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Creation and Dynamics of Identity within Social Media Landscape: A Discourse of Fragmentation

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Abstract

Today, the digital space became a natural landscape of identity formation, determining, in turn, individual' societal functioning and political behavior. Accordingly, propaganda influence processes also significantly moved to online environment, especially social media as a crucial platform for communication, including political one. At the same time, as previous studies revealed, this digitally constructed identity is fragmented to a more or less extent – the phenomenon called "fragmented Self". This determines the relevance of investigating mechanisms of the place of fragmented Self phenomenon in the processes of shaping public opinion through propaganda, as well as functioning of social media as a soft power tool. In this context, the study aimed at outlining the mechanisms of social media-constructed identity influence on the effectiveness of digital propaganda and soft power tools. The study is based on qualitative methodology, with the

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application of both content analysis and grounded theory elements. The findings demonstrate societal implications of the fragmented Self phenomenon within the context of soft power. The novelty of the results lie, in particular, in juxtaposition and connection of Michel Foucault' theory of fragmented Self and Joseph Nye' theory of soft power, in the plane of social media and propaganda within their landscape. The main result of the study is building a conceptual model of digital soft power influence on fragmented identity, within three-dimensional system of coordinates. The work makes a theoretical contribution to the study of the problem of identity in the context of nonlinear socio-cultural dynamics, reflected in the dynamics of identity.

Keywords: emotional intelligence; soft skills; soft power; national identity in media; audiovisual propaganda; memory politics; media influence on identity.

Introduction

The idea of 'identity' is essential to most modern sociology, reflecting a problem that unfolds in two ways. To begin, some argue that identity is both necessary and problematic in this era of high modernity. Second, while sociology reflects this understanding, its explanations of identity are inconsistent, under-theorized, and incapable of bearing the necessary analytical weight. As a result, there is an inherent conflict between seeing identity as so basic that it is critical to human well-being and a theory of 'identity' that regards it as created, fluid, multifaceted, ephemeral, and fragmented. The current identity crisis manifests as both a societal and a theoretical dilemma.

Identity development is a complicated process impacted by a wide range of social, psychological, and environmental factors. Historically, individuals' identities were mostly developed via direct social interactions and cultural influences. However, the introduction of social media has added new dimensions to this process, resulting in both possibilities and difficulties. In recent years, social media has played an important role in molding individual identities, particularly among teenagers and young adults (Nishanth & Haran, 2024). Identity development is a continuous process impacted by a variety of elements such as family, peers, culture, and life events. However, the introduction of social media has added a new level of complexity to the process, providing unique possibilities and difficulties for identity discovery and growth. As more individuals portray themselves online, the border between an individual's "real" identity and their "digital" identity blurs, resulting in both good and negative consequences on self-perception, self-esteem, and social interactions.

According to Michel Foucault's theory, media, particularly social media, has a profound impact on individual and community identities. He contends that identity is a fluid and manufactured term, continually changed by social and cultural influences, especially media. Social media, with its curated profiles and

algorithmic information curation, aids in this construction by offering idealized images of success, beauty, and pleasure, which can impact self-perception and behavior (Foucault, 2012).

The virtual universe of communication has ushered in a perplexing phenomenon of self-awareness and self-disclosure between two or more people involved in a discussion (Ahn, 2011). Kimmons (2014) noted that New Literacy Studies (NLS) with regard to Social Networking Sites (SNS) are causing identity issues on social media. Langmia (2016) discusses socio-cultural co-presence, which may be applied to the virtual teleco-presence domain. The inclination to 'like and hate', 'friend and unfriend', and 'follow or unfollow' on social media platforms has served to ironically confirm this symbiotic link between physical co-presence and virtual telepresence. In this context, identity refers to the natural feeling of an imaginative psychological state of mind anchored in the actual world of socio-culturally driven consciousness, as wonderfully captured by Anthony Giddens in his "Structuration theory" (Haslett, 2012). According to Giddens, authors gain a better knowledge of space, time, and social presence when look at several social systems.

All members of a society can live in a virtual framework that is created by the media, which also makes this framework a prominent area to dwell. To put it another way, it establishes an influence zone where a product that isn't included in the media has no way of being seen (Gunduz, 2017). Because social communication platforms enable users to freely express their thoughts, feelings, and ideas as well as create material inside them, they are among the most important issues of our day. In order to achieve active influence by creating a community of like-minded users, businesses and non-professional users alike search social media platforms for people who share their thoughts, sentiments, and ideas.

In the past, four issues with the self that define high modernity may be connected to the contemporary identity crisis: (1) The problematizing of self-knowledge: by the turn of the twentieth century, the self was seen as a vast inner continent that could only be explored with great difficulty and perhaps with professional assistance (such as in psychoanalysis), in contrast to the pre-modern era when it had been perceived as transparent and rather dull (Bohleber, 2019); (2). Modern secularization prioritized self-realization in this world above contentment with waiting for the next, which is why human potential was valued; (3) The possibility of profound social change, the emergence of individualism and social mobility, and the dissolution of hierarchies all made it possible to explore new identities in this environment; (4) A new flexibility in self-definition: identity and its definition must now be founded on dynamic and non-absolute foundations, as opposed to the rigid and predictable social structures and processes that once determined it (Bohleber, 2019).

