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THE ROLE OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES IN SHAPING SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND COLLECTIVE DIGITAL IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

Online communities have become an important part of contemporary social life, providing digital spaces where individuals communicate, exchange information, develop relationships, and construct shared identities. Through social networking platforms, discussion forums, interest-based groups, gaming communities, and virtual networks, people connect with others who share similar interests, experiences, values, and goals. These communities influence how individuals understand themselves and others, how they maintain social relationships, and how they develop a sense of belonging in digital environments. This study examines the role of online communities in shaping social relationships and collective digital identity, with particular attention to communication patterns, social interaction, group participation, shared values, and digital belonging. It explores how repeated interaction and participation in online groups can strengthen social connections, encourage cooperation, and create shared cultural meanings. At the same time, it considers challenges such as misinformation, exclusion, online conflict, privacy concerns, social pressure, and the weakening of boundaries between online and offline identities. The study adopts a qualitative, literature-based approach to examine existing research and identify major themes related to online communities and digital identity formation. The discussion suggests that online communities can contribute positively to social support, cultural exchange, and collective identity when participation is inclusive, respectful, and responsible. However, their influence depends on platform structures, community norms, user behavior, and digital literacy. The study concludes that online communities are not simply communication spaces; they are increasingly important environments in which modern social relationships and collective identities are developed and negotiated.

KEYWORDS:*Online communities, social relationships, collective digital identity, online interaction, digital belonging, social networking, virtual communities, group participation, social support, digital communication, online culture, community engagement, identity formation, social connection, internet society.*

INTRODUCTION

The development of internet technologies has transformed the ways individuals communicate, interact, and establish relationships with one another. In traditional societies, social relationships were largely developed through face-to-face communication, family networks, educational institutions, workplaces, and geographical communities. Although these forms of interaction continue to play an important role, digital technologies have created additional spaces in which individuals can meet, communicate, exchange ideas, and develop meaningful social connections. Online communities have emerged as an important feature of this transformation. They allow people from different geographical locations, cultural backgrounds, and social environments to participate in shared discussions and activities. Through social media groups, online forums, messaging platforms, gaming networks, professional communities, and interest-based websites, individuals can build relationships that extend beyond the limitations of physical distance. These digital environments have become especially significant because they provide opportunities for communication, cooperation, emotional support, information sharing, and collective participation. Bingley, W. J., Worthy, P., Wiles, J., & Haslam, S. A. (2026). found thatOnline communities can be understood as groups of individuals who interact through digital platforms around shared interests, purposes, experiences, or identities. Members may participate in these communities to discuss educational issues, professional interests,

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entertainment, social concerns, cultural practices, hobbies, or personal experiences. Unlike temporary online conversations, established digital communities often develop recognizable group norms, communication styles, shared expectations, and collective values. Members may begin to recognize one another, develop trust, exchange support, and establish a sense of belonging. In this way, online communities can perform some functions traditionally associated with physical communities. They can provide social support, encourage participation, strengthen relationships, and create opportunities for individuals to express their opinions and experiences.

Their influence is not limited to communication because participation can also shape how members understand their social identities and relationships with others.One of the most important developments associated with online communities is their role in shaping social relationships. Digital platforms enable individuals to maintain existing relationships while also developing new connections with people they might never meet in their everyday surroundings. Friends and family members use online networks to remain connected, while individuals with similar interests can establish relationships through shared activities and discussions. Online communities may also provide support to people who experience geographical isolation, limited social opportunities, or difficulty finding others with similar experiences. Bingley, W. J., Worthy, P., Wiles, J., & Haslam, S. A. (2026). Explained that For example, educational communities can connect students who exchange academic resources, while professional communities can help members share knowledge and develop career-related relationships. Similarly, cultural and interest-based groups can bring together people who wish to preserve traditions, discuss common concerns, or participate in shared activities. These interactions demonstrate that online communities can expand the social environments available to individuals.Another important dimension is the development of collective digital identity. Collective digital identity refers to the shared sense of belonging, common values, symbols, language, experiences, and group characteristics that emerge among members of an online community. Individuals do not participate in digital spaces only as separate users; they may also identify themselves as members of particular groups. Shared hashtags, profile symbols, community names, online events, repeated discussions, and common interests can strengthen this collective identity. As members participate, they contribute to the development of group culture and shared meanings. A community may gradually develop its own communication practices, rules, traditions, and expectations. These features help distinguish one digital community from another and provide members with a sense of recognition and belonging.

