Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Interdisciplinary Humanities and Communication Studies
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38496

Psychological Self-Reconstruction Behind the Deletion and Concealment of Past Social Media Posts

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Abstract. As social media has increasingly become an important space for documenting everyday life, expressing emotions and presenting personal identities, in this context, practices such as deleting, hiding, archiving and restricting the visibility of past social media posts have become increasingly common. These behaviors are often understood primarily as forms of privacy protection or information management. However, a privacy-based explanation alone cannot fully account for why individuals actively manage content that may have been posted years earlier and may no longer receive significant attention. Drawing on theories of the digital self, self-presentation, imagined audiences, context collapse and time collapse, this paper examines the relationship between historical social media content and changing perceptions of personal identity. Through a review and synthesis of existing academic literature, the paper argues that deleting or concealing past social media content is not merely an act of information management but can also function as a form of digital identity management and self-reconstruction. Imagined audiences, context collapse, and the persistence of digital traces allow past versions of the self to remain visible within present social environments. When individuals perceive a discrepancy between their past digital identities and their current sense of self, they may delete, hide, archive, or restrict access to older content to reorganize their digital identities. Therefore, the management of social media history can be understood as an ongoing process through which individuals renegotiate the relationship between their past selves, present selves and publicly visible identities.

Keywords: social media, digital identity, self-presentation, imagined audience, self-reconstruction

1. Introduction

Social media has evolved from a simple communication tool into a central environment for identity expression, relationship management, and self-presentation. Content shared on platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and X does more than document specific moments. collectively, it builds an ongoing digital representation of the self. Unlike offline expressions of identity, however, this content doesn't necessarily fade as people move through different life stages. Instead, old posts often remain searchable, viewable, and open to reinterpretation long after they were first shared.

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DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38496

This persistence creates a distinct psychological and social phenomenon. Some users delete older posts outright, while others hide, archive, or restrict their visibility. These behaviors might look like simple digital housekeeping, but when people remove ordinary posts that receive little attention, privacy protection alone doesn't explain it. The behavior more likely reflects a deeper process, which is individuals reconsidering the relationship between their past and present selves, and how they want to be seen by others.

Research on digital identity supports this view. Kerrigan and Hart [1] use a dramaturgical lens to describe digital personhood, highlighting how multiple "temporal selves" can coexist online. Because old content stays accessible even after someone's identity has shifted, different versions of the self may persist simultaneously in the same digital space. Jacobsen [2] offers further insight, finding that people use deletion to make painful, awkward, or identity-inconsistent memories invisible. Deletion is a reflective process through which people negotiate continuity and change in who they are.

This raises a key question: why do people delete, hide, archive, or restrict their past social media content, and to what extent does this reflect digital identity reconstruction? This paper mainly examines the relationship between historical social media content and changing perceptions of personal identity.

2. Theoretical framework: the digital self and self-presentation

Understanding why individuals delete or conceal past social media content first requires an understanding of the concept of the digital self. Personal identity is not necessarily a completely fixed entity. Instead, it develops through social interaction, self-reflection and self-presentation across different social environments. Social media extends this process into digital environments, allowing individuals to continuously present themselves through photographs, text, videos, profile information, likes, comments, and other forms of interaction.

Kerrigan and Hart [1] apply a dramaturgical perspective to digital personhood and argue that social media data can form a continuing digital representation of an individual. Their discussion of multiple temporal selves is particularly relevant because individuals may encounter different versions of themselves simultaneously within digital environments. Content created in the past does not automatically disappear when an individual's identity changes. Consequently, an older digital self may continue to coexist with the individual's current self.

This perspective suggests that digital identity is not constructed once and then permanently established. Instead, it is continuously shaped by decisions concerning what individuals publish, preserve, modify, hide, or remove. In this sense, digital identity is constructed not only through what individuals choose to display but also through what they choose to stop displaying.

For example, content posted during the early years of high school may reflect an individual's interests, values, friendships, or social environment at that particular time. Several years later, however, the same content may no longer correspond to the individual's current identity. Removing or concealing such content can therefore become a way of reorganizing the digital representation of the self.

