

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF DIGITAL REALITY: A CRITICAL REINTERPRETATION OF ONLINE INTERACTION IN CONTEMPORARY NETWORKED SOCIETIES

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed the ways individuals perceive, construct, and negotiate reality. This study critically examines the social construction of digital reality through online interactions, emphasizing how meaning is collaboratively produced in networked environments. Drawing upon social constructionism and critical digital theory, the article explores how platforms, algorithms, and user practices shape subjective and collective realities. The study employs a descriptive qualitative approach, synthesizing existing literature and conceptual analysis to reinterpret online interaction beyond surface-level communication. The findings reveal that digital reality is not merely a reflection of offline experiences but a distinct, layered construct shaped by technological affordances, algorithmic mediation, and socio-cultural contexts. Online identities are fluid and performative, often strategically curated to align with platform norms and audience expectations. Furthermore, power structures embedded in digital infrastructures influence what is visible, credible, and legitimate, thereby shaping knowledge production and social norms. This paper also highlights the paradox of digital interaction: while it enables democratized participation and global connectivity, it simultaneously reinforces echo chambers, misinformation, and surveillance practices. The reinterpretation proposed in this study positions digital interaction as an active site of meaning negotiation rather than passive consumption. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how digital realities are constructed, contested, and institutionalized. It calls for a more critical awareness of the socio-technical mechanisms that underpin online interactions and encourages interdisciplinary approaches to studying digital societies in the contemporary era.

Keywords: Digital Reality; Social Construction; Online Interaction.

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of digital technologies over the past two decades has fundamentally transformed the nature of human interaction, communication, and meaning-making. In contemporary society, individuals increasingly engage with digital platforms not merely as tools for communication but as environments in which reality itself is experienced, interpreted, and constructed. Social media, online forums, and virtual communities have become central arenas for social life, shaping how individuals understand themselves, others, and the world around them. This transformation calls for a critical examination of how reality is socially constructed within digital contexts and how online interaction contributes to this process.

The concept of reality has long been debated within social theory. Classical perspectives often treated reality as objective and independent of human perception. However, the emergence of social constructionism, particularly through the work of Berger and Luckmann (1966), challenged this notion by proposing that reality is produced and reproduced through social interaction. According to this perspective, knowledge, norms, and meanings are not inherent but are created through ongoing processes of communication and

interpretation. In the digital age, these processes are intensified, accelerated, and mediated by technological infrastructures, giving rise to what can be termed “digital reality.”

Digital reality refers to the ways in which individuals experience and interpret the world through digital interfaces and mediated environments. Unlike traditional face-to-face interaction, online communication is characterized by its asynchronous nature, reduced physical cues, and reliance on textual and visual representation. These features fundamentally alter how meaning is constructed and negotiated. For instance, the absence of physical presence in online interaction allows for greater flexibility in self-presentation, enabling individuals to curate and perform identities in ways that may not be possible in offline settings. As a result, identity becomes a dynamic and performative construct shaped by both individual agency and platform constraints.

The rise of digital platforms has also introduced new forms of mediation that significantly influence the construction of reality. Platforms such as social networking sites operate through complex algorithms that filter, prioritize, and recommend content. These algorithmic systems play a crucial role in shaping what users see, how they interpret information, and how they engage with others. Consequently, digital reality is not simply a product of human interaction but also of technological design and computational processes. This interplay between human agency and technological mediation represents a key dimension of contemporary social life.

Moreover, digital interaction is embedded within broader socio-economic and political structures that influence its dynamics and outcomes. Issues of power, inequality, and access are deeply intertwined with the construction of digital reality. Not all individuals have equal access to digital technologies, leading to disparities in participation and representation. Additionally, large technology companies exert significant control over digital infrastructures, shaping the rules and norms that govern online interaction. This concentration of power raises critical questions about whose realities are amplified and whose are marginalized in digital spaces.

Another important aspect of digital reality is the blurring of boundaries between online and offline experiences. Rather than existing as separate domains, digital and physical realities increasingly intersect and overlap. For example, social media interactions can have tangible effects on offline relationships, political processes, and economic activities. This hybridization challenges traditional distinctions between “real” and “virtual,” suggesting that digital interactions are not less authentic but differently constituted. Understanding this interconnectedness is essential for analyzing the complexities of contemporary social life.

In addition, the rapid circulation of information in digital environments has significant implications for knowledge production and dissemination. Online platforms enable the widespread sharing of information, allowing individuals to access diverse perspectives and participate in public discourse. However, this democratization of information is accompanied by challenges such as misinformation, echo chambers, and information overload. These phenomena shape how individuals construct their understanding of reality, often reinforcing existing beliefs and limiting exposure to alternative viewpoints.

