

Digital Belonging in Online Communities: The Role of Social Interaction and Emotional Connection in Shaping Trust, Identity, and Sense of Community

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the concept of digital belonging within online communities and the psychological processes (trust and identity) that affect the sense of belonging among individuals in online groups. Although the problem of disconnected social relationships remains the same in the digital realm, the current study is concerned with the social and emotional aspects that underlie the difference in the sense of belonging of users. The paper uses the perspectives of social interaction to develop and test a framework that integrates positive relational factors (e.g., social interaction) with emotional drivers (e.g., emotional connection) to examine their impact on trust, identity formation and a sense of community. The survey with 324 active users of social media in Jordan was used to collect data, as the participants regularly use the Internet and online communities to deliver the required information and services. With the help of PLS-SEM, the results show that social interaction has a great and positive impact on the formation of trust, but emotional connection is of great importance in influencing identity formation in the online environment. Trust has a high predictive power on how people feel about their community, and identity also has a positive predictive value on the sense of community. Moreover, the relationship between social interaction and sense of community is partially mediated by trust, whereas identity mediates the connection between emotional connection and belongingness. The findings underscore trust and identity as crucial psychological processes by which digital interactions promote meaningful social connections. The current research offers practical lessons to digital platforms and community managers who aim at increasing the level of user engagement, enhancing the level of social bonding and ensuring the creation of inclusive online communities.

Keywords: Digital Belonging, Social Interaction, Emotional Connection, Trust, Sense of Community

JEL Classifications: E71, M14

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of digital platforms at a rapid pace has fundamentally transformed how people form relationships, identities and social meaning and it has also given rise to the concept of digital belonging, within the online community. With the development of social interaction moving towards the virtual realm, the mechanisms that may contribute to the sense of community became a focal point of the modern debates in the field of sociology, media studies, and digital humanities (González-Anta et al., 2021; Bulat, 2025). The term digital belonging can be

defined as the degree to which individuals feel accepted, valued, and connected within online contexts, which is closely related to the concept of trust, identity formation, and relational engagement (Sachan et al., 2025; Zhou et al., 2021). Although there has been an increase in the number of platforms like social networking sites, forums, and virtual communities, users tend to experience a disjointed connection, which casts critical questions about the extent to which meaningful belonging can be cultivated within the digitally mediated context (Aldianto and Kausch, 2025). In this topography, social interaction and emotional connection become pillars of driving online interaction. The frequency and quality

of communication among the users, which is defined as social interaction, allows the exchange of information, support and shared experiences, thus strengthening relational ties (Vale et al., 2026). Emotional connection, in its turn, is a reflection of the affective relationships people build due to empathy, mutual feelings, and mutual understanding in the online world (Danielson and Bjorkman, 2025). The variables are of special interest because they reflect the behavioral and emotional aspects of online participation, which are essential in explaining how people shift to become active members of the community. The choice of trust and identity as mediating variables is based on their existing functions in influencing social cohesion and self-concept. Trust is the trust that users have in those around them and the site itself, which allows free communication and long-term interaction (Jamil et al., 2026). Meanwhile, identity is the way people perceive and self-express in digital spaces, which is often shaped through interactions and feedback of others (Zervas and Maronitis, 2025). Collectively, these constructs can form a comprehensive framework on how psychologically processes underpin digital belonging.

The topicality of the present research is also supported by the increasing economic and social significance of digital community-driven industries, such as the social media sites, online forums, games worlds, and content sharing networks. The social media market around the globe has grown exponentially, with billions of users engaging every day across platforms, creating a significant economic value through user-generated content, digital advertising, and community-driven innovation (Hatamleh et al., 2023). Nevertheless, despite such a high level of user penetration, platforms must still address an array of challenges that are related to user retention, dwindling trust, online toxicity, and superficial engagement (Bayram and Barut, 2023). These circumstances are what point to a deeper understanding of the way meaningful relationships and a true sense of community could be cultivated. Emphasis on this sector is not only based on the size and the impact it has had but also the core role it has played in shaping the present social life, communication practices and cultural exchange. Previous studies have done a good job in understanding online interaction and community dynamics; however, there are several critical gaps that require addressing to capture the overall effects of both on belonging (Aldianto and Kausch, 2025; Vale et al., 2026). While trust has been widely studied in e-commerce and organizational contexts, its role as a mediating mechanism in digital belonging remains underexplored (Khalid, 2025; Raslan et al., 2026). Research on identity formation has largely focused on offline or hybrid contexts, with limited attention to how identity evolves purely within digital communities (Zhou et al., 2021; Danielson and Björkman, 2025).