When combined, this collection of intricately linked problems demonstrates the conceptual weight that the term "identity" has and the problems with arguments

that are uncritically based on it. This problem is made worse by the fact that the concept of "identity" initially clearly included the idea of self-sameness. This fundamental idea is therefore at odds with models that highlight an almost infinite degree of self-fragmentation, fluidity, and plasticity a problem that Erikson saw early on as undermining this entire method of self-understanding (Scheck, 2014).

Because social media use affects people's sense of identity, especially when it comes to how they show themselves online vs IRL, it can cause a "crisis of presence". As people manage several virtual personas that can clash with their actual identities, this can result in a fragmented sense of self. The crisis of presence in the context of social media, identity construction and fragmentation of the self reflects the contemporary situation where constant presence in the online environment and the diversity of digital selves can lead to difficulties in forming and maintaining a coherent identity (Akimova *et al*., 2022). This phenomenon is related to the fact that social media offer various platforms for self-expression, often unrelated to each other, which can lead to a fragmented perception of the self and difficulties in integrating these different aspects into a single self.

A key idea in comprehending how people construct and interpret their online personas is digital identity. Despite being widely researched, the majority of attention has been on how individuals construct and perform their online identities or how digital platforms affect these identities. However, the societal repercussions of identity creation on social media and the associated issue related to self-fragmentation receive less attention. In particular, the correlation of these phenomena with the manifestation and consequences of national identity construction in media, audiovisual propaganda, memory politics, and soft power effects are not well-studied within systemic, integrative landscape. With this in mind, the objective of this article is to outline the mechanisms of social media-constructed identity influence on the effectiveness of digital propaganda and soft power tools.

Literature Review

According to Ugur (2017), social media platforms are becoming more and more significant in our lives as they allow "displaying" our life experiences. They also show many aspects of our place in the social life, both online and offline. People are influenced by both of these variables to adopt particular personas in social situations. In the modern world, social networks are becoming more and more significant, and they have a greater influence on society than conventional media. Social media facilitates identity expression, experimentation, and exploration all of which are inherent to the human condition. The real-world organizations that give names to various industries are the ones that motivate online communities and the connections they form among themselves. Understanding the agency's motivations is crucial to comprehending group interactions on social media.

Along with assisting people in connecting and interacting with others, they also help them participate in the activities they desire and help them decide how they want to be seen by others. People may interact with people in a variety of ways while communicating online: they can create as many accounts as they like and may or may not use their real identities. The practical features of identity building are examined in this study in relation to social media and virtual communities. It also examines "the spiral of transformation", which is the process by which the creation phase precedes the internet and reaches the real world, and the likely causes of people feeling the need to construct a virtual identity for themselves.

The enhanced uses and structural benefits of modern communication technologies provide a flexible environment that makes content modification simple. The constrained consuming style and sense of limitation that conventional media conveys to its audience contrasts sharply with the sense of ease and liberty that new media conveys to its audience (Fotopoulos, 2023).

Perhaps the clearest example of Foucault's idea that human identity is fundamentally a discourse that is mediated by our relationships with others is found in his 1969 lecture, which was subsequently turned into an essay. The article "What is an Author?" is rejecting the author's status as a single, cohesive mind that can explain the text's ultimate meaning, Foucault recasts the concept of the author. Rather, the author is defined by Foucault as a collection of functions or leverage points that allow for the creation of a final meaning (Foucault, 2021). Foucault's description of the several "selves" engaged in the authorial function and the following discourses a work might give rise to long after the author has passed away provide some of his most compelling evidence of a discourse-mediated identity. Regarding the "selves", Foucault states that an author will have clearly separate identities at different points in time, such as the voice used in a narrative account vs the voice used in a text's preface. Another "self" is needed when the author evaluates their work after it has been published. All of these "selves" are present at some point, but none of them is completely descriptive (Foucault, 2012).

Foucault goes into more detail on authorship and identity in "The Discourse on Language", especially the several discourses and disciplines that emerge when the general audience reads a piece (Foucault, 1982). The autonomous character (identity) that a text acquires after being read and understood by the reader is demonstrated by Foucault. The author has fulfilled his "function" and contributed to the creation of meaning, but a new kind of production the creation of new discourses occurs after that meaning is made accessible to the general public.

Several methodological traditions and techniques have been used in recent decades to study how discourse constructs identity (Garzone & Archibald, 2010; Page, 2012; Du Bois & Baumgarten, 2013). Their investigations have demonstrated that identity is discursively constructed, as well as how it is formed; in other words, identity is constantly presented as "identity in use".

Identity is a social and sociocultural phenomenon that emerges and expands in local discourse settings of contact, according to Bucholtz and Hall (2005). Accordingly, identity is first created, maintained, and negotiated locally; second, it is associated with established social or demographic categories (e.g., nationality, age, and gender); third, it is only comprehensible in relation to other identities; that is, it always acquires social meaning in relation to other available identity positions and other social actors.

Baldauf and Ollagnier-Beldame (2017) focus on the "otherness" phenomena. The authors stress that the language used by the social network's software qualifies the kind of relationship it offers: publicly displaying one's "friends", "connections", "followers", or others is perceived as both 'indefinite' (each person is a friend, connection, or follower of someone who is linked to someone else who knows someone, etc.) and "closed" (it is possible to count and know the names of people who are members). Users that are part of a social network place themselves in relation to the network by expressing themselves, leaving comments, and endorsing viewpoints that align with the norms, beliefs, and behaviors of the network. These standards and principles are continually renegotiated in member interactions; they are not explicitly stated. According to Page (2012), the user might also attempt to stand out and emphasize what makes them "unique" (micro-celebrity). Second, social network users place themselves in relation to non-members: friends, connections, followers, etc. are the "we" rather than a more or less distinct "you". Through a straightforward request, a single click by the user, and a "click" of acceptance on the other end, the social network's software also decides how one joins a group. Exiting a partnership or network is as simple using the program.