The performative nature of online interaction further complicates the construction of digital reality. Drawing on Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework, individuals can be seen as actors who present themselves to an audience, managing impressions through carefully curated content. In digital environments, this process is amplified by features such as profiles, likes, and comments, which provide immediate feedback and validation. As a result, users may engage in strategic self-presentation to align with social norms and expectations, contributing to the ongoing construction of social reality.

At the same time, digital interaction enables new forms of community and collective identity. Online communities provide spaces for individuals to connect with others who share similar interests, experiences, or identities, regardless of geographical boundaries. These communities play a crucial role in shaping collective meanings and fostering a sense of belonging. However, they can also contribute to social fragmentation by reinforcing group boundaries and limiting interaction with diverse perspectives.

This study seeks to critically reinterpret the social construction of digital reality by examining the complex interplay between technological structures, social practices, and cultural contexts. It moves beyond deterministic views that either celebrate or critique digital technologies in isolation, instead adopting a nuanced perspective that recognizes both the opportunities and challenges associated with digital interaction. By integrating insights from social constructionism, digital sociology, and critical theory, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how digital realities are produced and negotiated.

Furthermore, this study addresses a gap in existing literature by emphasizing the need for a critical reinterpretation of online interaction. While many studies have explored specific aspects of digital communication, there remains a need for a holistic framework that accounts for the dynamic and multi-layered nature of digital reality. This research contributes to this effort by synthesizing diverse theoretical perspectives and highlighting the interconnectedness of technological, social, and cultural factors.

The construction of digital reality represents a central issue in understanding contemporary society. As digital technologies continue to evolve and permeate all aspects of life, their influence on how individuals perceive and engage with reality will only intensify. By critically examining the processes through which digital reality is constructed, this study aims to shed light on the broader implications of digital interaction for social life, identity, and knowledge in the modern world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of the social construction of reality has its intellectual roots in sociology, particularly in the seminal work of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann. In *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), they argue that reality is not a fixed, objective entity but is continuously produced through social interaction. Their framework outlines three key processes—externalization, objectivation, and internalization—through which individuals create and sustain shared meanings. In digital contexts, these processes are not only preserved but intensified through technologically mediated interactions, where meanings are rapidly produced, circulated, and normalized across global networks.

Building on this foundation, Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory provides a critical lens for understanding identity construction in online environments. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman conceptualizes social interaction as a theatrical performance in which individuals manage impressions before an audience. This perspective has been widely applied to digital platforms, where users curate profiles, posts, and interactions to construct desirable identities. The affordances of digital media—such as editability, persistence, and visibility—enhance this performative dimension, allowing individuals to strategically shape how they are perceived by others.

The transformation of social interaction in the digital age is further elaborated by Manuel Castells through his theory of the network society. Castells (2010) argues that contemporary social structures are increasingly organized around networks enabled by information and communication technologies. In this framework, power is distributed through nodes and connections, and digital interaction becomes a primary mechanism for social organization. The network society perspective highlights how digital reality emerges from interconnected systems rather than isolated individual actions, emphasizing the relational nature of online interaction.

Critical theory also plays a significant role in understanding the construction of digital reality, particularly through the work of Michel Foucault. Foucault's concept of power/knowledge underscores how discourse shapes what is considered true, legitimate, and acceptable within a society. In digital environments, this dynamic is manifested through algorithmic governance and platform regulation. Algorithms determine the visibility of content, while platform policies define acceptable forms of expression. These mechanisms function as contemporary forms of disciplinary power, influencing how users produce and interpret information.

Recent scholarship has expanded these theoretical insights by examining the role of algorithms and digital infrastructures in shaping social reality. Ted Striphas (2015) introduces the notion of "algorithmic culture," arguing that computational processes increasingly structure cultural production and consumption. Similarly, Nick Srnicek (2017) conceptualizes digital platforms within the framework of platform capitalism, emphasizing their role as economic actors that monetize user data and attention. These perspectives highlight the entanglement of technological, cultural, and economic forces in the construction of digital reality.

The study of digital identity further contributes to this discussion. Sherry Turkle (2011) explores how individuals navigate identity in online environments, suggesting that digital spaces allow for experimentation and multiplicity of selves. However, she also raises concerns about the potential fragmentation of identity and the loss of authenticity. Complementing this view, danah boyd (2014) examines how networked publics shape social interaction, particularly among youth. Boyd argues that digital environments introduce new dynamics of visibility, persistence, and scalability, which fundamentally alter how individuals engage with one another.

