



## Second Accounts and Self-Presentation: Front Stage–Backstage Duality Among Female Students on Instagram

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### Abstract

This study examines how female students of the Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry, negotiate a duality of self-image through the use of main and second accounts on Instagram. Drawing on Goffman's dramaturgical theory, the study positions the main account as a "front stage" for idealized, socially appropriate self-presentation, and the second account as a "backstage" for more personal and authentic expression free from social pressure. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews and digital observation with ten purposively selected female students aged 18–25, and analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings reveal that second accounts function not only as spaces for authentic self-expression, but also as strategic tools for maintaining privacy, strengthening intimate relationships, and managing religious-cultural and social pressure. This study contributes to Islamic communication studies by demonstrating how the front stage–backstage duality is shaped by religious norms, Acehese cultural expectations, and gendered surveillance within an Islamic higher education context—offering new insight into the intersection of faith-based identity and digital self-presentation strategies among Muslim female students.

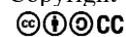
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## INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of internet and communication technology has fundamentally transformed how individuals manage social interaction and self-presentation, particularly through social media (Aminullah & Ali, 2020). Indonesia ranks among the top countries globally in Instagram user numbers, with an estimated 89 million active users as of 2024, the majority of whom are aged 18–34 (Hollenbaugh, 2021). Among Indonesian youth, college students represent one of the most active user groups, and studies on Indonesian university students have documented a growing tendency to maintain more than one Instagram account as a strategy for managing different social audiences and self-presentations (Novanra et al., 2022; Wattimena et al., 2022). This phenomenon is not confined to major urban centers: in Banda Aceh, as the capital of Indonesia's most distinctively Islamic province, Instagram use is widespread among university students, including those enrolled in Islamic higher education institutions such as Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry (Aminullah & Ali, 2020). The practice of maintaining a "second account"—distinct from the main, more public account—raises an important scholarly question about how female students negotiate impression management and self-image across different digital spaces, particularly within contexts where religious and cultural expectations carry direct social consequences (Salamor & Salamor, 2021).

In Aceh specifically, female students navigate a distinctive social environment shaped by at least three intersecting normative systems (Al-Shatti et al., 2022). First, Islamic religious norms—particularly expectations regarding modesty (*aurat*), ethical conduct (*akhlak*), and the public comportment appropriate for Muslim women—establish clear standards for how female students are expected to represent themselves in social settings, including digital ones. Second, Acehnese cultural values, including the importance of family honor (*kehormatan keluarga*) and community reputation, mean that a female student's public self-presentation is understood not only as an individual matter but as a reflection on her family and social group (Margana et al., 2025). Third, the institutional expectations of an Islamic university campus—where faculty, administrators, and fellow students share a religiously inflected community identity—create an environment of mutual social surveillance in which departures from expected conduct are visible and consequential. These three normative systems operate simultaneously and reinforce one another, making the management of self-presentation on social media a particularly high-stakes activity for female students at Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry. The main Instagram account, accessible to family members, lecturers, and the broader campus community, becomes the primary site where conformity to these expectations must be performed and maintained (Anggraini, 2020).

Self-image—an individual's perception of who they are, shaped by personal reflection and by how others perceive them—is increasingly constructed through social media platforms such as Instagram, where users build, present, and modify their self-image for different audiences (Susilo & Ridaryanti, 2024). Goffman's (1956) concept of the "presentation of self" is central to understanding this process: individuals strategically display a particular "face" depending on the social context, choosing content, narratives, and interactions that align with the impression they wish to create. On Instagram, this manifests through two parallel self-image types. The *ideal self-image* is crafted to fulfill social expectations through aesthetically curated



posts and displayed achievements, designed to attract positive responses from a broad audience. The *authentic self-image*, by contrast, is more commonly expressed in private accounts or smaller circles of trusted followers, reflecting a more unfiltered and personally genuine dimension of the self (Nurbani & Andriansyah, 2020). This duality is not incidental but structural: social media platforms are deliberately designed with features—editing, deleting, content control, follower filtering—that actively enable users to manage their self-image across these two registers (Boyd, 2014). The management of self-image on social media also carries psychological consequences: engagement metrics such as "likes" and comments can reinforce or undermine self-confidence, while opportunities for social comparison embedded in the platform's structure can produce dissatisfaction or pressure to conform (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012).