Concerns about the growing tendency to focus identities into single entities were raised by academics by the 2010s. They saw how commercial, governmental, and cultural forces actively defined online personas that differed from offline identities as "risk factors" (Lareki *et al*., 2023; van Zoonen, 2013) and encouraged the development of singular, anchored identities (Szulc, 2019; van Dijck, 2013), discouraging the idea of embracing multiple and performative experiences of identity online. In particular, van Dijck (2013) criticized social networking sites for promoting the idea of a single, transparent person or identity. She maintained that the user interfaces of digital platforms actively mold our public identities to improve the long-term traceability of social activity, going beyond just offering venues for self-expression.

Szulc (2019) echoed this viewpoint when he talked about how platformization has converted datafication logics into the development of distinct profiles. The author argues that social media platforms facilitate and encourage specific identity performance and construction, both online and offline, since the two are mutually constitutive, while acknowledging that the drive to create individual profiles is not exclusive to digital culture (Szulc, 2019). The author comes to the conclusion that platforms encourage users to create expansive but rooted selves identities that are both distinctive and cohesive and capacious, complicated, and volatile for

commercial purposes. To counteract this pressure, users particularly those from marginalized groups curate online across a variety of platforms, allowing them to express numerous or developing identities (Buss *et al*., 2022).

Using data from 17 online focus groups with 86 participants in Portugal, Rowland *et al*. (2024) approached the concept of digital identity from a qualitative, user-centric perspective. They distinguished three unique interpretations that each corresponded to certain aspects of users' online experiences: digital identity, self-presentation, and the datafied self. Rowland *et al*. (2024) research highlights the multifaceted aspect of digital identity, emphasizing its dynamic nature and capacity for continuous reinterpretation.

According to Tripathi (2024), the idea of identity has changed in the digital era in ways that go against long-held philosophical presumptions about the self. People's identities are no longer permanent or continuous; instead, they are now fractured and formed by the various digital personas they create in reaction to the always growing digital world. There is no longer a notion of a permanent self that endures over time and geography. Identity and self can be viewed as a Heraclitean flux that is never in a state of being but is constantly in a state of becoming. The lines separating the virtual and the real have become increasingly hazy, and hyperreal experiences now frequently take precedence over real-world occurrences.

It is also possible to view the different approaches to identification in terms of "depth" or "surface" models of analysis. The "core" of personhood that an actor possesses is equivalent with identity at the individual level. This core can be conceptualized literally as a deeply ingrained, basic, and defining feature, or (more frequently these days) as something much more surface-level, malleable, and manipulable; the latter would be classified as constructionist, while the former would be essentialist. Extreme forms of constructionism, which are linked to postmodernism and poststructuralism, completely reject the idea of a core and view identity as a product of discourse that is intrinsically fractured, multiple, and ephemeral. The exemplars in this case are Butler or Michel Foucault, whose performative theory of gender formation serves as the foundation for a large portion of modern identity politics (Rodemeyer, 2018).

The fragmentation of the self in digital settings is viewed by Sam and Devi (2024) as an existential identity problem. The authors stress that people frequently establish several identities on different online platforms, including social media, professional networks, and virtual communities, in the digital age. People who struggle to grasp who they really are may experience perplexity and an existential crisis as a result of their fractured identities. This study investigates how a person's sense of self is affected by digital environments, which frequently result in feelings of alienation, inauthenticity, and separation. The research explores the conflict between people's carefully constructed online identities and their true selves, drawing on existentialist philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard and Jean-

Paul Sartre. Existentialist ideas like freedom, alienation, and authenticity offer a foundation for comprehending how digital contexts undermine identity coherence. For example, whereas internet platforms make it possible to express oneself, they also put pressure on people to perform, conform, and present idealized images of themselves, all of which can cause internal turmoil.

Agustin and Angeliqa (2023) investigate Gen Z's splintered identity on Instagram. This phenomena is referred to by the authors as "digital dramaturgy on Bourdieu's logic of practice". Their study is based on the constructivism paradigm and gathers data through in-depth, qualitative interviews. When participants introduced themselves on social media, the concept of Fragmented Self was born. The Doxa, Habitus, Field, and Capital of the participant are taken into consideration while using digital dramaturgy. The findings illustrate the participants' approach toward image management and how they organize the most likely symbolic capital. In some industries, participants prefer to use pictures of their friendships or their status in the community as the primary means of showcasing their social capital. Some individuals retain their capital and merely follow their friends on social media in order to replicate them in other domains. In conclusion, Agustin and Angeliqa (2023) claim that the Self is presented in a fragmented manner, taking into account doxa, habitus, arena, and capital to control impressions required in digital dramaturgy, or Fragmented-Self.

However, there are direct societal implications of these psychological phenomena, including really sound ones, manifesting ultimately at the level of whole society. By exposing people to a continual stream of individualized and sometimes contradictory information, propaganda on social media in particular can contribute to a fragmented sense of self by distorting reality and creating a sense of disconnection from common experiences. This can be made worse by automated information filtering, which can lead to "filter bubbles" and "echo chambers" when people are mostly exposed to opinions that support their preexisting ideas (Erdem, 2020). Numerous studies have been conducted on the use of social media as a soft power instrument and how propaganda shapes public opinion; yet, the significance of the fragmented Self phenomena in these processes is still glaringly understudied.