Another important contribution comes from Nancy Baym (2015), who emphasizes the relational aspects of digital communication. Baym highlights how online interaction fosters

new forms of personal connection while also reshaping existing social norms. Her work underscores the importance of considering both technological affordances and human agency in understanding digital interaction.

The role of media and communication technologies in shaping society has also been explored by Marshall McLuhan, whose famous assertion “the medium is the message” remains highly relevant in digital contexts. McLuhan’s insight suggests that the characteristics of a medium influence how messages are perceived and understood. In the case of digital platforms, features such as interactivity, immediacy, and multimodality play a crucial role in shaping the construction of reality.

Furthermore, the concept of mediatization, as discussed by Stig Hjarvard (2013), provides a useful framework for analyzing how media becomes integrated into and influences various social institutions. Mediatization theory posits that media are not merely channels of communication but active agents that shape social processes and cultural practices. In digital environments, this influence is particularly pronounced, as media technologies are deeply embedded in everyday life.

Scholars such as José van Dijck (2013) have further examined the culture of connectivity, focusing on how social media platforms structure interaction and sociality. Van Dijck argues that platforms are designed to encourage specific forms of engagement, often driven by commercial interests. This perspective aligns with concerns about datafication, where user activities are quantified and analyzed to optimize platform performance and profitability.

Additionally, the political and ideological dimensions of digital reality have been explored by Evgeny Morozov (2011) and Cass Sunstein (2001). Morozov critiques the utopian view of the internet as inherently democratizing, highlighting its potential for surveillance and control. Sunstein, on the other hand, introduces the concept of echo chambers, where individuals are exposed primarily to information that reinforces their existing beliefs. Both perspectives underscore the complexities and contradictions of digital interaction.

Despite these extensive contributions, existing literature often treats digital interaction in fragmented ways, focusing on specific aspects such as identity, technology, or power. There remains a need for an integrative framework that captures the dynamic interplay between these elements in constructing digital reality. This study addresses this gap by synthesizing insights from social constructionism, network theory, and critical digital studies to provide a more comprehensive understanding of online interaction.

The literature demonstrates that digital reality is a multifaceted construct shaped by social processes, technological infrastructures, and power relations. From the foundational theories of Berger and Luckmann to contemporary analyses of algorithmic culture and platform capitalism, scholars have consistently highlighted the constructed nature of reality. However, the rapid evolution of digital technologies necessitates ongoing critical reinterpretation to fully understand their implications for social life.

METHOD

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative approach to critically examine the social construction of digital reality within online interaction. The methodological framework is grounded in interpretive research traditions, which emphasize the exploration of meaning, context, and socially constructed phenomena rather than the measurement of variables. This approach is particularly suitable for analyzing digital interaction, as it allows for a nuanced understanding of how reality is constructed through complex socio-technical processes.

The theoretical orientation of this research is informed by social constructionism, primarily derived from the work of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, alongside critical digital theory. These perspectives provide a conceptual lens to examine how meanings are produced, negotiated, and institutionalized within digital environments. Additionally, insights from Michel Foucault regarding power/knowledge relations are employed to analyze how digital platforms regulate discourse and shape what is considered legitimate knowledge.

The data for this study consist of secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and reputable scholarly publications related to digital interaction, social media, algorithmic systems, and identity construction. The selection of literature follows purposive sampling, focusing on works that are theoretically significant and relevant to the research objectives. Priority is given to sources that offer conceptual frameworks and empirical findings addressing the intersection of technology and social reality.

Data analysis is conducted using thematic analysis. This involves systematically identifying, categorizing, and interpreting recurring themes across the selected literature. Key themes explored in this study include algorithmic mediation, performative identity, power structures, and the hybridization of online and offline realities. Through this process, the study synthesizes diverse perspectives into a coherent analytical framework.

To ensure rigor and credibility, this research applies triangulation of theories by integrating multiple scholarly viewpoints. This strategy enhances the depth of analysis and reduces potential bias associated with reliance on a single theoretical perspective. Furthermore, critical reflection is employed throughout the analysis to evaluate assumptions and highlight underlying power dynamics within digital systems.

Overall, this methodological approach enables a comprehensive and critical reinterpretation of how digital reality is socially constructed, emphasizing the interplay between human agency, technological affordances, and socio-cultural contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study reveals that digital reality is a complex, multi-layered construct shaped through the continuous interaction between users, technological systems, and socio-cultural contexts. The analysis identifies four central dimensions: (1) algorithmic mediation, (2) performative identity construction, (3) power and knowledge dynamics, and (4) the paradox of connectivity and fragmentation. These dimensions collectively illustrate how online interaction operates as a primary site for the social construction of reality in contemporary networked societies.