Many studies emphasize technological features rather than human-centered variables, overlooking the emotional and relational aspects that drive sustained engagement (González-Anta et al., 2021; Lizzo and Liechty, 2022). There is a lack of empirical research in non-Western contexts, particularly in regions such as the Middle East, where cultural norms and digital adoption patterns may shape online behavior differently (Blanchard, 2024; Kackar, 2024). Furthermore, the previous studies are often based on descriptive or qualitative studies, which restrict the possibility of

quantitatively testing the complex relations and mediation effects (Paul, 2025; Ni et al., 2025). All these gaps lead to the conclusion that a thorough, empirically based study is necessary. The current study is intended to fulfill several main goals: (1) to evaluate the effect of social interaction on trust within online communities, (2) to determine the influence of emotional connection on identity formation, (3) to examine how trust and identity affect individuals sense of community and (4) to investigate the mediating role of trust and identity in shaping the feeling of community amongst individuals. With the consideration of these aims, the study provides a subtle insight into the interaction between behavioral and emotional dimensions to generate significant social results within the digital realm.

The value of this study is that it is an interdisciplinary synthesis of sociological, psychological and technological views of digital belonging, which provides a holistic perspective on the analysis of digital belonging. It goes beyond theoretical development to practical implications on platform designers, community managers and policymakers aiming to create non-discriminatory and engaging online experiences. The empirical situation in Jordan and the combined focus on social interaction, emotional connection, trust, and identity in one model are the peculiarities of the research, which contributes to the diversification of the global digital research. It makes a contribution to the existing body of literature by providing evidence-based ways of understanding the processes that perpetuate meaningful digital relationships. Finally, the study also contributes to the larger discussion on human connection in the digital age, highlighting that technology is not the solution to the issue, but rather a supportive tool that allows individuals to become truly connected (Sachan et al., 2025).

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This paper builds the foundation of two theoretical approaches, social identity theory (SIT) and social exchange theory (SET) to explain how trust, identity, and ultimately, digital belonging are formed within online communities through social interaction and emotional connection. These theories are chosen because of their high explanatory power in trying to understand both the cognitive-social and relational-behavioral aspects of human interaction in mediated environments. Through their integration, they offer a coherent package to capture how individuals create meaning, develop relations, and feel belonging in digital environments. SIT, the initial concept developed by Turner et al. (1979) asserts that people identify themselves with reference to their belongings to social groups. This process becomes even more dynamic in online communities where people constantly negotiate and reconstruct their identities within the digital interactions (Vale et al., 2026). The applicability of SIT to this research is that it can be used to explain how an emotional attachment leads to identity development. When users share common feelings, a sense of understanding, and symbolic closeness with other users, they start to internalize the sense of group membership as a part of their self-concept (Danielson and Bjorkman, 2025). Previous studies indicate that emotional attachment towards online groups is an essential aspect that substantially increases identity salience and commitment (González-Anta et al., 2021; Raslan et al., 2026).

Moreover, research on virtual communities proves that the pattern of interaction and the perceived group cohesion have a strong effect on identity formation (Aldianto and Kausch, 2025; Jamil et al., 2026). This renders SIT especially apt in explicating the route between emotional connection and identity, and, consequently, a feeling of community. This study meets the requirements of learning about belonging as not just a process of participation, but an internalized psychological condition that is a product of identification processes (Khalid, 2025). To supplement this view, SET offers a relational approach to explicating how trust is a product of social interaction.

According to Blau (1964) articulation of SET implies that the social behavior is motivated by the reciprocity of the exchanges where the people on one side of the exchange can evaluate the relationship based on a perceived benefit and cost. Online environments, social interaction (via communication, feedback, and shared activities) is the main mechanism through which such exchanges take place (Zervas and Maronitis, 2025). Trust is built when users find interactions to be predictable, beneficial, and mutually advantageous, reducing uncertainty and encouraging further interaction (Paul, 2025). Empirical evidence indicates that meaningful and frequent interaction significantly increases interpersonal trust in digital interactions (Kackar, 2024; Sachan et al., 2025). Additionally, trust is found to be a crucial predictor of continued involvement and sense of belonging of online sites (Zhou et al., 2021). The choice of SET can thus be justified because it gives explanations on how social interaction is translated into trust then into a stable and supportive environment that leads to the concept of belonging. The combination of SIT and SET provides a holistic account of the digital belonging by connecting emotional, cognitive, and relational processes. Whereas SIT describes the process of individuals internalizing group membership by forming identity, SET explains the relational processes that develop trust through the interaction of individuals. Past research has provided more and more reasons to believe that it is essential to integrate these views in order to gain a deeper understanding of complicated online behaviors (Ni et al., 2025; Bulat, 2025). As an example, the study has found that trust and identity have a mutual effect on the commitment by users to online communities, and both the relational exchanges and the identity processes are necessary to promote belonging (Bayram and Barut, 2023).