The relationship between online communities and identity formation is particularly important in contemporary society because digital platforms allow individuals to present different aspects of themselves to different audiences. A person may participate in an educational community as a student, a professional network as a career-oriented individual, and an interest-based group as a hobby enthusiast. These multiple forms of participation create opportunities for individuals to explore their identities and connect with people who understand their interests and experiences. However, online identity is not always a simple reflection of offline identity. Users may select the information they share, modify their profiles, adopt group-specific language, or present themselves differently according to community expectations. As a result, digital identity is continuously shaped through interaction between individual choices, social feedback, platform features, and group

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norms.Despite their benefits, online communities also create challenges for social relationships and collective identity. Digital communication can sometimes lead to misunderstandings because users cannot always interpret tone, facial expressions, and other non-verbal signals. Disagreements may develop into harassment, exclusion, or hostile group behavior. Some communities may encourage conformity and discourage members from expressing different opinions. Others may spread misinformation, promote stereotypes, or create divisions between groups. Privacy concerns and the public visibility of online interactions can also affect how freely individuals communicate. Furthermore, the influence of algorithms and platform design may determine which discussions and viewpoints become visible, potentially shaping the collective attitudes of community members. These challenges demonstrate that the social influence of online communities is complex and depends on the ways communities are organized and managed.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

1. To examine the role of online communities in shaping social relationships and collective digital identity by exploring how digital interaction, shared interests, group participation, and community norms influence social connection, belonging, and identity formation.

RESEARCH QUESTION

1. How do online communities influence the development of social relationships and the formation of collective digital identity among their members?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online communities have become an important part of digital society because they provide spaces where individuals interact around shared interests, experiences, goals, and social identities. These communities may exist on social networking platforms, discussion forums, messaging applications, gaming platforms, educational websites, and professional networks. Their main characteristic is the development of repeated interaction among members who recognize a common purpose or shared interest. Daynes-Kearney, R., & Gallagher, S. (2026). Explains that Unlike traditional communities, which are often connected to geographical locations, online communities can bring together individuals from different countries, cultures, and social backgrounds. This allows members to exchange ideas and develop relationships without being physically present in the same place.The meaning of an online community is broader than the simple presence of users on a digital platform. A group becomes a community when its members develop regular communication, shared expectations, recognizable group practices, and a sense of belonging. Kim and Nash (2026) examine the conceptual and methodological considerations involved in defining online communities, emphasizing the importance of understanding community participation and the social practices that distinguish communities from other digital spaces. This perspective suggests that online communities should be examined through their relationships, activities, communication patterns, and shared meanings rather than merely through the number of users or messages exchanged.

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Online communities also differ according to their purposes and organizational structures. Some are established for educational support, while others focus on entertainment, professional development, cultural exchange, social activism, or personal experiences. For example, university students may join academic groups to exchange information, ask questions, and discuss educational challenges. Gaming communities may develop around shared activities and team participation, while professional communities allow members to exchange expertise and establish career-related connections. Im, G., Park, E. H., Storey, V. C., & Baskerville, R. L. (2025). revealed thatThese different forms of participation demonstrate that online communities serve multiple social functions and can influence relationships in different ways.The development of online communities has also changed the meaning of social participation. Individuals are no longer limited to interacting with people in their immediate surroundings. They can become members of several communities simultaneously, participate in international discussions, and maintain relationships with people who share similar interests. One of the most significant contributions of online communities is their ability to create and maintain social relationships. Digital platforms provide opportunities for individuals to communicate regularly, exchange personal experiences, and develop connections based on common interests. These interactions can gradually develop into friendships, professional relationships, educational partnerships, and supportive social networks. Online communication is particularly useful for individuals who have limited opportunities to meet people with similar interests in their immediate environments.Social relationships within online communities are developed through repeated interaction and mutual recognition. Members may initially communicate by asking questions or sharing information, but continued participation can create familiarity and trust. When individuals respond to one another's messages, provide advice, express encouragement, and participate in group activities, they establish patterns of social interaction.