Algorithmic Mediation and the Structuring of Reality

One of the most significant findings is the central role of algorithmic systems in shaping digital reality. Unlike traditional forms of interaction, where communication flows relatively organically, digital environments are heavily structured by algorithms that filter, prioritize, and recommend content. As highlighted by Ted Striphas, algorithmic culture fundamentally alters how individuals encounter and interpret information.

These systems are not neutral; they are designed based on specific logics, often driven by engagement metrics and commercial interests. For example, content that generates more interaction—such as likes, shares, or comments—is more likely to be amplified, creating a feedback loop that reinforces certain narratives while marginalizing others. This selective visibility contributes to what can be understood as a “constructed visibility,” where reality is partially determined by what is made visible through algorithmic processes.

Furthermore, algorithmic mediation influences users’ perception of normality and consensus. When individuals are repeatedly exposed to similar types of content, they may perceive these perspectives as dominant or universally accepted. This phenomenon aligns with the concept of “filter bubbles,” which limits exposure to diverse viewpoints and reinforces existing beliefs. In this sense, digital reality becomes a curated experience rather than an objective reflection of the broader social world.

Performative Identity and the Construction of the Self

Another key finding is the performative nature of identity in digital environments. Drawing on the dramaturgical framework of Erving Goffman, this study finds that online interaction functions as a stage where individuals actively construct and manage their identities. Digital platforms provide tools that enable users to curate their self-presentation, including profile customization, content sharing, and interaction metrics.

This performativity is amplified by the affordances of digital media. Unlike face-to-face interaction, online communication allows for greater control over what is presented and when it is shared. Users can edit, delete, and refine their content, creating a more polished and strategic representation of themselves. As a result, identity becomes less about spontaneous expression and more about calculated performance.

However, this process is not purely individual; it is shaped by platform norms and audience expectations. Users often conform to implicit rules regarding what is considered acceptable or desirable behavior. For instance, certain aesthetics, opinions, or lifestyles may be rewarded with greater visibility and engagement, encouraging users to align their self-presentation accordingly. This dynamic highlights the interplay between agency and structure in the construction of digital identity.

At the same time, the multiplicity of digital platforms allows individuals to present different facets of their identity across contexts. This fragmentation can enable self-exploration but may also lead to tensions between authenticity and performance. As noted by Sherry Turkle, the flexibility of digital identity raises questions about the coherence and stability of the self in online environments.

Power, Knowledge, and Platform Governance

The findings also underscore the central role of power in shaping digital reality. Building on the work of Michel Foucault, this study conceptualizes digital platforms as sites where power and knowledge are intertwined. Platform operators, through their control of algorithms, policies, and infrastructures, exert significant influence over what information is disseminated and how it is interpreted.

This form of power is often subtle and embedded within technological systems. For example, content moderation policies determine which forms of expression are allowed or restricted, shaping the boundaries of acceptable discourse. Similarly, algorithmic ranking systems prioritize certain types of knowledge, influencing what users perceive as credible or important.

Moreover, the economic model of digital platforms further reinforces these power dynamics. As argued by Nick Srnicek, platform capitalism relies on the extraction and monetization of user data. This creates incentives to maximize user engagement, sometimes at the expense of information quality or diversity. Consequently, the construction of digital reality is closely tied to commercial interests, raising ethical concerns about manipulation and exploitation.

These dynamics also have implications for social inequality. Not all users have equal capacity to influence digital reality; factors such as digital literacy, access to technology, and social capital play a significant role. Influencers, institutions, and platform elites often have disproportionate visibility, shaping dominant narratives while marginalizing alternative voices. This uneven distribution of power challenges the notion of the internet as a fully democratized space.

Connectivity, Fragmentation, and the Paradox of Digital Interaction

A further finding of this study is the paradoxical nature of digital interaction, which simultaneously promotes connectivity and fragmentation. On one hand, digital platforms enable unprecedented levels of communication, allowing individuals to connect across geographical and cultural boundaries. This has facilitated the formation of global communities and the rapid dissemination of information.

On the other hand, this connectivity is often accompanied by fragmentation. As noted by Cass Sunstein, digital environments can foster echo chambers, where individuals are primarily exposed to like-minded perspectives. This selective exposure reinforces group identities and reduces opportunities for meaningful dialogue across differences.