Digital identity—the representation of the self that emerges through profiles, posts, and interactions on online platforms—extends and complicates these self-image processes (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Following Turkle (1995), digital identity is understood as a constructed, malleable extension of the self that allows individuals to explore facets of identity that may diverge from their offline lives. Unlike physical identity, digital identity is dynamic and easily revised: users can edit, delete, or recontextualize content to manage how they are perceived across different audiences. This flexibility is operationalized most clearly in the practice of maintaining separate accounts: the main account functions as the site of a publicly managed, idealized digital identity, while the second account becomes the site of a more flexible, personally authentic identity, accessible only to a chosen few (Tobing et al., 2023). The relationship between digital identity and self-presentation is therefore not simply one of reflection—social media does not merely mirror who a person is—but one of active construction, in which users make deliberate choices about what to reveal, to whom, and in what form. For researchers studying self-image duality, this constructedness is analytically significant: it means that the differences between main and second accounts are not random or incidental, but reflect meaningful decisions about identity, audience, and social context.

Instagram users who maintain a second account typically divide their accounts along a clear functional axis: the main account displays an idealized, socially curated self-image for a wide and mixed audience, while the second account allows for a more authentic and personal expression of identity within a smaller, trusted circle (Kang & Wei, 2020; Novanra et al., 2022). The main account often contains carefully selected content—formal photographs, achievement posts, and socially appropriate moments—crafted to attract positive responses and maintain a polished public image. The second account, by contrast, is characterized by spontaneity, informality, and personal disclosure: users share daily moments, personal complaints, and humor that would be considered inappropriate or unprofessional on the main account (Amelia, 2024; Wattimena et al., 2022). Research on Indonesian university students specifically has confirmed this pattern: second accounts are widely used as spaces for sharing small everyday moments, engaging in more intimate interaction with a close circle of friends, and expressing dimensions of the self that do not fit the curated norms of the main account (Novanra et al., 2022). The smaller, more familiar follower base on second accounts affords users a greater sense of privacy and freedom of expression, making the second account not merely a passing trend but a strategic response to the need for a more flexible personal space within social media (Mun & Kim, 2021; Nabiilah & Jayanti, 2024; Xiao et al., 2020).



Privacy and freedom of expression are the primary mechanisms through which the second account's backstage function is operationalized. Privacy, understood as the right to control who accesses one's personal information (Satria et al., 2024), is enacted on Instagram through account settings, follower curation, and the deliberate construction of a small, trusted audience on the second account (Rahmawati et al., 2023). Freedom of expression—the right to share thoughts and experiences without fear of judgment—is the outcome that privacy makes possible: users who feel secure in their audience settings are more willing to express themselves authentically, while perceived threats to privacy tend to produce self-censorship and restraint (Nabiilah & Jayanti, 2024; Putri et al., 2024). These two constructs are mutually reinforcing rather than independent: privacy is the structural precondition for freedom of expression, and freedom of expression is the experiential reward of maintained privacy. The second account exemplifies this interdependence in practice—by limiting followers to a close, trusted circle, users simultaneously create a privacy buffer and expand their expressive freedom, enabling forms of self-disclosure that would be socially or normatively sanctioned on the more public main account (Amiruddin et al., 2024). This conditionality is important: the second account is best understood not as an entirely free space, but as a managed, conditional backstage whose openness depends on the ongoing maintenance of its restricted audience.