Methodology

Authors take a social constructionist stance, which sees identity as an intersubjective construct rather than a personal one and as a socially developing phenomena rather than a predetermined and defined reality.

The theoretical framework for this research has been derived from the following theories: (a) Theory of soft power; (b) Theory of public diplomacy; (c) Theory of social identity; (d) Network theory (through the usage of social networks, soft power in social media may be utilized to influence behavior, foster collaboration, and create connections); (e) Theory of agenda-setting (implies that people's views

and attitudes about a nation may be influenced by using soft power on social media to set the agenda and mold the problems and subjects they focus on).

The study is based on qualitative methodology, with the application of both content analysis and grounded theory elements. While qualitative content analysis and grounded theory are usually considered as two different methods, our research demonstrates that their applications in a sequence within one research allow obtaining new theoretical insights of more significant depth than each of these methods separately. The sample of literature sources included 51 items, and their processing was carried out with the help of AILYZE an AI-powered solution for grounded theory, with formulation of categories, which were further included in the constructed theory and modelling. AILYZE's AI-assisted theme analysis is one of its primary characteristics. The application automatically finds and extracts important themes from qualitative data using natural language processing (futher – NLP), allowing researcher to quickly identify potential categories and concepts. While AILYZE was employed for concentrating on the more complex and interpretive facets of developing theories, a methodical process for inductively developing theories from qualitative evidence was carried out manually, as it is implied in grounded theory (Yu & Smith, 2024).

Results

Five fundamental elements of the self phenomenon were noted by scholars: material, psychological, social, and ideal (Williams & Schwarz, 2022). A person who uses several social media channels may exhibit different behavioral patterns on each of those networks. It might be argued that people who are able to behave in ways that fit the characteristics and behavioral patterns of each social media site tend to distance themselves from the aspects that make them who they are. As a result, they are drawn to behavioral practices that are solely focused on "space" (the social media platform) and the development of a fragmented self. It is also possible to argue that the fragmented self the self that is classified according to social media engagement practices causes people to lose their feeling of belonging around their ideal self and results in experiences that are not coherent.

The basic tautological nature of spectacle stems from the straightforward fact that the objectives are also the methods, according to Debord (1996), who described modern society as "the society of the spectacle". This perspective leads us to the conclusion that, when the phenomena of consumption is taken into consideration, people use their social media accounts as a way to display themselves as well as for other purposes. Simple pictures become valuable resources and powerful inducers of hypnotic behavior when the real world is transformed into them (Kaya Erdem, 2020).

In addition, this disjointed identity is a target of audiovisual propaganda. Digital propaganda and social media identity are strongly related. Social media sites give

people a place to create and present their online personas, but they also serve as a breeding ground for misinformation. When paired with propaganda's ability to persuade, this identity modification can have a big influence on social behavior and public opinion (Farkas & Neumayer, 2018).

Godoy-Guevara *et al*. (2025) analyzed Ecuadorian voters' perceptions and Facebook posts. The results showed that some information, like memes, had a significant impact on younger voters. Communication tactics that highlight the regularity and recurrence of this information serve to further this impact. The author highlights that the selection of Ecuador as a case study reflects a theoretical desire to comprehend how divided and weak democracies are especially sensitive to the impact of digital platforms. An excellent setting for examining how social networks intensify polarization and influence public opinion is provided by the nation's political instability and low levels of confidence in institutions. Since candidates in Ecuador often have a deeper relationship with voters than in presidential campaigns, the country offers a unique case study to investigate how these platforms affect local elections. This method not only advances knowledge of Ecuadorian politics but also offers conclusions that may be applied to other Latin American democracies who are experiencing crises. Facebook's significance in the Ecuadorian digital ecosystem has led to its selection as the primary platform for analysis. More over 69% of Ecuadorians were active social network users in 2023, and Facebook continued to rank among the most popular platforms with 15.3 million members and an average of 12.7 million organic visits per month (Godoy-Guevara *et al*., 2025). Facebook continues to dominate, particularly among voters in important provinces like Guayas, Pichincha, and Manabí, despite the growth of competing platforms like TikTok and Instagram. Because it enables a thorough examination of how propaganda messages affect public opinion, this relevance further supports the need of researching its effects on political communication. The author provides a flowchart illustrating how voters view the total influence of social media propaganda on their voting choices, based on a poll with 384 participants (Figure 1). It demonstrates that many respondents are aware of the impact of the information they consume.