Research also suggests that social media self-presentation can influence individuals' perceptions of themselves. Choi, Williams and Kim [3], for example, examined how self-presentation and the temporal characteristics of social media influence self-concept. Their research demonstrates that the persistence of social media content is relevant not only to how others perceive users but also to how users understand themselves.

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Thus, the digital self is not simply an archive of everything an individual has ever done. It is a selectively maintained representation that can be continuously edited as the individual's identity develops.

3. Imagined audiences and impression management

Why might individuals decide that an old social media post should be removed? One important explanation involves the concept of the imagined audience.

Marwick and Boyd [4] introduced the concept of the imagined audience to describe the audience that social media users mentally construct when producing and sharing content. Users may not know exactly who will see a post, but they nevertheless imagine particular groups of people as potential viewers. These imagined audiences influence what users choose to share and how they present themselves online.

This becomes particularly significant because social media can bring together social groups that would normally remain separate in offline environments. Friends, family members, classmates, teachers, coworkers, and future professional contacts may all potentially encounter the same digital content.

This phenomenon is commonly described as context collapse. In offline life, individuals typically adjust their behavior according to different social contexts. The language used with close friends, for example, may differ substantially from the language used with teachers, parents, or professional contacts. On social media, however, these different audiences can become concentrated within a single digital environment.

Consequently, when individuals revisit old posts, they may not simply remember the past. They may also imagine how different audiences would interpret those posts in the present:

- Would my current classmates interpret this differently?
- What would a teacher or future employer think?
- Does this post still represent who I am?
- Would someone who knows me now misunderstand who I used to be?

The imagined audience therefore becomes an important factor in digital self-presentation. Users may adjust their content, hide particular topics, or remove older posts to manage how their digital identities are perceived.

Importantly, deletion does not necessarily indicate that an individual rejects their past. Instead, it may indicate a desire to control which version of the self is accessible to which audience.

Loh and Walsh [5] similarly examine context collapse through Goffman's concept of face-work. They argue that context collapse can blur boundaries between public, private and professional identities, creating challenges for individuals attempting to manage their social image.

From this perspective, deleting old social media posts can serve an important impression management function. Individuals are not merely managing information; they are managing how others understand them.

4. Time collapse: why the past continues to affect the present

While context collapse helps explain why different audiences may encounter the same version of an individual, time collapse helps explain why different versions of the individual can exist simultaneously.

Brandtzaeg and Lüders [6] extend the concept of context collapse by examining the temporal dimension of social media. Traditional discussions of context collapse emphasize the merging of

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different social audiences. Time collapse, by contrast, highlights the compression of different moments in an individual's life into the same digital environment.

This concept is particularly important for understanding the deletion of old posts.

In offline life, identity change generally follows a temporal sequence. Individuals may have different interests, values, relationships, and social identities during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. As these changes occur, earlier identities often gradually become less relevant to everyday social interactions.

Social media disrupts this natural separation of time. A photograph posted at age sixteen may remain accessible at age twenty. In offline life, the person may regard that period as a completed stage of life. Digitally, however, the content remains part of the individual's accessible identity.

In other words, the person has changed, but the digital representation of the past has not necessarily changed with them. This can create a perceived discrepancy between the past self and the present self. The old content itself remains unchanged, while the individual's interpretation of that content may change.

Kerrigan and Hart's [1] concept of multiple temporal selves helps explain this phenomenon. Different versions of the self can remain simultaneously present within social media environments. Deleting or hiding old content can therefore be understood as one way of managing these temporal selves. From this perspective, deleting the past does not necessarily mean rejecting the past. Instead, it may represent an attempt to redefine how the past relates to the present.

5. Deletion, concealment, archiving and audience restriction

Not all users manage their historical content in the same way. Social media platforms provide multiple mechanisms, including deletion, hiding, archiving, and audience restriction. These practices may represent different degrees and forms of digital identity management.

5.1. Deletion

Deletion represents one of the strongest forms of digital content management. By deleting a post, users remove it from their publicly visible identity. When individuals believe that a particular piece of content no longer reflects who they are, deletion can reduce the visibility of an earlier version of themselves.