For female students in particular, the stakes of managing self-presentation across main and second accounts are significantly heightened by gendered social expectations operating at multiple levels (Valkenburg et al., 2022). At the cultural level, studies of Indonesian and Muslim-majority contexts have documented persistent beauty standards and femininity norms that shape how young women present themselves in public spaces, including digital ones (Ishaq & Mahanani, 2018; Somantri & Larasati, 2020). At the familial level, the concept of family honor embedded in Indonesian and Acehnese social culture means that a female student's public conduct—including her online self-presentation—is perceived as reflecting on her family's reputation, creating external pressure to maintain a respectable and modest front-stage image (Ananda et al., 2024). At the religious level, Islamic norms regarding modesty and appropriate conduct for Muslim women add a further layer of expectation that is particularly salient in the context of an Islamic university campus, where religious identity is institutionally embedded rather than merely personally held (Yuan et al., 2026). Research on Muslim women and digital media in Indonesia has shown that these layered expectations can produce a dual pressure: the pressure to appear appropriately modest and religiously conforming on public platforms, alongside an equally real need for private spaces in which to express aspects of the self that may not fit these public norms (Amelia, 2024; Novanra et al., 2022). The second account, in this context, is not simply a space for casual content but a specifically gendered and religiously inflected coping mechanism.

Goffman's (1956) dramaturgical theory provides the conceptual anchor that integrates the threads developed above—self-image, digital identity, privacy, and gendered expectations—into a coherent analytical framework. The theory's core distinction between *front stage* (roles performed in line with social expectations before an audience) and *backstage* (spaces where individuals act without the burden of audience judgment) maps directly onto the main account/second account structure observed on Instagram (Goffman, 2023; Suneki & Haryono, 2012). Two additional Goffmanian concepts sharpen this mapping analytically. *Role awareness* refers to the individual's conscious recognition of which role is appropriate for



which audience—a capacity that is exercised every time a user decides what to post, and on which account. *Impression management* refers to the deliberate manipulation of symbols, narratives, and content to construct a desired image before a given audience (Goffman, 1956; Krämer & Winter, 2008). These concepts explain not only that users behave differently across accounts, but why they do so strategically and self-consciously (Myers, 2012). Critically, dramaturgy does not operate in isolation in this study: it is analytically integrated with digital identity theory—which explains the malleability and constructedness of online self-presentation—and with privacy management perspectives—which explain the structural mechanisms through which backstage spaces are created and maintained. The relationship among these three frameworks is hierarchical rather than parallel: dramaturgy provides the overarching metaphor (front stage/backstage), digital identity theory explains the medium through which this performance occurs (the constructed, revisable online self), and privacy management theory explains the mechanism through which backstage conditions are secured (audience control, follower curation, account restriction) (Putro, 2017). Together, they constitute an integrated framework for analyzing self-image duality in digital contexts.

Despite growing scholarly attention to second accounts and *finstas* as spaces for self-presentation and impression management (Huang & Vitak, 2022; Xiao et al., 2020), existing studies have largely examined this phenomenon in secular, Western, or general youth contexts. Research on Indonesian university students and digital identity has explored self-disclosure and virtual self-image (Novanra et al., 2022; Tobing et al., 2023), but has given limited attention to how specifically religious and cultural norms—particularly within Islamic higher education—shape the negotiation between front-stage and backstage digital identities (Brahmasari & Suprayetno, 2008). This gap is significant for several reasons. First, in contexts where modesty, family honor, and religious reputation are operative social pressures rather than abstract background assumptions, the function and meaning of the second account as a backstage space may differ substantially from what has been documented in secular contexts. Second, the presence of institutional religious authority—in the form of lecturers, campus administrators, and a broader Islamic community of practice—adds a dimension of surveillance and accountability to front-stage performance that is largely absent from existing finsta and second-account research. Third, Acehese cultural identity, with its distinctive articulation of Islamic values and local social norms, provides a context that has been underexamined in communication and digital media studies despite its relevance to questions of religious identity and online self-presentation.