Furthermore, research on social media usage indicates that emotional attachment improves trust and identification, which strengthens the interrelationship between these constructs (Raslan et al., 2026). More importantly, previous research has frequently considered trust and identity as distinct outputs instead of interdependent processes within a single framework (Hatamleh et al., 2023; Paluch et al., 2026). This research contributes to the current body of knowledge by incorporating these constructs into a single model through the support of SIT and SET, to explain the role of these two constructs in conjunction to produce digital belonging. Empirical evidence that serves to support the theoretical alignment is also provided by the fact that trust mediates the relationship between interaction and community engagement, whereas identity mediates the relationship between emotional connection and belonging (Blanchard, 2024). Altogether, the SIT

and the SET are highly justified because they are used collectively in the context of the multidimensional nature of online community experiences. Not only do their integration support the proposed relationships in this study, but they also address the existing theoretical fragmentation by providing a cohesive and holistic explanation of how digital belonging is formed and maintained.

2.1. Social Interaction and Trust in Online Communities

Social interaction in online communities operates as a template process in which interpersonal trust is established and strengthened. The regular exchanges, meaningful conversations, and reciprocal communication enable individuals to gauge the reliability, responsiveness, and intentions of others, thus reducing uncertainty in digitally mediated settings (Danielson and Bjorkman, 2025). In contrast to passive engagement, active interaction will enable familiarity and predictability, which are the necessary antecedents to the development of trust (González-Anta et al., 2021). According to the empirical evidence, the more frequent the positive experience that the users have had, the more likely they are to perceive others as trustworthy (Vale et al., 2026). Also, it becomes more visible that there are regular patterns of interaction, which strengthens a perception of transparency and accountability, which in turn reinforces trust dynamics (Khalid, 2025). Interaction as a communication method is a replacement of physical cues in digitally networked environments where anonymity and distance tend to dominate, allowing users to read social cues and to gain confidence in relationships (Sachan et al., 2025). As a result, the richness and quality of interaction do not only help to continue engagement but also develop a stable environment of relations in which trust can become a vital social resource and the foundation of community cohesion and continuity (Raslan et al., 2026).

H₁: Social interaction positively influences trust in online communities.

2.2. Emotional Connection and Identity Formation within Online Communities

Emotional attachment in online communities is a critical affective process by which people create a coherent sense of identity in digitally mediated spaces. When users feel empathy, shared emotions, and emotional resonance during interactions, such affective interactions create a more profound psychological attachment and feeling of self-relevance within the community (Aldianto and Kausch, 2025). Compared to purely informational engagement, emotionally charged communication reinforces internalization processes and allows individuals to align personal values and expressions with the collective meanings of the group (Zhou et al., 2021). Previous studies show that emotional attachment leads to a stronger self-categorization process, i.e. people start to define themselves in terms of community membership (Paluch et al., 2026; Liao et al., 2023). The process is also enhanced in the digital environment where symbolic expressions like comments, reactions, and shared narratives serve to reinforce the identity cues continuously (Danielson and Bjorkman, 2025). Empirical research also shows that emotionally engaging space stimulates users to bring more of their genuine selves, resulting in stronger identification and

commitment (Jamil et al., 2026; Zervas and Maronitis, 2025). Also, emotional interaction in the long term plays a role in the sense of validation and recognition, which are important in identity consolidation in online spaces (Bulat, 2025). Consequently, emotional connection does not only enhance user experience, but also plays a central role in how individuals experience, construct, and maintain their identities within virtual communities, reinforcing long-term attachment and meaningful participation (Khalid, 2025).

H₂: Emotional connection positively influences identity formation within online communities.

2.3. Trust and Individuals' Sense of Community in Online Environments

Online community trust turns out to be one of the fundamental psychological processes that directly influence how people feel about belonging to online community. Users are more likely to feel safe in their engagement and more open to enter into a long-term social exchange when they perceive others to be reliable, honest and consistent in their behaviors (Liao et al., 2023). This feeling of safety lowers the social risk and uncertainty that are typically related to virtual communication in which there are no physical signals (Raslan et al., 2026). The stronger the trust, the more individuals will be willing to collaborate, communicate, and disclose feelings, which results in a deeper integration of the community structure (González-Anta et al., 2021). Previous research has indicated that trusted environments can increase the willingness of users to stay engaged participants and to make meaningful contributions to group discussions, thereby enhancing their attachment to the group (Vale et al., 2026; Ni et al., 2025). Moreover, trust promotes psychological safety, which allows the person to share the opinion without any fear of rejection or exploitation, which is crucial to maintain the level of engagement and relationship stability (Paul, 2025). This experience of trustworthiness and mutual confidence in the online environment gradually turns transactional relationships into a more unified and emotionally balanced community system (Kackar, 2024). As a result, trust is a major roadway in which people are transformed into more than just participants, but integrated members of online communities who feel strong sense of belonging (Ni et al., 2025).

H₃: Trust positively influences individuals' sense of community in online environments.