Importantly, however, deletion should not automatically be interpreted as rejection of personal history. Jacobsen [2] demonstrates that deletion may function as a tactic for managing the digital past, particularly when individuals encounter memories that are embarrassing, painful, awkward, or inconsistent with their current understanding of themselves.

Deletion can therefore be both an act of identity management and an act of reflection.

5.2. Concealment and archiving

Hiding or archiving content represents a less permanent form of identity management. Instead of completely eliminating a piece of content, individuals can remove it from their publicly visible profile while retaining access to it.

This distinction is psychologically meaningful. A person may still consider an experience part of their personal history while deciding that it should no longer contribute to their public identity.

In this sense, archiving may allow individuals to balance two competing goals: preserving personal memory while controlling public identity.

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5.3. Audience restriction

Restricting visibility emphasizes audience management rather than complete removal.

Costa [7] argues that social media users actively shape their use of platform features according to their social and cultural contexts. Her concept of affordances-in-practice emphasizes that users are not simply controlled by technological structures. Instead, they actively adapt platform features to meet social needs.

Accordingly, different forms of content management may communicate different identity strategies:

Deletion: "I no longer want this version of myself to be part of my public identity."

Concealment or archiving: "This is part of my past, but I do not want others to see it now."

Audience restriction: "This version of myself is appropriate for certain audiences but not others."

Thus, social media content management should not be understood as a simple choice between "delete" and "keep." Instead, it represents a spectrum of digital identity management strategies.

6. Managing the digital past

One of the most important developments in the literature is the growing recognition that social media users actively manage their digital past. Jacobsen [2] provides particularly relevant evidence through interviews and focus groups examining how individuals respond to social media memories. His research identifies deletion, delaying, and linking as tactics through which individuals negotiate their digital past. Importantly, deletion was particularly relevant when users encountered content that no longer fit their current representation of themselves.

This finding strengthens the argument that deleting old content can be related to identity change rather than simply privacy concerns. Similarly, Davidson and Joinson [8] found that users employ multiple strategies to manage different audiences and digital identities across social media platforms. Their participants reported deleting old content, untagging themselves, self-censoring, and maintaining different forms of self-presentation across platforms.

These findings suggest that digital identity is actively maintained rather than passively accumulated.

Feher [9], based on qualitative research with 60 participants, likewise emphasizes the importance of personal strategies for managing digital footprints and online identities.

Taken together, these studies suggest that social media users are not simply surrounded by digital traces that automatically define them. Instead, individuals make active decisions concerning which traces should remain visible, which should be hidden, and which should be removed.

7. Audience change and the continuous reconstruction of digital identity

Users' perceptions of their audiences can change over time, and these changes may influence how they manage their digital identities. Yao, Taylor and Ransom [10] examined imagined audiences on Instagram and investigated how platform affordances and users' self-disclosure goals influence perceptions of audiences. Their research distinguishes between different forms of Instagram content and demonstrates that the characteristics of content and users' disclosure goals can influence how users imagine their audiences.

This finding is particularly important for understanding historical social media content. Different types of content have different levels of persistence and visibility. Users may therefore adjust their

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38496

self-presentation depending on whether they believe a post will remain accessible to future audiences.

For example, temporary content may allow users to express themselves more spontaneously, whereas permanent posts may encourage greater consideration of how future audiences will interpret the content. For example, suggests that the permanence and breadth of an audience can influence users' restraint in digital self-presentation. Therefore, digital identity is not constructed once at the moment of posting. Instead, it is continuously reconsidered as audiences, social environments, and self-perceptions change.

Digital identity is an identity that can be continuously edited. Past posts represent earlier versions of the digital self, while deletion, concealment, archiving, and audience restriction represent later attempts to revise that digital representation.

8. Self-reconstruction: from deleting the past to redefining the present

Taken together, the literature suggests that the management of old social media posts may involve a deeper psychological process of self-reconstruction.

First, individuals experience identity change. As age, education, relationships, interests, and social environments change, individuals' understandings of themselves also develop. Consequently, older social media content may gradually become inconsistent with their current identities.

Second, individuals become increasingly aware of social evaluation. Because imagined audiences and context collapse bring different social groups into contact with the same digital content, users may reconsider whether older posts could influence how others perceive them.