Female students at the Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry, offer a meaningful and original site for addressing this gap, given their position at the intersection of religious obligation, academic expectation, Acehese cultural identity, and digital self-presentation. This study therefore asks: how do female students in this context form and negotiate their self-image through the use of second accounts on Instagram, and how do religious-cultural norms and gendered social expectations shape this negotiation? Using Goffman's dramaturgical framework—integrated with digital identity theory and privacy management perspectives—the study examines how front stage–backstage duality is constructed, maintained, and experienced by female students navigating the specific normative landscape of Islamic higher education in Aceh. In doing so, the study contributes to Islamic communication studies by demonstrating how social media, particularly the second account,





functions as a strategic space for negotiating religious-cultural identity and self-presentation—offering new empirical and theoretical insight into the intersection of faith-based norms, gendered surveillance, and digital self-expression among Muslim female students in Indonesia.

## METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to understand the subjective experiences and in-depth perspectives of participants regarding the duality of self-image through the use of a second Instagram account. The phenomenological approach was selected because it allows researchers to explore the meaning participants attach to the phenomena they experience, particularly within social and digital contexts (Rorong, 2020).

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) active use of Instagram as a primary platform for communication and self-expression, and (2) ownership and active use of both a main account, used for formal or professional public presentation, and a second account, used as a more private and personal space (Halkis, 2017). Participants were recruited through the researchers' academic and social networks within the Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, followed by snowball referrals to peers meeting the same criteria. A total of ten female students aged 18–25 years participated in this study. Recruitment and data collection continued until data saturation was reached—that is, until no new themes emerged from successive interviews—which occurred after the tenth participant. To minimize the risk of power relations and social desirability bias inherent in recruiting participants from within an Islamic campus environment, several procedural safeguards were implemented. Participation was entirely voluntary, and prospective participants were explicitly informed that their decision to participate or withdraw would have no academic or institutional consequences. No faculty members, lecturers, or administrators were involved in the recruitment process or informed of who had agreed to participate. Interviews were conducted in neutral, private settings—off-campus locations or via secure online platforms—rather than in institutional spaces, to reduce the likelihood that participants would feel observed or judged by the campus community. Prior to data collection, all participants provided informed consent after being briefed on the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, and the procedures used to protect their identities. To ensure anonymity, participants are referred to throughout this study using anonymized codes (P1–P10), and any identifying details from quotations or observed content—such as usernames, specific locations, or names of third parties—were removed or generalized prior to analysis.

Two main methods of data collection were used. In-depth interviews were conducted individually, either in person or online depending on participant preference, using a semi-structured format that allowed flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences while ensuring core themes were consistently addressed. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. To align with the phenomenological design, interview questions were constructed to elicit descriptions of lived experience rather than abstract or conceptual responses about account use.

The interview protocol was organized around four main domains: (1) participants' personal history and motivations for creating a second account, explored through open narrative prompts such as "Can you describe the moment you decided to create a second account and what prompted that decision?"; (2) everyday practices and experiences on each account,



including how participants decide what to post, for whom, and why; (3) feelings, emotions, and perceived social pressure associated with each account, particularly in relation to family, peers, lecturers, and campus community expectations; and (4) participants' reflections on how their self-image differs between their main and second accounts, and what that difference means to them personally. These domains were designed to encourage participants to describe specific, concrete experiences and situations rather than general opinions, in keeping with the phenomenological emphasis on lived, first-person experience (Kahija, 2018).