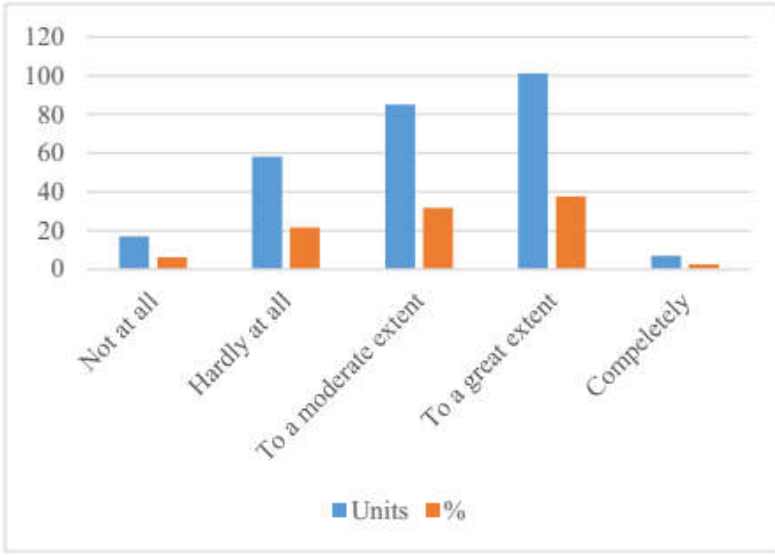

Figure 1. Results of survey regarding social media propaganda impact on electoral behavior, in Ecuadorian context, the question "What was the impact on your voting decision following the consumption of social media propaganda?"

Source: Godoy-Guevara et al. (2025)

As stimulants for political mobilization and self-expression, social networks have transformed election behavior (Jones *et al*., 2017). Through political homophily and the organization of personal networks, they have an impact on electoral decision-making. This supports the idea of the "correct vote", according to which elections represent individual preferences (Bolzern *et al*., 2021). These platforms go beyond simple communication and turn into vital instruments for the election campaign, information sharing, and influencing voters' opinions (Ravanilla *et al*., 2022).

The statistical data presented by Statista, evidently show a sharp growth in the number of countries with evidence of using social media to spread propaganda even in the period of four years (2017-2020) (see Figure 2).

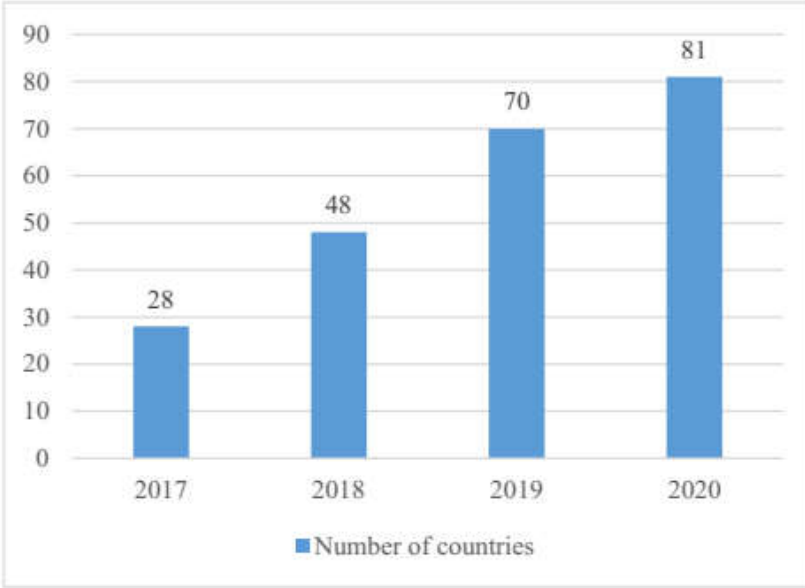

Figure 2. Number of countries with evidence of using social media to spread propaganda and disinformation about politics from 2017 to 2020

Source: Dixon (2022)

Voting intentions and social media involvement show how these platforms influence political participation, particularly among youth. Furthermore, political psychology research has shown that feelings of thankfulness promote voting and that the virality of communications has a big impact on voting behavior.

Furthermore, the internet may be used to successfully facilitate political opposition, which goes beyond a simple technical issue with internet technology, which has advantages over mass communication medium. This element suggests that political action can be successfully supported via the internet. For example, expressions made by Internet users have the potential to elicit opposition and disgust. Additionally, using the internet may divert attention from different economic plans and militarism by establishing unfettered networks, new conflict zones, and movements. Enhancing critical media study or studies, debate, and the new organization of journalistic communities are further possibilities that the internet may facilitate.

As Demuyakor (2021) points out, Facebook has undoubtedly contributed significantly to the various political changes associated with authoritarian regimes. This includes its ability to facilitate an infinite communication network that encompasses the global community and its significant influence in bringing people together and sharing information in order to achieve specific objectives: expanding

influence among audiences of ever-increasing sizes; speeding up information sharing; fostering social bonds between audiences through the exchange of private and public information; and encouraging its diverse user base to use anonymous identities, especially those who wish to voice opposing opinions. These specific indicators show that Facebook, as a social media platform, is more than just a place to display unimportant items or activities. In addition to the many status updates that create impromptu and straightforward stories, Facebook also conveys political expressions that may also contain strong opposition.

The instances of Egypt and Syria provide yet another noteworthy illustration of the use of social media or internet technology in opposition to political authorities. The ruling parties and the various opposition organizations engaged in cyberwars in both instances, using images, symbols, and conflicting narratives to both win allegiance and stop leaders or regular people from defecting to the opposing factions. Cyber activists, for example, were able to create and mobilize new forms of grassroots propaganda during the Syrian and Egyptian uprisings by using social media platforms to plan, organize, and inspire as well as to persuade and motivate. They also used these platforms to continue their massive efforts to reshape society while minimizing the abuse of everyone's fundamental rights and guaranteeing respect for one's dignity.