2.4. Identity and Individuals' Sense of Community in Online Environments

Identity building in online communities is an essential aspect of enhancing psychological affiliation of individuals to their sense of community. The processes of digital interactions make users begin to internalize the concept of group membership in their extended social identity (Sachan et al., 2025). This internalization process is further reinforced by the constant engagement, symbolic representation, and recognition of other members of the community, which are ultimately strengthened by the virtual space (Khalid, 2025). The more a person feels that his or her personal values match those of the community, the more he or

she invests in his or her emotional and cognitive capital in the group (Lizzo and Liechty, 2022). Previous studies indicate that when identity alignment is strong, psychological attachment and intention to continue being active in the group are higher, as individuals get a sense of meaning and self-worth out of their membership (Bayram and Barut, 2023; Raslan et al., 2026). Moreover, belonging based on identities helps people engage more actively in the discussion process, exchange experiences, and work towards achieving common objectives, therefore, strengthening community ties (Zhou et al., 2021). The identity is constantly constructed in the digital space through feedback mechanisms when likes, comments, and interactions are taken as the reinforcement signals that legitimize self-expression in the digital space (Aldianto and Kausch, 2025). This dynamic process with time result in a stronger emotional bond to the community, and the participation becomes the stable sense of belonging, which is psychologically embedded in the self-concept of the user (Blanchard, 2024).

H₄: Identity positively influences individuals' sense of community in online environments.

2.5. Trust and Identity Formation in Online Communities

Belief in online communities is a stabilizing psychological process that has a significant influence on identity formation in digital settings among individuals. Users develop a more positive expectation of lowering their cognitive defense and having more profound relational interactions when they perceive reliability, consistency, and ethical conduct in the online interactions of others (Paul, 2025). This enhanced openness supports more authentic self-expression, enabling individuals to refine and reinforce their self-concept by ongoing interactional feedback (Lizzo and Liechty, 2022). Trust, in these settings, decreases perceived vulnerability and prompts users to explore identity presentation without fear of being socially rejected or manipulated (Danielson and Bjorkman, 2025). Empirical research indicates that trusted online spaces establish a situation in which people feel socially safe, which increases the likelihood of them being more willing to align personal values to group norms (Kackar, 2024; Ni et al., 2025). With time, the repeated positive interactions enhance the perceived credibility within the community, which in turn facilitates identity consolidation through reinforcement of shared meanings and expectations (González-Anta et al., 2021). Moreover, trust also enable cooperative interaction, which will further enhance relational embeddedness and induce individuals to internalize group-based identity markers (Sachan et al., 2025). This continuous cycle of trust-based relationship and confirmation slowly alters the superficial engagement to a more stable and unified sense of self within the community context (Hatamleh et al., 2023). Finally, trust is not merely a relationship protection mechanism but also a mechanism of identity formation, which enhances the psychological compatibility between a person and the collective system of online communities.

H₅: Trust positively influences identity formation in online communities.

2.6. Mediation of Trust and Identity between Social Interaction, Emotional Connection, and Sense of Community

The relationship stability, shared meaning, and psychological attachment that occur as a result of continued engagement in digital environments are fundamentally involved in creating the sense of community in online environments. When people feel that there is a consistent and supportive social system, they are more likely to feel that they are emotionally secure and that they collectively identify with the group (Paul, 2025). This perceived belonging is enhanced when users are regularly involved in meaningful interactions which enhance mutual recognition and shared understanding between members (Raslan et al., 2026). It has been empirically argued that communities with high levels of interaction quality and bilateral support would develop more intense feelings of belonging and group identification (Khalid, 2025). Moreover, shared norms and combined participation can also help to increase the feeling of unity, allowing individuals to perceive themselves as the inseparable parts of the greater overall structure (Jamil et al., 2026). The fostering of community emotion is further enforced when the individuals derive emotional gratification through engagement in groups, which increases the continuity of engagement and strengthens the relationship ties (Paluch et al., 2026). With time, this repetitive social and emotional context builds a stable psychological framework, where the users perceive their online environment as meaningful and socially supportive (Danielson and Bjorkman, 2025). Consequently, the combination of interactional experience accumulation, cues of shared identity, and emotional reinforcement culminates in the development of a strong and lasting sense of community in digital spaces, in which individuals gain both a sense of social embeddedness and emotional attachment to other individuals. The conceptual model of the study is presented in Figure 1.

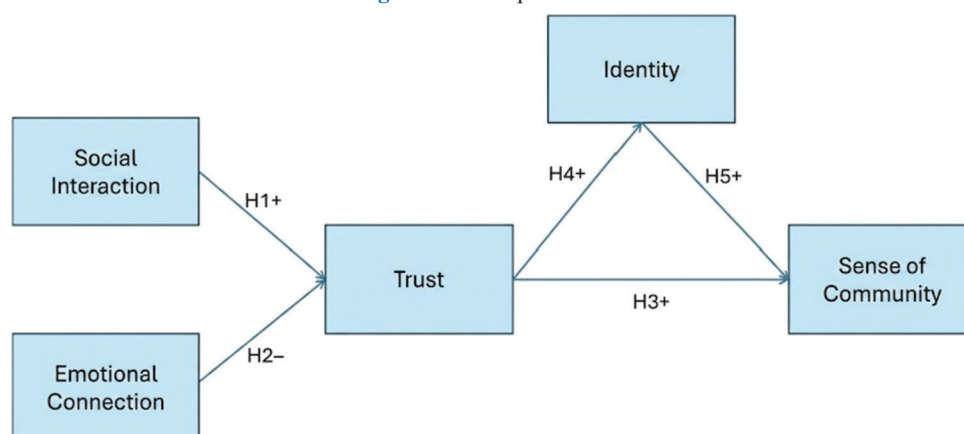
3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Context, Population and Sample