Digital observation was conducted over a four-week period, during which researchers reviewed content shared by each participant on both their main and second accounts, with access granted voluntarily by participants as part of the informed consent process. The observation covered multiple content types across both accounts, including permanent feed posts (photographs, videos, and carousels), Instagram Stories, Highlights, caption language and style, emoji use, hashtag practices, follower counts and account privacy settings, and—where participants explicitly granted access—Close Friends stories on the second account. Particular attention was paid to ephemeral content such as Stories, given that second accounts frequently rely on this format rather than permanent posts for more spontaneous and personal expression. Observation notes documented differences in content type, tone, formality, frequency of posting, and patterns of follower interaction across both account types. This observation period was used to triangulate and contextualize the interview data, providing a concrete, content-based picture of how self-image duality is enacted digitally (Kahija, 2018).

Data from interviews and observations were analyzed using thematic analysis, conducted manually by the researchers without the use of qualitative data analysis software, given the relatively small and manageable dataset. Two researchers independently coded the full set of transcripts and observation notes to enhance analytical rigor. In the initial coding phase, each researcher generated open codes line-by-line from the data; across both coders, a total of 48 initial codes were produced, covering recurring elements related to self-image construction, account use motivations, privacy management, audience awareness, social pressure, and religious-cultural expectations. These initial codes were then compared, discussed, and consolidated through a consensus process, resulting in a finalized codebook of 31 codes organized under six preliminary thematic clusters. A codebook was maintained throughout the analysis to ensure consistency in how codes were applied across transcripts and observation notes. In the subsequent thematic development phase, the six preliminary clusters were further refined through iterative review, ultimately yielding the two main thematic categories reported in the findings: the duality of self-image across main and second accounts, and the factors shaping that duality.

The analysis followed four stages: (1) data transcription, in which all interviews were transcribed verbatim and re-read to ensure accuracy and identify initial patterns; (2) data coding, conducted independently by two researchers using the codebook; (3) identification of key themes, in which coded data were grouped and refined into the final thematic categories; and (4) interpretation and conclusion, in which themes were analyzed in relation to dramaturgical theory and privacy management perspectives to develop a deeper theoretical understanding of self-image duality on social media (Farid et al., 2018). To strengthen the credibility of the findings, the researchers employed source triangulation by systematically comparing interview accounts with observed account content for each participant. Member checking was conducted by sharing a written summary of preliminary findings and



interpretations with five of the ten participants; three participants confirmed that the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences, while two offered clarifications regarding the role of religious expectations in their account use, which led to the refinement of the analytical framing around Islamic norms and gendered surveillance in the final discussion.

Through this approach, the study aims to reveal distinctive patterns in female college students' use of second accounts, including how they construct differentiated self-images across accounts, while offering broader insight into how social media functions as a space for navigating privacy, freedom of expression, and social and religious pressure in digital life.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Duality of Student Self-Image*

This study found that the duality of self-image among female students of the Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry, is reflected in clear and consistent differences in how main and second accounts are used on Instagram. To organize these findings empirically, Table 1 presents representative examples drawn from the data, summarizing the function of each account type, the perceived social pressure associated with it, and a representative quotation from selected informants.

**Table 1. Representative Examples of Main-Account and Second-Account Functions Across Informants.**

| Informant Code | Main-Account Function                                                                      | Second-Account Function                                                | Perceived Social Pressure                                                   | Representative Quotation                                                                                                                                                                      |
|----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| P1             | Displaying formal, curated content for a wide, mixed audience (family, lecturers, friends) | Sharing personal, unfiltered daily content with a small trusted circle | High — pressure to maintain a "good impression" before family and lecturers | "On my main account, I'm more careful about what I post... those who follow this account are not only close friends, but also family and lecturers, so I have to maintain a good impression." |
| P2             | Maintaining a professional, socially acceptable image                                      | Expressing oneself freely without filtering content                    | Low on second account — followers limited to selected close friends         | "The second account is really comfortable for me. I don't need to filter anything because the followers are just a small circle that I have selected."                                        |

Note: This table presents two representative informants selected to illustrate contrasting patterns of account use. Data from all ten participants were analyzed in the thematic analysis; the full pattern of findings across P1–P10 is reported in the narrative discussion below.

