despite for sign language due to the lack of support for sign language on digital platforms (MacK et al., 2020). Further, smartphones are the preferred device for accessing social media among deaf and hard-of-hearing adults, with a focus on visual components such as sign language videos and graphics (Yessengaliyev et al., 2025). For the communication using written language and text, deaf people also used emoticons. Emoticons are widely used by deaf individuals to express emotions and facilitate self-disclosure on platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook (Rachdito & Hidayat, 2022). In addition, there are some benefits of social media for deaf people. Social media helps deaf individuals stay in touch with family and friends, and it is used for work-related communication which provides a platform to build intimate relationships and community cohesion (Kożuh et.al, 2016).

Previous research on deafness and social media has focused on aspects of technology, education, and accessibility of social media for deaf people, such as the use of social media as a learning tool for deaf students (Toofaninejad et al., 2017). Other studies on how to design inclusive applications for sign language users (Yeratziotis et al., 2023) tend to ignore the subjective experiences of how deaf individuals personally feel, interpret, and express their identities in the digital space. In addition, most approaches use quantitative methods to measure the satisfaction of deaf students in China with social media use and life satisfaction, which still do not explain the social and emotional aspects of these findings in detail. In Indonesia, research on deafness also focuses on education, language, and public policy (Mabruroh, 2022). Therefore, further research is needed on how social media affects deaf individuals in building social relationships and its influence on community development.

This study aims to describe the experiences of deaf people in using social media. By emphasizing the subjective personal experiences of individuals, it is hoped that a unique picture of each deaf individual can be provided. Therefore, the research questions to be answered in this study is how do deaf people use social media in their live personally to express their identity and feeling?

Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach using phenomenology. Phenomenology was chosen because the main objective is to explore and understand the experiences of deaf individuals in using social media based on their own perspectives. Phenomenology seeks to understand the meaning experienced by participants, not just to explain the phenomenon objectively (Creswell, 2013). Data was collected through observation, in- depth interviews using sign language, text conversations, and assistance from sign language interpreters. The use of several forms of communication was intended to make the interviews inclusive and in accordance with the preferences of each participant. The statements from the participants were then identified for their meaning and grouped into main themes in accordance with the

research questions. After that, the researcher described what was experienced and how the experience occurred.

There were five participants of this research following criteria: deaf individuals who were members of deaf community in Jember, East Java, Indonesia who actively used social media, and were aged above 17 years old. Based on these criteria, five research subjects were obtained, namely: (1) DL, aged 19, a tailor and elementary school graduate who actively uses Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp; (2) SL, aged 24, a recent bachelor's degree graduate and assistant teacher at a special needs school who actively uses Instagram, TikTok, Pinterest, and WhatsApp; (3) HZ, aged 38, a high school graduate, working as a car washer, actively using Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp; (4) CC, aged 21, a university student, actively using Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp; and (5) IR, aged 26, an elementary school graduate, a photographer, actively using Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp.

Data analysis used Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflective thematic analysis framework. Further, this research described the findings according to the qualitative research reporting standards presented by O'Brien et al. (2014). Both authors are experienced qualitative researchers working with socially marginalized populations. This research considered reflective thematic analysis to be the most appropriate methodology for presenting deaf people experiences in using social media. The analysis stages carried out in this study are as follows: (1) data identification, (2) transcript coding, (3) generating initial themes, (4) reviewing emerging themes, (5) defining themes, and (6) writing down findings.

Results

Exploring the experiences of deaf people in using social media which have limitations in the ability to hear and understand spoken language. Three core themes that illustrated the experiences deaf people emerged from data: (1) social media as a visual world that more accessible, (2) feeling connected and socially present, (3) self-expression in a digital space, (4) experiencing vulnerability and the need for safety in digital platforms, and (5) meaningful adaptation in using digital platform.

1. Social media as a visual world that more accessible

Theme 1 illustrated subjective experiences in using social media, which were not only related to the use of technology but also to visual access for communication that was independent of spoken language. Visual interactions with written text, video content, and sign language aligned with the natural communication modalities of deaf individuals. This allowed them to be less dependent on sign language interpreters because they could choose the appropriate communication method on social media.