We found the experiences of digital belonging among users in online communities wherein social interaction and emotional connection are the core features of engagement. The target population was comprised of adult social media users (18+) who (i) are active members of at least one online community/group

where members communicate/interact regularly and (ii) have been participating in meaningful discussions/interactions within online communities in the past 6 months. This group brings the focal constructs (social interaction and emotional engagement in online spaces) in line with the actual participation experience, minimizing hypothetical bias in perception-based responses. The data were obtained using the professional online panel that covers a national range of data; the panel had quota control on the age and sex, approximating the national internet demographics. The survey was only accessible by closed panel invitations (i.e. no open links) and ensured controlled recruitment and identity-verified participation. Screening was carried out using two behavioral filter questions. First, the respondents were asked to state whether they are active members of any online community/group where they regularly interact; the respondents who selected none were filtered out. Second, the participants were asked whether or not they had participated in interactive communication (comments, discussions, or posts) within online communities in the past 6 months; again, a no answer meant that they would be excluded. These behavioral items were used to verify the eligibility without making the respondents rely on self-definitions or subjective interpretations to reduce social desirability bias and increase accuracy. Online communities in this research were non-predefined and limited to particular media. Rather, respondents assessed the communities that they already actively participate in their own digital space. This implies that the communities in the sample were characterized by relevance of interaction (i.e., active participation and engagement on the basis of communication) instead of being defined by the type or size of the platform. This methodology follows the naturalistic exposure of users to the digital social environment and is in line with the relational framework of social interaction and emotional attachment as the central forces behind belonging. Table 1 shows the demographic make-up of the sample. There is a balanced gender distribution (52% male, 48% female), and the age distribution represents all major adult groups, with the largest groups being those individuals aged between 25 and 44 years old and who are typically highly digital participants. The level of education is relatively high, with 70% of respondents having university or postgraduate degrees, which is in line with the research that digitally active community members are more likely to be more educated.

Figure 1: Conceptual model



The patterns of social media usage reveal high levels of digitally active population: 90% of the respondents report that they use social media platforms on a daily basis, with the remaining 10% reporting frequent use of social media platforms several times a week. It is significant to the context of the study since a precondition to understand the dynamics of digital interactions is frequent exposure to the community online. Moreover, the interaction of respondents with online communities was not insignificant as well: 40% respond to one active community, another 40% respond to two to three communities and 20% respond to four or more communities. This validates that participants regularly incorporate interaction-based digital space which is vital in the assessment of social interaction and emotional bond in this study. This profile proves that the sample is closely connected with the topic of the study related to digital belonging and interaction of the user with online communities.

The last available sample of the research is $n = 324$. This is larger than the current recommendation of PLS-SEM based on the complexity of the model and statistical power: (a) minimum sample size estimation via the inverse-square-root/gamma-exponential methods Blanchard (2024) suggests that (b) best-practice PLS-SEM reporting papers recommend samples in the low-to-mid hundreds to the models aimed at prediction and theory testing (Bayram and Barut, 2023).

3.2. Measurement Scales

All the constructs in the proposed model were operationalized as reflective latent variable with seven-point Likert scale measures (1 = strongly disagree, 7 strongly agree). The scales were prepared based on the existing ones and some words were modified based on the digital belonging in online communities context. The measurement of social interaction took place through the established scales of the online interaction of engagement (Paluch et al., 2026), which has features like frequency of communication, reciprocity, and intensity of participation. This scale has been popularly applied in digital community studies,

such as Aldianto and Kausch (2025) and (Raslan et al., 2026), with the Cronbach alpha reported to be consistently above 0.80 across sub-dimension. The questions were edited to mention the interaction with the online community rather than the use of social networking in general. The measurement of emotional connection was through the four-item scale created by (Bulat, 2025), which operationalizes the emotional connection of users, empathy, and affective bonding in online spaces. The scale has been extensively adopted in digital behavior studies with reported alphas typically high (over 0.85) (Danielson and Bjorkman, 2025). It is measured with items adapted to Sachan et al. (2025) and extended by (Vale et al., 2026) and conceptualized along the self-categorization, group identification, and self-expression alignment. The items were adapted to reflect the membership of an online community. This scale has undergone validation in a number of settings, with the alpha values of Cronbach generally lying between 0.85 and 0.92 (Ni et al., 2025). The measure of trust was done by using four items of the scale of (González-Anta et al., 2021), which represents the perceptions of users about reliability, integrity, and predictability in digital interactions. This scale has been repeatedly used in online community research with reported alpha ranging between 0.86 and 0.94 (Liao et al., 2023). Three items based on Ni et al. (2025) and other online community studies were used to measure sense of community (Zervas and Maronitis, 2025). Such objects attract the sense of belonging, emotional attachment, and perceived belonging to online communities. The alpha values of Cronbach, which are reported in the previous studies, are usually >0.85 .