Over time, these patterns can create stronger relationships and a sense of responsibility toward other members.Zervas and Maronitis (2025) examine online gaming communities and the ways gaming clans can encourage social interaction and identity development. Their work highlights how activities that may initially appear individual can become collective experiences through communication, cooperation, and shared participation. Similarly, Sachan, Chhabra, and Abraham (2025) review the relationship between virtual identities and social capital in online gaming communities. Their review emphasizes the importance of community membership and interaction in understanding how digital environments can support social connections and social capital.Online relationships can also complement offline relationships. Family members and friends use digital platforms to maintain communication when they live in different locations or have limited opportunities to meet. Students can continue academic discussions outside classrooms, while colleagues can maintain professional communication beyond working hours. These forms of interaction demonstrate that digital communities do not necessarily replace traditional social relationships; rather, they can extend and support them.However, online relationships may differ from face-to-face relationships because digital communication often provides fewer non-verbal signals. The absence of facial expressions, physical gestures, and immediate social context can create misunderstandings. Some members may also use anonymous profiles, making it difficult to establish confidence in another person's identity. Therefore, the development of strong online relationships depends on regular communication, respectful interaction, reliability, and the gradual development of trust.Collective digital identity refers

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to the shared understanding of membership, values, interests, symbols, and experiences that connects individuals within an online community. It develops when members begin to recognize themselves as part of a group rather than simply as separate users of a platform. This identity may be expressed through community names, shared language, group symbols, hashtags, common activities, and agreed behavioral expectations.Social identity theory provides a useful foundation for understanding this process. Individuals often define aspects of themselves through their membership in social groups. When people participate in an online community, they may adopt certain group values, communication styles, and symbols that distinguish the community from others. Their sense of identity can therefore develop through the relationship between individual self-expression and collective membership.Bingley, Worthy, Wiles, and Haslam (2026) propose a social identity theory of digital identity that connects online and offline group membership.

Their framework highlights how digital identities are shaped by social relationships and group memberships, while also recognizing that digital platforms introduce particular conditions for identity expression. This is important because individuals may maintain different identities across different online communities while still connecting these identities to their broader offline lives.Ni, Bruce, and Henley (2025) examine how digital spaces contribute to collective identity and sustained belonging within a university sports team. Their study illustrates how online communication can help maintain a shared group identity beyond physical meetings and activities. Kim, G. M., & Nash, B. L. (2026). Elaborated on This suggests that collective identity is not necessarily dependent on continuous physical interaction. Members can preserve a sense of unity through digital communication, shared memories, group discussions, and continuing participation.Collective identity can also strengthen members' commitment to a community. When individuals feel recognized and accepted, they may become more willing to contribute information, help other members, and participate in community activities. However, strong group identification can sometimes create boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Communities may develop expectations about acceptable opinions and behavior, potentially discouraging members who hold different perspectives. Therefore, collective identity can create belonging while also producing exclusion if group norms are applied rigidly.A sense of belonging is an important factor in the development of meaningful relationships within online communities. Digital belonging refers to the feeling that an individual is accepted, recognized, valued, and connected to other members of a digital group. This feeling can develop through regular communication, shared experiences, emotional support, and participation in community activities.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, secondary research methodology to examine the role of online communities in shaping social relationships and collective digital identity. The research is based on the analysis of existing academic literature, including peer-reviewed journal articles, research studies, systematic reviews, and scholarly publications from 2025 and 2026. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study focuses on social experiences, communication practices, identity formation, group belonging, and interpersonal relationships rather than numerical measurement alone. It allows the researcher to explore how online communities influence the ways individuals communicate, develop trust,