Technological developments and social media have fundamentally altered international communication, which affects how nations wield power. Joseph Nye (2005) invented the term "soft power", which refers to a country's ability to influence world events via persuasion rather than force. Foreign policy, political regulations, and diplomatic involvement through instruments like cultural diplomacy, media outreach, and internet engagement have all traditionally been associated with soft power. With both benefits and problems, the rise of digital platforms has altered how nations use their soft power impact. Because social media sites like Facebook, X, and TikTok allow for direct communication with unwary publics, states now have access to audiences worldwide that was previously unthinkable.

Kuupäev (2015) aims to highlight how power and diplomacy are evolving in the 21st century's increasingly digitalized and networked world. The author contends that effective communication, with an emphasis on digital diplomacy using digital means, such as social media, to engage with international audiences and engage in public diplomacy is the most essential component of this. The empirical portion of the book focuses on Estonia, a small state that may be seen as a digital success story. By examining how Estonian foreign policy players use social media, the thesis aims to highlight how successful and active these actors have been in using social media for digital diplomacy and to interact with audiences throughout the world. The findings imply that although these players have some excellent examples, they also have a lot of flaws. For example, some actors still do not appear to grasp the rising significance of digital diplomacy or take full use of the potential that social media presents.

As popular culture and a variety of digital technologies become more and more integrated into foreign policy, digital soft power emerges as a key component in achieving public diplomacy. As the primary forces behind media culture and politics in the digital age, affect and emotion may be mobilized and captured through digital technology (Ayhan, 2017; Boler & Davis, 2021).

Global influence is now multipolar due to the fundamental democratization brought about by the digital era. Earlier, few Western centers controlled soft power flows. However, influence now emanates from everywhere. Overnight, a Nollywood movie from Lagos or a K-pop music video from Seoul may become a worldwide sensation. One notable example of how non-Western platforms are changing the media scene is TikTok, which was the most downloaded app globally in 2024 (Jin, 2024).

With 190 out of 193 UN member nations having an official presence on X, almost every government has entered the digital discourse, demonstrating that digital participation is now a key component of public diplomacy. Global influence is more varied and disputed than ever as a result of this multipolar shift. Just as much as a cable news program from Washington, a podcast episode or a popular YouTube series from São Paulo or Mumbai may influence global opinions. The message is clear: any linked group may produce cultural capital, and influence is no longer top-down but rather networked.

Content producers and digital platforms are becoming independent, potent sources of soft power. Globally, there are an estimated 50 million content producers that serve as cultural ambassadors and storytellers for their cities or nations by creating material for platforms like YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, podcasts, and more. Given how quickly this sector is expanding, the creator economy is already valued at over $250 billion as of 2025, up from nearly $100 billion only a few years before (Koetsier, 2025). These digital producers and influencers have devoted fan bases that cut across demographics and countries, frequently surpassing conventional media in terms of reach and interaction.

National borders have become hazier due to platforms like YouTube and TikTok. Creators frequently take on the role of de facto cultural ambassadors, introducing local languages, clothes, and lifestyles to audiences throughout the world through their daily vlogs, music, or comedic skits. In ways that conventional public diplomacy occasionally cannot equal, this person-to-person influence fosters familiarity and favorability, which are the cornerstones of soft power. Not surprisingly, governments and corporations alike are collaborating with influencers on projects that serve as cultural displays.

According to Kaleem (2023), the widespread use of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube offers strong and innovative communication tools that can impact policy decisions by capturing the political sentiment of the general public. The emergence of social media and its interaction with the public has affected politics and policy, as seen in the Middle East. For example,

there have been several governments in the Middle East that have shaped the political landscape by using the region's linguistic, cultural, and religious ties. Social media has also provided a voice to previously underrepresented groups, especially minorities, women, and young people, who have utilized these platforms to raise awareness of their rights and make their views heard. Governments and civil society organizations may now interact with these groups and establish partnerships, opening up new avenues for public diplomacy.

This is one of the tools in the memory politics toolbox. Its meaning is rather clear, even if it comes from a more complicated phenomena called collective memory. The governing class wants people to remember past events, and that is the essence of memory politics. The structure of a more formal definition of memory politics may be as follows: Memory politics is a political strategy used by the ruling class to influence the public's perception of particular historical occurrences. In other words, three conditions must be met for memory politics to exist: 1) a political actor, often the ruling class; 2) a particular set of historical occurrences; and 3) a target audience that is considered significant (Budryte, 2021; Hunter *et al*., 2018).

Crucially significant topics are addressed by memory politics studies: Why do interest groups, political elites, or governments highlight particular historical events more than others? Why do they commemorate some historical events while ignoring others? How do they attempt to encourage or dissuade people from learning about particular events? Why do these sorts of judgments, actions, and policies exist? Radchenko *et al*., 2023; Dutchak *et al*., 2020; Derstuganova, 2018a, 2018b).

One of the most effective memory-politics tools is audiovisual propaganda. In the context of online protest movements, Makhortykh and González Aguilar (2020) examine the relationships among emotions, memories, and user-generated digital information. It contrasts how pro- and anti-government groups employ the visuality and memorability of online memes to influence and advance their political objectives, using the anti-government protests in Venezuela (2019) and Ukraine (2013–2014) as case studies. It demonstrates that Venezuelan and Ukrainian memes have comparable political usefulness, even if they employ different graphic content elements. While anti-government memes create more complex comments that are utilized as a kind of creative critique or coping strategy, pro-government memes in both nations often focus on straightforward emotive messaging for propaganda or polarizing reasons. Memorabilia frequently amplifies these political roles, being utilized by pro-government groups to stigmatize opponents of the state and by anti-government communities to validate the demands of protestors.