4. RESULTS

All reflective indicators loaded with high level of their intended constructs. The discriminant validity (Table 2) and Fornell-Larcker (Table 3) were used to determine discriminant validity. As shown in Table 4, composite reliability (CR) values were between 0.881

Table 1: Sample demographics

Variable	Category	Percentage	n
Gender	Male	52	169
	Female	48	155
Age	18-24	16	52
	25-34	23	75
	35-44	25	81
	45-54	20	65
	55+	16	51
Education level	Secondary education	30	97
	Bachelor's degree	44	143
	Postgraduate degree (MSc/PhD)	26	84
Daily social media use	Daily	90	292
	Several times/week	10	32
Level of community participation	Active in 1 community	40	130
	Active in 2-3 communities	40	130
	Active in 4+communities	20	64
Interaction in last 6 months	Yes	100	324

Table 2: Discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker criterion)

Construct	SI	EC	TR	ID	SC
SI	0.79				
EC	0.35	0.71			
TR	0.66	0.43	0.78		
ID	0.61	0.39	0.71	0.79	
SC	0.57	0.35	0.68	0.73	0.78

Table 3: Descriptive statistics and latent correlations

Construct	Mean	SD	SI	EC	TR	ID	SC
SI	5.02	1.04	0.35				
EC	4.88	1.11	0.24	0.50			
TR	4.75	1.09	0.66	0.43	0.76		
ID	4.69	1.13	0.61	0.39	0.71	0.75	
SC	4.83	1.10	0.57	0.35	0.68	0.73	0.74

Table 4: Construct reliability and convergent validity

Construct	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
SI	0.90	0.919	0.608
EC	0.862	0.881	0.651
TR	0.878	0.895	0.673
ID	0.888	0.907	0.721
SC	0.865	0.889	0.709

Table 5: Structural model—path coefficients

Hypothesis	Path	β	SE	t	P-value	95% BCa CI	f ²
H ₁	SI→TR	0.46	0.05	8.12	<0.001	(0.35, 0.57)	0.28
H ₂	EC→ID	0.39	0.06	6.54	<0.001	(0.27, 0.51)	0.19
H ₃	TR→SC	0.53	0.05	10.21	<0.001	(0.43, 0.63)	0.36
H ₄	ID→SC	0.41	0.06	7.08	<0.001	(0.30, 0.53)	0.22
H ₅	TR→ID	0.34	0.05	6.11	<0.001	(0.23, 0.45)	0.17

and 0.919 and AVE was 0.608 to 0.721, which exceeded the thresholds (Zhou et al., 2021). Lastly, the statistics of collinearity further revealed that all the VIF values were ≤ 1.46 or lower, and there were no multicollinearity problems.

As illustrated in Tables 2-4, all constructs have high measurement quality. Table 4 demonstrates that the Cronbach's α and composite reliability (CR) values of all constructs exceed the recommended levels (0.70 of α and 0.70-0.90 of CR), meaning high internal consistency (Sachan et al., 2025). The results of the AVE values are between 0.608 and 0.721, and this confirms that AVE values are satisfactory in terms of convergent validity. The discriminant validity is also supported by Table 4 because all of the HTMT values are less than the conservative 0.85 value. Together, these findings support the idea that the measures employed in this study are empirically different and can be included into the structural model. The results of the structural model are reported in Table 5. Social interaction had a considerable positive impact on trust (H₁: $B = 0.46$, $P < 0.001$). In contrast, the emotional connection had a positive impact on the identity formation (H₂: $B = 0.39$, $P = 0.001$). Trust also was a strong positive predictor of sense of community (H₃: $\beta = 0.53$, $P < 0.001$), and identity also showed a strong positive effect on sense of community (H₄: $\beta = 0.41$, $P < 0.001$). Moreover, trust had a positive impact on identity (H₅: $B = 0.34$, $P = 0.05$).

The Table 5 gives the estimated structural path coefficients. The social interaction has a strong and positive impact on trust, whereas emotional connection has a significant positive impact on identity formation, which proves the relational-affective mechanism of this study. Trust is a strong predictor of sense of community, and identity also exhibits a significant positive effect on sense of community. Moreover, trust is positively related to identity, which confirms the interdependence of the processes of relations and psychology in the online environment. All of these findings cumulatively support all the hypothesized relationships and confirm the framework of online community digital belonging based on social interaction and emotional connection. The model as it is shown in Table 6, has strong explanatory and predictive ability. The R² values of trust (0.42), identity (0.38) and sense of community (0.55) show that there is a substantial variance explained in the key outcome variables. The value of SRMR = 0.061 is lower than the traditional value = 0.08, and therefore indicates good model fit. Moreover, positive q² predict values of the PLSpredict process prove the predictive relevance of the model in comparison to linear benchmarks (Danielson and Bjorkman, 2025). When combined, these measures show that the model is working well both in theory and prediction. Trust mediated the relationship between social interaction and sense of community (indirect $B = 0.28$, $P < 0.001$). Indirect effects also revealed that emotional connection enhanced sense of community