The result is a fragmented digital reality, where multiple, often conflicting, versions of reality coexist. This fragmentation is further exacerbated by the spread of misinformation and disinformation, which can distort public understanding and undermine trust in institutions. In such contexts, the construction of reality becomes contested, with different actors competing to define what is true or legitimate.

Despite these challenges, digital interaction also offers opportunities for resistance and alternative knowledge production. Marginalized groups can use digital platforms to amplify their voices, challenge dominant narratives, and create new forms of community. This

highlights the ambivalent nature of digital reality, which is shaped by both constraints and possibilities.

Hybridization of Online and Offline Realities

Finally, the study finds that the distinction between online and offline realities is increasingly blurred. Digital interactions have tangible effects on offline life, influencing social relationships, political processes, and economic activities. This hybridization suggests that digital reality should not be viewed as separate from “real” life but as an integral part of it.

For instance, online movements can lead to offline social change, while offline events are often mediated and interpreted through digital platforms. This interplay creates a feedback loop in which online and offline realities continuously shape each other. As a result, understanding digital reality requires a holistic perspective that considers both dimensions simultaneously.

Synthesis of Findings

Overall, the results demonstrate that digital reality is not a passive or secondary form of reality but an active, dynamic, and contested construct. It is shaped by the interaction of technological systems, social practices, and power relations. Algorithmic mediation structures what is visible; performative practices shape identity; power dynamics influence knowledge; and connectivity both unites and divides users.

These findings support and extend existing theories of social construction by highlighting the unique characteristics of digital environments. In particular, they emphasize the need to consider technology not merely as a medium but as an active participant in the construction of reality.

In conclusion, the reinterpretation proposed in this study positions online interaction as a central mechanism through which contemporary reality is produced and negotiated. Understanding this process is essential for addressing the broader social, cultural, and political implications of digital technologies in the modern world.

CLOSING

Conclusion

This study has critically examined the social construction of digital reality by reinterpreting online interaction as a central mechanism of meaning-making in contemporary networked societies. Drawing upon social constructionism, digital sociology, and critical theory, the analysis demonstrates that digital reality is not merely a reflection of the offline world but a distinct and dynamic construct shaped by the interplay of technological systems, human agency, and socio-cultural contexts.

One of the key conclusions is that algorithmic mediation plays a decisive role in structuring digital reality. Digital platforms do not passively host content; rather, they actively filter, prioritize, and shape information flows. As emphasized in the theoretical perspectives of Ted Striphas and Nick Srnicek, algorithms and platform economies influence

visibility, engagement, and ultimately, perception. This process contributes to the emergence of curated realities in which users encounter selective representations of the world, often reinforcing pre-existing beliefs and limiting exposure to alternative perspectives.

In addition, the study highlights the performative nature of identity in digital environments. Building on the insights of Erving Goffman, it is evident that individuals actively construct and negotiate their identities through strategic self-presentation. Digital platforms provide tools and affordances that enable users to curate their online personas, resulting in identities that are fluid, contextual, and often shaped by audience expectations. This performativity underscores the constructed nature of the self and challenges traditional notions of authenticity.

Furthermore, power and knowledge emerge as central elements in the construction of digital reality. Drawing from Michel Foucault, this study demonstrates that digital platforms function as sites of power where discourse is regulated and knowledge is produced. Platform governance, algorithmic control, and economic interests all contribute to shaping what is considered valid, visible, and legitimate. These dynamics reveal that digital reality is not neutral but embedded within broader structures of inequality and control.

Another important conclusion is the paradoxical nature of digital interaction, which simultaneously fosters connectivity and fragmentation. While digital platforms enable global communication and the formation of diverse communities, they also contribute to the creation of echo chambers and polarized information environments. As noted by Cass Sunstein, this selective exposure can reinforce ideological divisions and complicate collective understanding. Consequently, digital reality is characterized by multiplicity and contestation, with competing narratives coexisting within fragmented informational spaces.

Moreover, the study finds that the boundaries between online and offline realities are increasingly blurred. Digital interactions have tangible impacts on offline life, influencing social relationships, political engagement, and cultural practices. This hybridization suggests that digital reality should be understood as an integral component of contemporary social reality rather than a separate or secondary domain.

In conclusion, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how reality is constructed in the digital age by emphasizing the interdependence of technology, society, and culture. It calls for greater critical awareness of the mechanisms that shape digital interaction and highlights the need for interdisciplinary approaches to studying digital phenomena. Future research should focus on empirical investigations, cross-cultural comparisons, and the implications of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and immersive media. By doing so, scholars can further illuminate the complexities of digital reality and its impact on human experience.

AI Policy Statement

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