But in this digital environment of influence, the issue is raised: if social media creates a fragmented self, how can soft power tools and tactics effectively impact this fractured identity? In order to answer this issue, an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the phenomena under consideration must be strengthened.

Discussion

The appeal to the problem of identity from the very beginning was associated with the formation of the humanistic paradigm in science, which outlined the problems of freedom and responsibility, the meaningfulness of life, with the growing interest in the problem of choice in all spheres of life space, self-expression, and the acquisition of the "essential Self". Identity is considered as an independent problem in the works of representatives of classical philosophy. The widespread use of the term "identity" and its introduction into scientific use belongs to Erickson, who defined identity as the internal "continuity of an individual's self-experience", "lasting internal equality with oneself", the most important characteristic of the integrity of the personality, the integration of a person's experiences of his identity with himself and with social groups (Rios, 2024). Erickson identifies three main aspects of identity: a sense of identity, the process of identity formation, and identity as a result.

Identity is a person's sameness to himself, which is revealed through personal experience and knowledge of the surrounding world. The concept of identity, according to Erikson, denotes: an acquired and personally accepted image of oneself in all the richness of the person's relationships to the surrounding world; a sense of adequacy and stable possession by the person of his own "Self" regardless of changes in the 'Self" and the situation; the ability of the person to fully solve the problems that arise before him at each stage of his development.

Identity is defined both as a result of personality development and as a psychological mechanism for the formation of a person's sense of self-identity, a sense of integrity in changing social conditions. Researchers define identity as a person's experience of belonging to something (a principle, a cause, an idea) or of oneness with someone (another individual, oneself, a group). This phenomenon arises within the framework of the global problematic of existence of a human, who becomes "fully human" when he or she realizes his or her identity. The famous American futurologist A. Toffler wrote in this regard back in 1980: millions of individuals are intensely searching for their own identity or some kind of magical therapy that facilitates the reunification of their personality in order to overcome chaos, internal entropy, and form their own order (Toffler, 1980).

Contemporary researchers argue that the nonlinearity of identity change provides an opportunity and prospect for interaction and joint application of naturalistic-essentialist and constructivist approaches to identity analysis (Bos *et al*., 2018). This is also confirmed by the results of our study.

A digital identity can be conceptualized as a matrix, where each row represents an individual and each column represents an attribute or piece of information associated with that individual's online presence. This matrix-like structure helps manage and organize the various facets of a person's or entity's digital footprint. Accordingly, the result of digital soft power influence (E) on fragmented identity

can be understood as a point in three-dimensional system of coordinates, the axes of which are social/status identity (SI), national identity (NI), and citizen/political identity (PI). In turn, each of these points can consist of several vectors, the sum of which will ultimately determine the potential effect made by soft power or propaganda tools (see Figure 3).

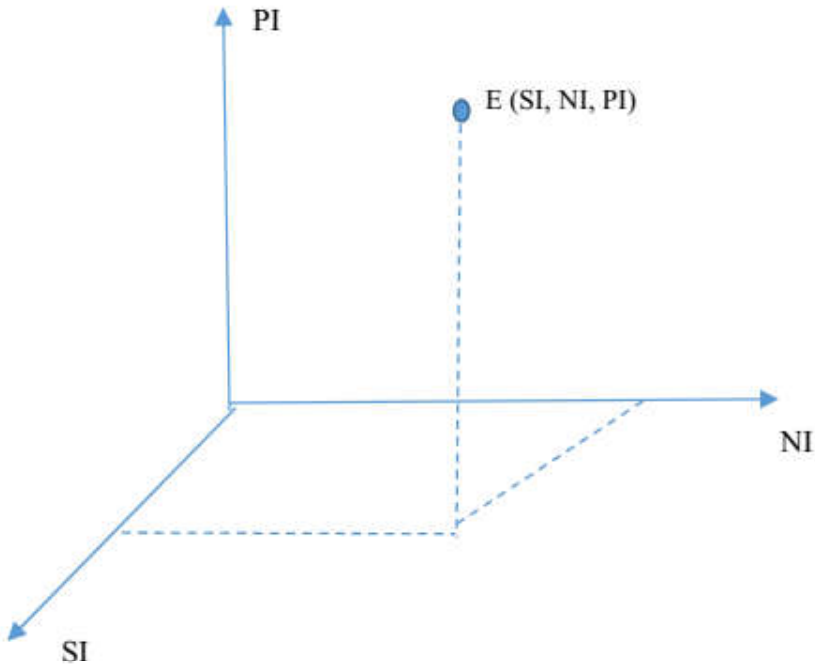

Figure 3. Conceptual vision of digital soft power influence on fragmented identity
Source: developed by the authors

In turn, each of the variables SI, NI, and PI is multicomponent, due to identity fragmentation. This can be formulated through the model of McKinsey matrix (see Figure 4).

For each indicator within each of the two factors, weight coefficients (%) are determined. For each indicator within each of the two factors, a rank is determined (from 1 to 5 or from 1 to 10). For each indicator, an overall score is determined by multiplying the weight coefficient of this indicator by its rank. Then the scores are summed up within each factor, and an overall score for the factor is obtained.

The extent of influence in the elements of matrix are determined by the assumption that a "fragmented Self" in the context of electoral behavior refers to a situation where voters' identities and political affiliations are less stable and

more fluid, leading to increased electoral volatility and unpredictable voting patterns. This refers, sure, not only to voting but also to activism and other civic engagement.