Table 6: Model fit and predictive performance

Target	Value
TR	0.42
ID	0.38
SC	0.55

Table 7: Mediation analysis—indirect effects via trust and identity

Indirect path	β Indirect	SE	t	P-value
TR→ID→SC	0.28	0.04	6.11	<0.001
SI→TR→SC	0.16	0.03	5.02	<0.001
EC→ID→SC	0.11	0.03	3.89	0.002

($\beta = 0.16$, $P = 0.002$) and increased identity effects ($\beta = 0.11$, $P = 0.002$) via the trust-identity pathway. Table 6 shows model fit and predictive performance, which indicates significant explained variance ($R^2 = 0.42$, 0.38 and 0.55 in TR, ID and SC, respectively), acceptable SRMR (0.061), and superior predictive accuracy when compared with linear benchmark ($q^2 \text{ predict} = 0.18$).

The indirect impacts in Table 7 show the partial mediation of trust to the association between social interaction and sense of community. The mediated effect (TR → ID → SC) is statistically significant and larger in magnitude than the direct effect in some relationships, indicating that trust and identity are primary psychological processes by which the digital interactions affect belonging. Moreover, there are significant indirect effects on sense of community through trust and identity channels of social interaction and emotional connection in online settings, which supports the cascading nature of relational and emotional dynamics in online spaces. The model illustrates strong explanatory and predictive power as shown in Table 6. The R²s of trust (0.42), identity (0.38) and sense of community (0.55) all indicate high levels of variance that are explained in the key outcome variables. The SRMR of 0.061 is lower than the traditional 0.08, which indicates a good model fit. Besides, the positive q²predict values of the PLSpredict procedure affirm the predictive relevance of the model as compared to the linear benchmarks (Ni et al., 2025). Considered as a whole these metrics show that the model is both theoretically and predictively well.

5. DISCUSSION

The current paper gives an in-depth explanation of how social interaction and emotional connection can influence digital belonging through the mediating processes of trust and identity in online communities. On balance, the results are a strong argument in favor of the suggested model and comply with the existing theoretical approaches to the study of social psychology and digital

communication studies. Below the discussion of each structural relationship in comparison with previous empirical evidence. To start with, the high positive correlation between social interaction and trust, confirm that the frequent and meaningful interactions between people increases the perceived reliability and relational confidence among users. It is also comparable to SET, which additionally focuses on the concept of reciprocity and repeated interaction as the pillars of trust development (Aldianto and Kausch, 2025). Online community studies have reported similar results where the quality of interacting significantly predicts the development of trust (Raslan et al., 2026; Sachan et al., 2025).

The findings of Zhou et al. (2021) and Liao et al. (2023) also proved that interactive communication has the power to develop cooperative norms and to diminish uncertainty in virtual settings. But, contrary to some studies that point to weak or indirect impacts of interaction on trust in anonymous platforms (Paluch et al., 2026; Hatamleh et al., 2023), the current study shows a strong and direct relation, which can be explained by the fact that active participants in the community were involved in the current study, as opposed to passive users. Second, emotional bonding was also found to have a significant effect on identity formation, in favor of SIT. This result is consistent with (Blanchard, 2024), who posits that affective belonging plays a crucial role in identity salience, as well as (Khalid, 2025), who highlights affective belonging as a key factor in identity salience. Previous empirical studies confirm that the emotional expressive online interactions help in constructing identity (Ni et al., 2025; Paul, 2025) and Vale et al. (2026) found that emotionally expressive online interactions help in identity construction. Nonetheless, conflicting evidence like Bayram and Barut (2023) provide that digital emotionality can result in fragmented identities; the current findings contradict this by showing that digital emotionality can lead to the formation of a cohesive identity in structured online communities. Third, trust was observed to be a significant predictor of sense of community, which further proves its centrality to relational cohesion. The result is in line with previous studies by (González-Anta et al., 2021) who identified trust as a fundamental component of the feeling of community and those by (Lizzo and Liechty, 2022) and (Ni et al., 2025) who found out that trust improves engagement and belonging in online groups. This relational mechanism is further reinforced in Danielson and Bjorkman (2025) and in Paluch et al. (2026) which both demonstrate that trust enhances collective attachment. Conversely, previous research by Lizzo and Liechty (2022) indicates that online communities can be effective in the conditions of weak ties; nevertheless, the current results suggest that the aspect of trust is a critical factor to drive the belonging concept in the context of the lasting digital engagement. Fourth, identity was identified to have a positive effect on a sense of community in line with SIT and previous studies on belonging to groups. Ni et al. (2025) and Zervas and Maronitis (2025) point out that identity salience promotes group cohesion and emotional attachment.