Third, time collapse allows past versions of the self to remain visible. The past does not automatically disappear from digital space but continues to coexist with the present self.

Finally, individuals can use digital platform features to reorganize their digital identities.

The process can therefore be represented as follows: Identity change → Discrepancy between past and present selves → Changing perceptions of the imagined audience → Concern that past content may affect current social impressions → Reevaluation of historical social media content → Deletion / concealment / archiving / audience restriction → Reorganization of digital identity

This process demonstrates that social media "clean-up" is not merely an informational activity. It also concerns how individuals understand their past, present, and future selves.

Importantly, self-reconstruction does not necessarily mean rejecting the past. The use of concealment and archiving demonstrates that individuals may attempt to balance preserving personal memories with maintaining a coherent public identity.

This distinction is important because digital identity is not determined exclusively by the platform. Costa [7] emphasizes that users actively adapt technological affordances to their social contexts. Digital identity therefore emerges through the interaction between users, platform features, social relationships, and cultural environments.

9. Discussion

The existing literature suggests that the deletion and concealment of social media content can be understood at three interconnected levels.

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9.1. Information management

At the first level, users may simply want to reduce unnecessary information, increase privacy, or control the circulation of their content. This represents the most straightforward explanation for deletion and concealment.

9.2. Social relationship management

At the second level, users manage relationships with different audiences. Because multiple social groups may encounter the same content, users need to determine who should have access to particular aspects of their identities. Deletion, concealment, and audience restriction can therefore function as tools of impression management and audience management. Marwick and Boyd's [4] work on imagined audiences and context collapse provides an important theoretical foundation for understanding this process.

9.3. Identity management

At the third and deeper level, users manage their identities. When individuals' self-understandings change, historical digital content may become inconsistent with their present identities. At this point, deleting or concealing content is not simply about controlling what other people see. It is also about deciding which aspects of the past should continue to represent the present self. This interpretation is strongly supported by research directly examining digital memories. Jacobsen [2], for example, shows that deletion can be used to manage digital memories that no longer fit an individual's current sense of self. Therefore, deleting an old post should not necessarily be interpreted as an act of forgetting. It may instead be an active process of identity editing.

Through the management of digital traces, individuals redraw the boundaries between their past and present selves and attempt to maintain greater consistency between their public digital identities and their current self-understandings. However, this behavior should not be interpreted as the result of a single universal psychological mechanism. Social media practices vary according to cultural background, age, social environment, platform design, and individual goals. Costa [7], for example, demonstrates that users' approaches to social media affordances are shaped by particular social and cultural contexts.

Similarly, research on digital identity management suggests that individuals can employ different strategies across different platforms and audiences. Davidson and Joinson [8] found that users often maintain different presentations of themselves across platforms and actively use practices such as self-censorship, deletion, and audience separation. Therefore, future research should avoid assuming that every act of deletion represents the same psychological motivation.

10. Conclusion

The deletion, concealment, archiving, and audience restriction of historical social media content represent important ways in which individuals manage their digital identities. Drawing on theories of the digital self, self-presentation, imagined audiences, context collapse, and time collapse, this paper argues that managing the digital past is not simply a form of information deletion, but can also be a process of digital identity management and self-reconstruction. As individuals' identities change, imagined audiences, context collapse, and time collapse may make older versions of the self-remain visible in the present, leading users to reorganize their digital identities through deleting,

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38496

hiding, archiving, or restricting past content. From this perspective, "deleting the past" can be understood as a way of redefining the present. Individuals are not simply removing information from a digital platform; they are negotiating which parts of their past should continue to represent who they are today.

However, deletion does not necessarily have a single psychological meaning. It may also be motivated by privacy concerns, relationship changes, embarrassment, emotional regulation, or other social factors. Existing research has also focused on particular platforms and populations, suggesting that future studies could examine how age, culture, platform features, and changing identities influence the way people manage their digital past. Longitudinal and behavioral research could further explore whether these practices actually contribute to a greater sense of identity coherence.

Ultimately, social media does more than document identity change. It also provides individuals with tools through which they can actively reconstruct their identities. The digital self is therefore not a fixed online archive, but a dynamic representation that is continuously shaped by time, audiences, social relationships, and changing self-perceptions.

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