1.1. Visual communication for deaf people's natural interaction access

Facial expressions and body language are achieved through video-based interactions. SL explained that using video communication with sign language can convey not only messages but also emotional meaning, as misunderstandings sometimes occur when using text alone. Misunderstandings in text, as written communication, are limited not only by the lack of emotional expression but also

by the deaf limited ability to speak Indonesian. The visual modality is in keeping with deaf culture.

1.2. Focused on non-verbal communication

In verbal communication involving hearing individuals, deaf individuals missed some information because hearing individuals speak too quickly. Deaf cannot read rapid oral movements, but hearing individuals cannot speak sign language. SL said he once taught sign language by introducing the alphabet, but was instead ridiculed, leaving him traumatized by the incident. CC also experienced bullying due to his hearing impairment, resulting in feelings of isolation and frustration. CC stated the need for sign language interpreters to understand verbal communication or encourage them to speak slowly. According to CC, social media allows for more complete social interaction through translated text, written messages, and visual content as a form of inclusivity.

1.3. Social media as a space for active participation

Social media is a platform for deaf people to participate on an equal footing with hearing individuals. Deaf people can participate in content creation, for example, by following TikTok trends by dancing with hearing friends even though they can't hear the music. CC said, "I can dance with hearing people even though I can't hear the music. I'm happy." Deaf people could also have control in using social media because they could rewind videos or pause them to read the text for more understanding. DL felt embarrassed when he had to ask hearing people to repeat what they said, so she pretended to understand. He also sometimes gets tired of having to repeat himself to hearing people because they didn't understand

2. Feeling connected and socially present

Theme 2 describes the deaf experience on social media, which was not only a space for communication but also emotionally meaningful, connecting with others and being valued. Social media allowed interaction through visual channels, giving deaf people time to explore and build relationships without requiring auditory communication.

2.1. Social media as a social support

Participants perceived social media as a space where they could connect with other deaf individuals or the deaf community. DL communicated with deaf people not only from within Jember, but also from outside Jember, East Java, and even abroad. Interactions through TikTok Live were not only considered entertainment but also a medium for building relationships and providing mutual support.

2.2. Cross-border friendship and expanding social identity.

Participants used social media like Instagram and TikTok to build relationships beyond their local communities. For example, DL interacted with deaf people from France, Pakistan, Russia, and Chile. DL admitted that he didn't fully understand their sign language because of the differences. However, he seemed to have made new friends, and despite the difficulties, he still managed. CC also felt

connected to deaf people from abroad, despite the difference in sign language, but some expressions were still understandable.

3. Self-expression in a digital space

Theme 3 describes individuals using social media to express, construct, and negotiate their identities. Social media is not only for communication but also for visually expressing deaf culture. They could actively and creatively express themselves, especially through visual formats such as videos, images, photos, captions, and sign language.

3.1. Social media as a space for self-expression

Participants use social media as a platform for creativity and self-expression, not only as deaf individuals but also as workers, creators, and diverse identities. For example, IR used Instagram to showcase her photography work. IR wanted to demonstrate that her photography and image editing skills were worthy of being exhibited. CC, who also displayed dance content and campus-related posts, illustrates how social media enables her to participate in digital culture. Although CC couldn't hear music, she could still visually display and share experiences. This demonstrated how social media enabled deaf individuals to construct multidimensional identities that encompass social roles and personal interests beyond deafness itself.

3.2. Written identity as an expression of visual culture

Participants expressed their deafness through visual language and communication practices. Deaf culture is demonstrated through sign language, gestures, and facial expressions, which serve as their identity. In this case, during live broadcasts on TikTok and Instagram, DL demonstrated globally understandable sign expressions. They use sign language to demonstrate their identity and how to communicate so that they can be socially recognized.

3.3. Advocacy and desire to educate the public

Social media is used as a platform to educate others about the experiences of deaf people facing social exclusion. SL uses social media to showcase educational comics she created based on her experience of being ignored in public spaces when she couldn't hear when called to the doctor. SL expresses her identity as someone who is socially conscious and actively involved in promoting inclusion. Her content represents the realities of deaf life and communicates the need for inclusivity.

3.4. Negotiating identity under platform norms

Although social media enables identity expression, participants also experience obstacles and vulnerabilities related to platform regulations and algorithmic systems. Deaf cultural expressions can be misunderstood or interpreted differently by hearing-dominated norms in digital systems. DL and HZ's experience of being blocked for displaying the middle finger gesture illustrates this issue. While the gesture might be used jokingly in deaf interactions, the platform's algorithm categorized it as inappropriate.