The findings indicate that female students construct a positive, professional self-image on the main account, displaying achievements, formal photographs, and activities aligned with social norms. As shown in Table 1, P1's account use exemplifies this pattern directly: her statement that she must "maintain a good impression" because her main-account audience includes family and lecturers illustrates how the diversity and authority of the audience



intensifies front-stage performance, requiring careful self-monitoring rather than spontaneous self-expression. This supports the front-stage argument by showing that impression management on the main account is not simply a stylistic preference but a response to an audience capable of social and institutional judgment. Digital observation data corroborate this: main accounts consistently displayed well-curated feed posts featuring formal photographs from campus events, graduation ceremonies, and academic activities, accompanied by formal or motivational captions written in standard Indonesian, minimal emoji use, and hashtags oriented toward academic or religious identity (e.g., #mahasiswi, #UINArRaniry, #dakwah). Profile bios on main accounts typically included study program affiliations and campus-related identifiers, reinforcing a publicly legible institutional identity.

By contrast, the second account functions as a more private, secure space for self-expression. P2's account illustrates this dynamic: her description of feeling she does "not need to filter anything" because her second-account followers are a small, self-selected circle demonstrates how a reduced and trusted audience directly enables the lowering of impression-management effort. Digital observation of second accounts confirmed a markedly different content profile: second accounts relied predominantly on Instagram Stories and Close Friends features rather than permanent feed posts, with content including candid daily photographs, personal complaints (*curhat*), informal humor, and unedited selfies. Caption language on second accounts shifted to colloquial Indonesian or Acehnese dialect, with frequent use of informal expressions, slang, and expressive emoji clusters. Follower counts on second accounts ranged from 15 to 60, compared to hundreds or thousands on main accounts, and all second accounts observed were set to private with manually approved follower lists. This stark contrast in content type, language register, visual quality, and audience size across the two account types provides concrete observational confirmation of the front stage–backstage distinction: the main account is a curated performance space, while the second account is a managed, conditional backstage.

Social and cultural pressures further shape this duality, and in the context of UIN Ar-Raniry these pressures carry a specifically Islamic and Acehnese character that goes beyond generic social conformity. On the main account, participants consistently reported the need to project a self-image consistent with the values expected of a female student at an Islamic university: modesty in appearance and language, religious seriousness, and academic dedication. Several participants noted that they avoided posting content that could be interpreted as frivolous, immodest, or inconsistent with their identity as a student of Da'wah and Communication—a program explicitly associated with Islamic propagation and ethical communication. This institutional identity functions as a form of *gendered surveillance*: because the faculty's academic mission is visibly Islamic, female students experience their online conduct as subject to judgment not only by family and peers but by the broader Islamic community that the faculty represents. The main account thus becomes not merely a social performance space but a site of religious identity management, where departures from expected norms risk not only social but also reputational and spiritual consequences within the campus community.

The second account, by contrast, provides relief specifically from this form of religiously inflected surveillance. Participants described the second account as the space where they could express frustrations, share humor, or post content that did not conform to the



modesty and seriousness expected on the front stage—not because they rejected Islamic values, but because they needed a space in which their full, complex humanity could be expressed without constant normative monitoring. This finding resonates with Islamic communication ethics (*akhlaq al-karimah*), which emphasizes sincerity and authenticity (*ikhlas*) in communication: the second account, paradoxically, may be understood as the space where students communicate more sincerely, even as it is also the space least subject to Islamic institutional oversight. Acehese social norms further compound this dynamic: in Acehese culture, the concept of *malu* (shame or social embarrassment) functions as a powerful regulator of public conduct, and female students are disproportionately subject to its effects. The second account becomes a space where *malu* is temporarily suspended—not abandoned, but bracketed—allowing for forms of self-expression that would trigger social sanction in more public settings. Understood together, these findings confirm that social media functions not merely as a communication tool, but as a performative space in which religious, cultural, and gendered dimensions of identity are continuously negotiated and reconstructed in response to shifting audience compositions and social contexts.