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establish social connections, and identify themselves as members of digital groups.The study uses a literature-based approach to collect and examine information related to online communities, social interaction, digital identity, social support, community participation, and collective belonging. Relevant literature is considered from areas such as communication studies, sociology, social psychology, digital media, and internet research. The reviewed material is examined to identify similarities, differences, and recurring arguments about the positive and negative effects of online community participation. Particular attention is given to studies that investigate how group interaction contributes to social relationships and how shared values, experiences, and community norms contribute to collective identity.The research also considers the different forms of online communities, including educational communities, social networking groups, gaming communities, professional networks, cultural groups, and online support communities. This broad approach helps identify common patterns across different digital environments. The study does not involve direct interviews, questionnaires, experiments, or new participant observations. Therefore, it does not claim to produce original survey results or statistically representative findings. Instead, its conclusions are developed through the interpretation and thematic synthesis of published research.Academic sources are selected according to their relevance to the research question, publication details, research focus, and contribution to understanding online social interaction. The analysis gives priority to recent research from 2025–2026 while using established theoretical concepts, such as social identity, social support, and community belonging, to organize the discussion. The methodology provides a structured basis for examining how digital participation influences social relationships and collective identity while recognizing the limitations of secondary research.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study follows a qualitative descriptive and thematic research design. This design is selected to explore the social processes through which online communities influence relationships and collective digital identity. Rather than measuring the behavior of a specific group of users, the research examines published evidence and theoretical discussions to identify major themes related to digital community participation. The descriptive element provides an overview of the characteristics of online communities, while the thematic element helps organize the literature into connected areas of investigation.The research design is organized around five main analytical dimensions: social interaction and relationship development, emotional and informational support, collective identity and belonging, community norms and participation, and challenges associated with digital interaction. These dimensions are closely related to the research objective and research question. For example, social interaction is examined to understand how members develop familiarity and trust, while collective identity is considered in relation to shared interests, group symbols, common values, and participation. The study also examines how negative experiences, such as exclusion, harassment, misinformation, and privacy concerns, can influence community relationships.The research process involves identifying relevant academic publications, reviewing their central arguments and findings, grouping related information into themes, and comparing the themes across different types of online communities. The analysis considers both the opportunities and limitations of online interaction. This design makes it possible to develop an integrated understanding of online communities as social environments in which relationships and identities are continuously

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developed. Since the study is based on secondary literature, its conclusions represent an interpretation of existing research rather than the results of new fieldwork.

DATA ANALYSIS

The collected literature is examined through qualitative thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is used to identify recurring ideas, concepts, and patterns across the selected academic publications. The first stage involves reviewing the relevant studies to understand their research objectives, methods, and major findings. The second stage involves identifying concepts related to social interaction, trust, belonging, identity development, community participation, social support, inclusion, and digital challenges. These concepts are then grouped into broader themes according to their relationship with the research question.The first major theme concerns the development of social relationships. The literature indicates that repeated communication, shared interests, cooperation, and mutual support can help members develop familiarity and stronger social connections. The second theme concerns collective digital identity. It examines how community membership, shared language, group symbols, values, and common experiences contribute to a sense of belonging. The third theme focuses on social support and emotional connection, particularly how members provide advice, encouragement, information, and recognition to one another. The fourth theme examines participation and community norms, including the influence of moderation, shared expectations, and member involvement on the social environment of online groups.The fifth theme concerns the challenges of online community participation. These include exclusion, harassment, misinformation, privacy concerns, unequal participation, and pressure to conform. The literature is compared to identify where researchers report similar findings and where their conclusions differ. For example, some studies emphasize the potential of online communities to strengthen belonging and social support, while others highlight how digital environments can reproduce discrimination and social inequalities. The comparison of these perspectives helps avoid presenting online communities as entirely positive or entirely negative.The analysis is interpretive and descriptive. It does not calculate statistical relationships or generate numerical results because no original quantitative dataset has been collected. Instead, it synthesizes the arguments and findings of existing studies to develop an overall understanding of how online communities influence social relationships and collective digital identity.