4. Experiencing vulnerability and the need for safety in digital platform

Theme 4 describes participants' experiences of vulnerability and insecurity when using social media. While social media is often experienced as an easily accessible and empowering visual space, participants also noted that the digital environment can present uncertainty, emotional discomfort, and psychological risks. From their subjective perspective, social media is not always a safe or predictable space. Instead, it is experienced as a space that requires constant caution, selective trust, and the management of personal boundaries.

4.1. Anxiety and misunderstanding

Participants noted that text-based communication on social media can create misunderstandings. Written messages are often perceived as an accessible alternative to spoken language, but participants' experiences suggest that this was also influenced by the varying written Indonesian language skills of deaf individuals. SL explained that not all deaf individuals have strong reading and writing skills in Indonesian, which increases the likelihood of misinterpretation. From a subjective perspective, this creates anxiety and hesitation during interactions, as participants fear misunderstanding messages or responding incorrectly. This can lead to feelings of insecurity and self-doubt, especially when communication is rapid or when participants interact with individuals who perceive them as having good literacy skills.

4.2. Feeling confused facing platform restrictions

One of the main forms of vulnerability described by participants was the experience of being blocked or restricted by social media platforms. Participants HZ and DL expressed frustration and confusion when their accounts were blocked without a clear explanation. HZ described disappointment when her TikTok account was blocked and she didn't understand the reason. Similarly, DL experienced being blocked for a middle-finger gesture that was interpreted as offensive by the platform.

4.3. Fear of fraud and distrust toward strangers in online interaction

Participants perceived social media as a space where trust must be carefully managed. Online interactions allow communication with strangers, but participants expressed concerns about fraud in digital spaces. SL specifically highlighted anxiety about potential fraud and described the need to verify a stranger's identity before continuing an interaction. In online spaces, identities can be hidden or faked, creating a sense of psychological risk. Nevertheless, DL still feels comfortable interacting with strangers, although he feels the need to exercise caution. Therefore, he communicates more on social media with his old friends in various regions.

4.4. Discomfort with exposure and the need protect privacy boundaries

Another important form of vulnerability relates to privacy and emotional boundaries. Several participants described discomfort when interacting with outsiders who exhibit excessive curiosity. IR, for example, avoided interacting with deaf communities outside his area because he felt uncomfortable with intrusive

questions or attention. IR's selective interactions reflect a need for self-preservation and emotional control.

5. Meaningful adaptation in using digital platform

Theme 5 describe the independence of deaf individuals in responding to the challenges faced in using social media. While previous themes revealed that social media provided accessibility and emotional connection, as well as vulnerability and insecurity, this theme emphasizes how participants actively develop strategies to manage barriers, maintain communication, and sustain their participation in the digital environment. Participants demonstrated an active and adaptive role in using social media.

5.1. Multimodal communication strategies

Participants explained that effective social media use requires flexibility in communication methods. Rather than relying on a single mode, they combine multiple strategies such as text messages, captions, sign language videos, emojis, and video calls. This multimodal communication becomes a form of adaptive competence. For example, SL uses WhatsApp and Instagram by combining text messages and sign language videos to avoid misunderstandings. She recognizes that text alone can cause confusion due to literacy differences among deaf individuals, so she adapts by using video to clarify meaning. This demonstrates that participants experience communication as something that must be managed strategically to ensure mutual understanding.

5.2. Seeking support

Participants described seeking help from family members, friends, or fellow deaf individuals to resolve digital challenges. This support could include understanding online messages, managing devices, or interpreting platform rules. For example, during TikTok live broadcasts, deaf individuals helped each other by providing phone stands or assisting with technical setup. Such cooperation strengthened emotional connections and reduced feelings of isolation.

5.3. Digital self-protection through boundary-setting and selective interaction

Participants developed protective strategies to maintain psychological well-being. Instead of interacting openly with everyone, they selectively chose who to interact with and how much personal information to share. This suggests that adaptation encompasses not only participation but also withdrawal as a deliberate coping strategy. IR's avoidance of unfamiliar deaf communities and outsiders reflects this boundary-setting process. She recognized the intrusive and emotionally uncomfortable interactions, so she protected herself by limiting engagement. This suggests that resilience does not always mean active interaction; sometimes resilience is expressed through self-control and the ability to say no.