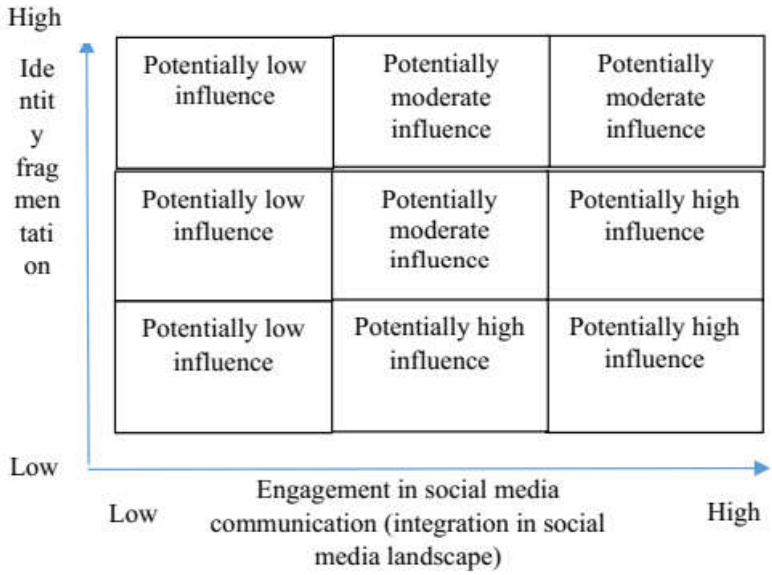

Figure 4. A concept of McKinsey matrix for variables SI, NI, and PI

Source: developed by the authors

Effective influencing an individual with highly fragmented Self is difficult "task". However, political marketers use the 'arsenal' of business marketing tools in case of elastic demand – these tools include microtargeting, relationship marketing, formation of consumer needs, value co-creation. In some social networks environments, this appears especially effective.

Specifically, Second Life is a virtual environment where users may construct and "script" various items, from houses and clothes to cars and weaponry, thanks to the developers' powerful tools. As a result, there is a large amount of user-generated content, some of which is vulgar, some of which is rubbish, and some of which is quite enlightening. For instance, the W-Hats, a Second Life griefer organization, had a property with swastikas, enormous penises, and a "build" that included a Death Star exploding the World Trade Center. The Patriotic Nigras (futher – PN), another griefer gang, frequently committed racist and illegal acts, attacking clubs inside Second Life and claiming responsibility for the griefing of John Edwards' Second Life political campaign headquarters (the W-Hats also claimed blame). Second Life Republicans were accused by the Edwards campaign.

Using a comparative dataset of the Twitter discussion activities of 115 political groups across 26 countries, Bright (2018) aims to explain the rise of political fragmentation on social media. It finds that groups that are more ideologically

distant from one another interact less frequently, and that groups at the extremes of the ideological spectrum are especially likely to have fewer interaction patterns. In fact, interactions between centrists on opposing sides of the left-right spectrum are more common than those between centrists and radicals on the same ideological wing. The findings strengthen the notion of exposure to a range of ideological perspectives on the internet.

One of the hypotheses considered by Bright (2018) was the following: "when groups are from different sides of the left–right divide, they will interact less". In direct opposition to the premise, it seemed during the study that pairings from opposing sides of the left-right split communicate more than those from the same side. This implies, for instance, that a particular center-left party would converse more with other center-left parties than with extreme-left parties (assuming no change in ideological distance). Thus, the landscape of exerting soft power and propaganda influence on fragmented Selves through social networks is of complex nature and requires further deep investigation, in particular, within interdisciplinary perspective.

Conclusion

Today, the era that presented the world with the expansion of urban culture and adequate political and economic formats is close to its end. Along with the previous political phenomenology and above the administrative grid, a new world is emerging: a complex, dynamic, multifactorial, multidimensional cosmos of communities built according to exotic patterns, the characteristic features of which are: the primacy of cultural gravity, flow sociality, widespread multiplicity, which, as our study demonstrated, lead to the phenomenon of fragmented identity, that can be described in terms of the "fragmented Self" paradigm offered by Foucault. This fragmentation, in turn, changes the nature and tools of soft power influence. In other words, in our research, we presented at attempt to combine Foucault' theory of fragmented Self and Nye' theory of soft power and built a conceptual model of digital soft power influence on fragmented identity within the landscape of social media – the plane of fragmented identity most evident manifestation.

The change in identity affects the state of culture, morality, politics, and people's attitudes towards each other, towards national identity and politics. But these changes are not only a consequence of social development processes, but also the result of state and other identity policies that shape it in one direction or another. Despite the active interest of society and scientists in the identity crisis and attempts to get out of it, many problems of identity analysis remain unaddressed. Among them are the history of the change of theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of identity and the emergence of new theories of identity, the study of the contexts of formation and change of identity, constructivist

tendencies in the study of identity and their connection with naturalistic-essentialist ones, conflicts of identity, the role of identity in culture.

These and other problems are relevant in theoretical and practical senses. Their theoretical solution will help to present the dynamics of identity in society and its study in sociology, to identify the contexts that form identity, affirming the functioning norms of self-identification of an individual, small groups, social formations - ethnic groups, nations, classes, societies, countries. In a practical sense, the obtained results can contribute to the implementation of an identity policy adequate to the tasks of society.

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