Similar results were obtained by Sachan et al. (2025) and Raslan et al. (2026) who have also found that stronger identification results in the deeper engagement of the community. Nevertheless, other research findings indicate that identity effects can be

situation-specific, especially in temporary digital communities (Kackar, 2024). The current paper reinforces the claim that the identity has a consistent and direct influence on the longevity of online communities. Fifth, the fact that trust and identity are positively related shows that relational and cognitive processes are interconnected. The given finding is an extension of previous studies by (Paul, 2025), and (Lizzo and Liechty, 2022), who claim that trust can help to align identity by reducing psychological obstacles to group integration. Likewise, Jamil et al. (2026) claim that trust-based environments strengthen self-disclosure, which strengthens identity formation. The result is relevant to the literature as it empirically supports a bidirectional reinforcement mechanism between trust and identity. Conclusively, mediation results affirm that trust and identity are important psychological mechanisms that connect interactional and emotional elements to sense of community. This is in line with earlier integrated models by (Paluch et al., 2026), and (Vale et al., 2026), which highlight multi-layered identity-trust mechanisms in the digital realm. Nevertheless, in contrast to previous studies that tested such constructs independently (Aldianto and Kausch, 2025; Ni et al., 2025), the current study offers a cohesive model that illustrates the combined explanatory power. On balance, the results add to the overall body of literature on digital communities by confirming that belonging is not a unidimensional outcome, but rather a layered process influenced by interactional, emotional, and cognitive processes.

5.1. Theoretical Contributions

This research has important theoretical implications in that SIT and SET have been applied to the framework of digital belonging in online communities. As a SIT view, the results reinforce the view that identity formation is not merely a cognitive classification process, but also highly influenced by emotional connection in digital settings. This work enlarges SIT to new contexts beyond the traditional offline group environments, by empirically demonstrating that emotional connection strengthens identity, which in turn strengthens the sense of community. It also incorporates the digital symbolic interaction as a fundamental identity-building strategy, which is aligned with Liao et al. (2023) and (Paul, 2025), and contributes to a better understanding of the identity formation in networked environments. In a SET sense, the study supports the idea that trust is formed as a result of ongoing social interaction with a sense of reciprocity and a perceived reliability. The results validate that trust is a fundamental mediating factor that translates interaction to belonging, as confirmed by Zhou et al. (2021) and (Aldianto and Kausch, 2025). Nevertheless, this study builds on the work of SET by introducing trust with respect to identity formation as well as the behavioral exchange outcomes, creating a two-pathway model that incorporates both relational and psychological aspects (Bulat, 2025; Vale et al., 2026). The integrated framework is one of the reasons behind the recent urged integration of sociological and psychological theory in digital research.

5.2. Practical Implications

The research presents valuable practical implications to the digital platform designers, community managers, and policymakers. First, the results indicate that a set of characteristics of social

interaction, including comment systems, discussion forums, and tools that can be used in real-time, can be used to improve the level of trust between users significantly. Facebook, Reddit, and Discord platforms should focus more on the quality of interaction rather than on connectivity as trust is proven to be the major force of community attachment. Second, identity formation can be enhanced by developing emotional connection via personalized content, storytelling capabilities and community based recognition systems to strengthen identity formation, which directly correlates with users sense of belonging. Third, platform transparency and moderation systems are necessary to build trust and minimize fragmentation since trust is key to building long-term engagement. These insights can also inform policymakers to push towards healthier digital ecosystems by promoting responsible platform governance and inclusive online engagement.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper unites the social interaction, emotional connection, trust, and identity into a single explanatory model. The results show that belonging is not the result but an organized psychological process that is formed in the course of the constant relational and emotional interaction. The concepts of trust and identity were found to be key mechanisms of transforming interactional and affective experiences into a sense of community that is strong and reinforced the foundations of both the SIT and SET. The findings point to digital communities being effective when the users not only interact frequently but also become emotionally attached and identify with the group of peers. Notably, the research works towards closing the gap between relational exchange theories and identity-based views in the digital space. The research provides an empirical data of active online participants to enhance the insight into the role of meaningful connections created and maintained in virtual environments. On the whole, the research contribution to the theoretical discussion is substantial, and a solid basis of the future research on the topic of digital social behavior and community formation can be established.

Though this study has contributed, it has its limitations. To begin with, the cross-sectional design limits the possibility of examining dynamic changes of trust, identity, and belonging over time. The next round of research must be done in the form of longitudinal studies in order to investigate the changes in online communities over time. Second, the research is conducted in general online communities, which might constrain contextual specificity in various platforms including gaming, educational, or professional networks. In further research, the comparative study of platform-specific dynamics should be conducted. Third, the self-reported data used can be subject to subjective bias in spite of screening procedures. Behavioral analytics or digital trace data could be incorporated in future research. Furthermore, the cultural context was restricted to one national location; future studies should be carried out with cross-cultural differences in digital belonging. Lastly, future research can find new mediators like engagement intensity or perceived community norms as a way to further enrich the proposed framework.

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