### *Factors Affecting Self-Image Duality*

Based on findings from ten informants, six interrelated factors emerged as shaping the duality of female students' self-image across main and second Instagram accounts. Rather than operating independently, these factors function as a single interlocking system in which privacy and audience control serve as the *mechanisms* that make freedom of expression possible, while gender norms and religious-cultural expectations function as the *forces* that make such mechanisms necessary in the first place.

### *Privacy and Security*

Privacy and audience control are the most immediate enabling factors for second-account use. Participants consistently described limiting their second-account followers to a small, trusted circle as the precondition for feeling safe expressing themselves. P3 explained: "On my second account, I feel safer because only my close friends can see it. So, I don't have to worry about negative comments from people I don't know." P5 echoed this: "I approve followers one by one on my second account. If I don't know the person well enough, I won't accept the request." Digital observation confirmed these accounts were uniformly set to private, with follower lists ranging from 15 to 60 people, all of whom participants described as personally known and trusted. Audience control here is not incidental but deliberate and ongoing: participants actively curated who could follow their second account, effectively constructing a social environment that the main account's broader, less filterable audience could not provide.

### *Social Pressure*

Social pressure on the main account operates not as a generalized expectation but as a specific, anticipatory form of self-censorship directed at a concrete and consequential audience. P4 stated: "On my main account, I have to be more careful. If I'm too casual, I'm afraid people will think I'm not serious or not professional enough." P7 added: "I deleted a post once because a senior from my faculty liked it and I suddenly felt it was too informal for them to see." These



statements reveal that social pressure on the main account is anticipatory—participants preemptively self-censor based on imagined judgments from an audience they cannot fully control. Observation of main accounts confirmed frequent evidence of self-editing: posts were consistently formal in tone, and observation notes recorded that several participants had visibly sparse posting histories on their main accounts relative to their second accounts, suggesting deliberate restraint rather than low activity.

### *The Need for Freedom of Expression*

The need for freedom of expression represents the primary experiential motivation for maintaining a second account. P2 described her second account as "a place where I can say what I actually think, not what I'm supposed to say." P6 noted: "On the second account I post things that make me laugh, or when I'm stressed about campus. I could never post those things on my main account." Observation of second accounts confirmed this: content included candid complaints about academic workload, informal humor in Acehnese dialect, unedited photographs, and emotional disclosures that would have been inconsistent with the formal, composed self-image projected on the main account. The second account thus functions as an expressive outlet that satisfies a genuine psychological need, not merely a stylistic preference.

### *Audience Control*

Beyond the privacy settings described above, participants engaged in active and ongoing management of their second-account audience as a dynamic social practice. P8 explained: "I periodically check who follows my second account. If someone's relationship with me changes—like if we're no longer close—I remove them." P3 added: "I have a close friends list for my stories. Even among my second-account followers, not everyone sees everything." Observation confirmed the use of Instagram's Close Friends feature on all observed second accounts, indicating that audience management operates at multiple levels: not only through follower restriction but through the further stratification of content access within the already-restricted second-account audience. This layered audience control demonstrates that the backstage is not a binary space but a graduated one, with different degrees of openness calibrated to different levels of relational trust.

### *Cultural and Religious Norms*

Cultural and religious norms shape the specific content of front-stage performance demands and thereby define what kinds of expression require backstage relief. P3 noted: "On my main account, I'm more careful because I know my family and older people are watching. But on the second account, I'm more free to share casual things." P9 stated: "As a student of Da'wah faculty, I feel there's an expectation that I should post things that are Islamic or educational. So on my main account I try to maintain that image." Observation of main accounts confirmed frequent posting of Islamic content—Quranic verses, religious event documentation, and modesty-conforming photographs—alongside academic achievement posts, reflecting the institutional and religious identity that participants felt obligated to perform publicly. These norms are not experienced as external impositions alone but as partially internalized values, making their negotiation on social media a nuanced process of self-management rather than simple compliance or resistance.