5.4. Creativity and adaptation

Some participants adapted by transforming social media into a space of opportunity. DL's livestreaming activities, for example, are not only social but also economic. He uses TikTok livestreaming to earn income through digital gifts. This

demonstrates that participants use social media not only as a communication platform but also as a space for independence and empowerment.

Table: 5 themes of deaf experiences using social media

Theme	Sub-theme	Finding	Interpretation
Social media as a visual world	Visual communication as natural interactions	Social media enables visual-based communication (video, gestures, facial expressions, sign language). Participants chose TikTok/Instagram because they can use video and expression.	Social media is understood as a social space that "fits the deaf way of life" because visuals are central to their experiences.
	Focused on non-verbal communication	Participants felt it was easier to interact without the barriers of verbal communication. CC felt that videos without captions made her feel misunderstood, while captions made her feel included.	Social media provided a space that reduced social pressure because they didn't have to follow the communication norms of listeners.
	Social media as a space for active participation	Online activities offer the opportunity to follow trends, share content, and interact without direct barriers. CCs could participate in dance content and campus activities through TikTok.	Social media is understood as a space of social equality, where participants feel "equal" to those listening.
Feeling connected and socially present	Social media as a social support	Participants felt they had found a community and friends who understood the deaf experience. DL interacted with deaf communities from various countries.	Social media was seen as a social space that provided a collective identity and a sense of acceptance.
	Cross-border friendship and expanding social identity.	Participants built global friendships through social media. DL made friends with deaf people from France, Russia, Pakistan, and Chile.	Social media was interpreted as a space for expanding social identity: being deaf wasn't a local identity, but a global one.
Self-expression in a digital space	Social media as a space for self-expression	Participants express their interests, lifestyles, and daily activities through content. CC creates content about dance and campus life.	Social media is seen as a personal platform for building a broader identity (not just about being "deaf").
	Written identity as an expression of visual culture	Sign language and body language are used as forms of identity representation. The interaction between DL and the deaf community on TikTok Live utilizes visual gestures.	Sign language is not only a means of communication but also a symbol of culture and identity.
	Advocacy and desire to educate the public	Social media is used to voice experiences of discrimination and educate the public. SL created an educational comic	Participants interpret social media as a space for identity struggles and social equality.

		about discrimination in healthcare.	
	Negotiating identity under platform norms	Certain expressions can be considered unlawful, leading to account bans. DL was banned because the middle finger gesture was deemed offensive.	Participants felt their visual identities could be misinterpreted by algorithms and mainstream norms
Vulnerability and safety in digital platform	Anxiety and misunderstanding	Text-based communication can lead to misunderstandings and a lack of confidence. SL stated that many deaf people have difficulty understanding what they read.	Literacy barriers are not only academic, but also psychological experiences that lead to social anxiety
	Feeling confused facing platform restrictions	Account blocking without explanation frustrates participants. HZ and DL was disappointed when TikTok was blocked without any clear reason.	Social media is interpreted as an unfair space controlled by a non-transparent system.
	Fear and distrust	Participants were more wary of strangers and potential scams. SL was more cautious around strangers due to fear of scams.	The digital world was perceived as a risky space that required heightened vigilance
	Discomfort with exposure	Some participants avoided certain communities due to discomfort. IR avoided interacting with deaf communities outside the region due to discomfort.	Social media was perceived as a space that could threaten privacy and make identities feel "exposed."
Meaningful adaptation in using digital platform	Multimodal communication strategies	Participants used a combination of text, video, emojis, and sign language. SL used text and video sign language to avoid misunderstandings.	Adaptation is understood as the ability to control communication to maintain effectiveness.
	Seeking support	Support from friends, family, and the community helps participants stay active. During live sessions, participants share tools and technical assistance.	Resilience builds from social connections and community solidarity.
	Digital self-protection	Participants were selective in their interactions and limited privacy. IRs preferred limited interactions; SL verified strangers.	Agency was demonstrated through the ability to set boundaries to maintain emotional safety
	Creativity and adaptation	Social media is used for income, existence, and independence. DL earns income from TikTok live streaming gifts.	It was seen as a space for empowerment and broader life opportunities.