FINDINGS

The thematic analysis of the reviewed literature identifies several major findings concerning the role of online communities in contemporary social life.First, online communities create opportunities for social connection beyond geographical boundaries. Individuals can develop relationships with people who share similar interests, experiences, and goals, even when they live in different locations. Educational groups, gaming networks, professional communities, and social support groups demonstrate how digital interaction can extend existing relationships and create new connections. These relationships may become stronger through regular communication, cooperation, and mutual recognition.Second, repeated participation contributes to the development of collective digital identity. Members gradually develop shared meanings through common interests, group language, symbols, activities, and values. These shared practices help individuals recognize themselves as members of a community.

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Research on digital identity and online group membership supports the view that online and offline identities are increasingly interconnected (Bingley et al., 2026; Ni et al., 2025).Third, trust and emotional connection are important for maintaining meaningful online relationships. Members are more likely to participate actively when they feel respected, recognized, and supported. Supportive responses, reliable information, and respectful communication can strengthen trust and encourage continued engagement. Studies of digital belonging and online support communities highlight the importance of interaction and emotional support in building a sense of community (Mohammad, 2026; Rains & Carter, 2025).Fourth, online communities can provide emotional, informational, and practical support. Members may exchange knowledge, offer advice, share experiences, and encourage others during difficult situations. This support can be especially meaningful in communities organized around education, caregiving, personal experiences, and shared challenges. However, the quality of support depends on the reliability of information, the sensitivity of responses, and the privacy practices of the community.Fifth, community participation can encourage cooperation and collective responsibility. Members contribute by answering questions, sharing useful resources, helping newcomers, organizing activities, and maintaining group standards. These activities can strengthen community relationships and create a shared sense of responsibility. Research on digital civic groups and youth-led online communities also indicates that participation and shared decision-making can support meaningful engagement (Thomsen et al., 2025; Talian, 2025).Sixth, diversity can strengthen online communities, but inclusion is not automatic.

CONCLUSION

Online communities have become an influential feature of contemporary society because they provide individuals with opportunities to communicate, establish relationships, share experiences, and develop collective identities. This study examined how digital communities influence social relationships and collective digital identity through social interaction, shared interests, emotional support, group participation, and community norms. The reviewed literature indicates that online communities can extend social networks beyond geographical boundaries and connect individuals who may not otherwise have opportunities to interact. Through repeated communication and shared activities, members can develop familiarity, trust, cooperation, and a sense of belonging.The study also highlights the importance of collective digital identity in shaping members' experiences. Shared language, values, symbols, interests, and group practices help individuals recognize themselves as part of a wider digital community. This identity can encourage participation and strengthen relationships because members develop a common understanding of their group. At the same time, digital identity remains connected to offline experiences and other forms of social membership. Individuals may participate in multiple online communities and express different aspects of their identities according to the expectations and activities of each group.Another important conclusion is that online communities can provide valuable social support. Members may exchange information, offer emotional encouragement, share practical advice, and help one another address common challenges. These activities can make digital communities meaningful sources of social connection. However, the positive influence of online participation is not guaranteed. Online conflict, discrimination, misinformation, privacy risks, exclusion, and pressure to conform can damage relationships and weaken community belonging. Digital communities therefore require responsible participation, fair

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moderation, clear communication standards, and respect for individual differences.Overall, the study concludes that online communities should be understood as social environments rather than merely technological spaces.

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