### *Social Relationships and Intimacy*

The second account also functions as a tool for deepening specific relationships, suggesting that backstage behavior in this context is socially embedded rather than purely individualistic. P10 described her second account as "where my real friendships happen. We comment on each other's stories and know what's actually going on in each other's lives." P4 noted: "The people who follow my second account are the ones I'm closest to. Sharing there feels like talking to friends, not performing for an audience." Observation confirmed higher rates of interactive engagement—comments, replies to stories, and direct message exchanges—on second accounts compared to main accounts, where interaction tended toward more formal acknowledgment (likes, brief congratulatory comments). This relational dimension of second-account use indicates that the backstage serves not only as a space for individual authentic self-expression but as the primary site of genuine social intimacy for these participants.

Taken together, these six factors do not operate as a simple checklist but as a layered causal structure: religious and cultural expectations generate heightened social pressure on the front stage; this pressure creates a need for relief, which is met through deliberate privacy and audience control on the second account; and this controlled privacy, in turn, enables both individual freedom of expression and the deepening of close social relationships. Understood this way, the use of a second account is best interpreted not as a collection of separate motivations, but as an integrated strategy through which female students actively manage the tension between religious-cultural conformity and authentic self-expression in their everyday digital lives—a tension that is distinctively shaped by the Islamic, Acehnese, and institutional context in which these students live and study.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study found that female students of the Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry, actively negotiate a duality of self-image through the strategic use of main and second accounts on Instagram. The main account functions as a front stage for idealized, religiously and socially conforming self-presentation before a broad and consequential audience, while the second account operates as a carefully managed backstage for authentic, unfiltered expression within a small, trusted circle. Six interrelated factors shape this duality: privacy and security, social pressure, the need for freedom of expression, audience control, cultural and religious norms, and the cultivation of social relationships and intimacy.

Theoretically, this study extends Goffman's dramaturgical framework by demonstrating that front stage–backstage duality in digital contexts is not generically social but specifically gendered and religiously inflected. In an Islamic higher education context, impression management on the main account is shaped by modesty norms, family honor, and institutionalized religious identity, while the second account's backstage function is defined precisely by its removal of these specific audiences and their associated expectations. This finding advances Islamic communication studies by showing how faith-based norms actively structure digital self-presentation strategies among Muslim female students in Indonesia.

Practically, these findings carry implications for digital literacy education, student counseling, and communication practice in Islamic higher education. Digital literacy programs



should address the psychological costs of sustained front-stage performance on social media, helping students develop healthier and more intentional approaches to self-presentation. Student counselors and campus support services should recognize second accounts as legitimate coping mechanisms for religious-cultural pressure rather than signs of deception or duplicity. Communication educators in Islamic institutions might also consider integrating discussions of digital identity and self-presentation into da'wah and communication curricula, equipping students to navigate the intersection of Islamic values and digital life more reflectively.

This study has several limitations. The sample was limited to ten female students from a single faculty within one Islamic university in Aceh, which constrains the generalizability of the findings to other institutional, cultural, or religious contexts. The relatively short four-week observation period captures a snapshot of digital behavior rather than long-term patterns of account use. Additionally, because access to second accounts depended on voluntary participant disclosure, the observed accounts may not fully represent the range of backstage practices that participants engage in privately.

Future research could expand the sample to include male students, students from other faculties or institutions, or comparative contexts across different Muslim-majority regions in Indonesia. Longitudinal studies tracking how self-image duality evolves across different stages of university life would provide deeper insight into the developmental dimensions of this phenomenon. Research employing netnographic methods over extended periods could also capture the ephemeral content—particularly Instagram Stories—that plays a central but methodologically elusive role in second-account backstage practices.

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