Discussions

The results of this study indicate that deaf individuals perceive social media as a visual space that is inherently more aligned with their communication styles. This finding is consistent with recent studies that confirm that visual-based media, such as video, facial expressions, and sign language that provide a greater sense of accessibility than solely audio- or text-based communication. Thus, the experiences of participants in this study reinforce the view that social media is not only a communication tool but also a medium that is “culturally appropriate” for deaf identity (Ahlin & Hiddinga, 2023). Further, The themes of feeling connected and socially present demonstrate that social media serves as a source of social support and emotional affiliation. Recent research has shown that social media use is positively associated with life satisfaction, self-esteem, and perceived social support among deaf and hard-of-hearing college students. Social media helps deaf individuals overcome social isolation by mediating the relationship between social support and psychological well-being. This aligns with participants' experiences of feeling "socially present" through cross-border interactions, despite differences in sign language. Social media thus shapes deaf identity as global, not merely local (Huang et al, 2024).

In the context of self-expression in a digital space, this study demonstrates that social media enables deaf individuals to project multidimensional identities—as workers, creators, students, and social advocates—rather than simply as "people with disabilities." These findings reinforce the literature that views deafness as a cultural and linguistic identity, not simply a medical condition. The formation of deaf individuals' self-identity is strongly influenced by opportunities to authentically express their language and culture. Social media provides a symbolic space for this expression through sign language, gestures, and visual representations, which contributes to the strengthening of positive self-concepts and identities (Brice et al, 2016). However, the themes of vulnerability and the need for safety demonstrate that social media also poses a vulnerable space for deaf individuals. Barriers to written literacy, text-based miscommunication, and algorithmic systems insensitive to deaf culture create anxiety and feelings of injustice. Stigma, technological bias, and unequal access remain major challenges for the deaf community in digital spaces. Account blocking due to misinterpreted visual expressions demonstrates that digital platforms are still dominated by hearing norms, often marginalizing deaf experiences (Aldè et al., 2025).

Further, social media has made interaction with hearing individual more accessible compared to in-person interaction (Paglieri et al., 2023). Although, using social media faced some challenges like misinformation, privacy and security concern and accessibility issues. Deaf people encounter misinformation related to deaf culture and sign language that can lead to confusion and uncertainty (Rachdito & Hidayat, 2022; Sharevski et al., 2025; Ulep et al., 2022). Further, Privacy issues and the potential for cyberbullying and audism (discrimination against deaf people) are significant concerns for deaf users on social media (Saunders, 2016). The negative impacts also occur in deaf experience. The emotional and psychological impact

to the online disclosure of deaf people often include trauma-related narratives, and reflecting the emotional challenges (Zhao et al., 2025)

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the relatively small number of participants from a single geographic region (Jember, East Java) limits the generalizability of the study results to the broader deaf population. The experiences of deaf individuals are strongly influenced by social, cultural, and educational contexts, as well as local policies related to accessibility. Second, limitation relates to variations in written and sign language literacy skills among participants. Differences in education level and language competency could potentially influence the depth of narratives conveyed during interviews, even though researchers used multiple communication modes (sign language, text, and interpreter assistance). Third, Phenomenological qualitative methods allow for in-depth exploration of subjective experiences, but also have limitations in measuring causal relationships or the long-term impact of social media use on the psychological well-being of deaf individuals.

Conclusion

The study concluded that social media plays a crucial role in the social and psychological lives of deaf individuals, serving not only as entertainment but also as a visual-based communication space that supports connection, self-expression, identity negotiation, and a sense of community through platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and WhatsApp. Participants perceived social media as empowering because it aligns with deaf communication culture through video, sign language, and visual interactions, allowing them to build relationships even across borders and express multidimensional identities beyond disability. However, they also face vulnerabilities such as misunderstandings in text-based communication, limited accessibility features, privacy concerns, the risk of fraud, and platform restrictions caused by algorithmic bias toward hearing-centered norms. Despite these challenges, deaf individuals demonstrated resilience through multimodal communication strategies, seeking support from their communities, and setting boundaries for safety, demonstrating that social media is both a meaningful empowering space and a contested space that still requires more inclusive and accessible design.

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