

The phenomenon of begging in the comment columns of public figures' Instagram account viewed by the lens of Media Ecology Theory

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of digital begging in Instagram comments by public figures reflects changing patterns of social interaction influenced by digital media. This study aims to analyze the practice of openly asking for help on social media through the lens of McLuhan's media ecology theory. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, this study combines thematic and critical discourse analyses of netizen comments directed at seven Indonesian public figures with a luxurious lifestyle. The analysis shows that these comments form a discourse pattern that emphasizes the glorification of wealth, emotional dependence, representations of suffering, and the legitimacy of public pleas. Media, in this case, Instagram, functions as a symbolic environment that shapes perceptions, behaviors, and social values. This study offers novelty by revealing the dark side of social media as a mediating space for economic hope and parasocial interaction while also highlighting the changing power relations between public figures and digital society. These findings broaden our understanding of the impact of media ecology on shaping communication culture in the platform era.

Keywords: Media Ecology, Instagram, Public Figure, Digital Begging.

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RESEARCH & PUBLISHING



1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has emerged as a bridge between private and public space. Social media is an integral part of people's daily lives. This means that social media is incredibly popular and has become a necessity for people worldwide, as seen on platforms such as Instagram. The primary online activities that can be performed on Instagram include uploading photos and videos, sharing comments, and liking posts. Over the years, almost all levels of society, from the general public to public figures, have created Instagram accounts for various online activities, including advertising. A public figure is defined as someone who attracts considerable public attention. Public figures are often referred to as celebrities who have become significant figures in the entertainment world, particularly on social media. The public can enjoy public figures through various forms of content, ranging from their daily lives and achievements to their personal lives. Public figures are not always limited to celebrities from the entertainment world but also include individuals in the public spotlight, such as those in politics, law, government, sports, business, and other fields.

The public figures referred to in this study are Indonesian celebrities and entrepreneurs who performed on the private television station Indosiar, entitled "Konser Raya the Sul7ans." The event, held in January 2022, featured seven entrepreneurs considered "sultan tanah air," including Ahmad Sahroni, Doni Salmanan, Indra Kenz, Rudy Salim, Raffi Ahmad, Juragan 99, and Maharani Kemala. They are considered sultans because they own various successful businesses and frequently display glamorous lifestyles on their Instagram accounts, such as overseas trips on private jets, luxury vehicles, and other expensive lifestyle choices. Consequently, many members of the public use the posts of these "sultans" as a platform to seek financial assistance.

The researchers' observations of the posts on the seven entrepreneurs' Instagram social media accounts yielded comments from netizens seeking to experience the provision of assistance or gifts, such as money or goods, from the 'sultans.' Some of the comments that the researchers found on the Instagram accounts of these seven public figures included:

Assalamualaikum mba ,mas, semoga ramadan bwa berkah utk aku & anak agar bisa plg kmpung yg udh 10 thn gk plg kpdang, moga uluran tgn mas @juragan_99 & mba @shandypurnamasari agar keinginan ku bs plg thn ini..moga dbaca,trimakasih,wasalam.

Gercep mami.. Boleh hoki mami buat 40barian almarhumah ibuku H-2 lebaran acaranya.sedih banget lebaran tanpa ibu @maharanikemala.

Asalamuallaikum ko @_rudysalim ☺☺ bismillah Jumat berkah ☺☺ apakah ko @_rudysalim ada niatan untuk traktir istri dan anak saya makan ayam bakar ? Kalo ada saya terima dengan terbuka banget ko @_rudysalim 🤔🤔🤔🤔.

Jumat berkah semoga dapat rejeki dari sultan .. pinggin sepatu baru 🤔🤔🤔🤔 bebebehe @raffinagita1717. Kamis manis semoga dapet rezeki buat beliin kado hari IBU Yaitu BATU NISAN DAN RUMAH TERAKHIR BUAT BELLAU 🙏🙏🙏 @ahmadsabroni88

assalamualaikum ka indra, saya bener2 kepengen bgt bahagiain ibu saya yg skrg sudah berumur, saya pengen bgt ngelunasin hutang ibu saya dan beliin makan yg enak, saya khawatir bgt gabisa bahagiain ibu... saya cuman dagang keripik aja untuk makan sehari2, 🙏 semoga dapat rezeki seikhlasnya, Aminn yaAllah semoga dikabulkan @indrakenz 🙏🙏🙏🙏

Assalamualaikum kak @donisalmanan perkenalkan nama saya Ragil saya suaminya, saat ini istri saya lagi hamil 9bln, saya butuh biaya persalinan kak, saya hanya penjual mie ayam di Surabaya saat ini pendapatan

benar-benar tidak stabil kak semua bahan pokok naik, anak saya yg pertama di diagnosa sakit leukimia setiap bulannya harus kontrol untuk cek darah setelah menjalani kemoterapi, saya berharap kakak bisa membantu saya, saya doakan kakak rezekinya selalu di lancarkan Aamiin , tolong baca komen saya ya kak, saya sudah DM kakak terima kasih sebelumnya kak

These comments have undoubtedly left a lasting impression on Indonesians. Netizens who ask for help, especially financial assistance, from people they have never met can leave a negative impression. This practice is considered an attempt to foster an online "beggar" mentality, and a similar trend occurred in 2021, known as the "Ikoy-Ikoyan" trend. Ikoy-Ikoyan, an online money-giving initiative introduced by Arief Muhammad, has drawn widespread criticism for its practice, as it is believed to foster a begging mentality by encouraging people to solicit money from strangers ([Kompas.com, 2021](#)).

McLuhan ([Meisyaroh, 2013](#)) stated that technology, through media, can shape human actions, feelings, and thoughts. Humans have a symbiotic relationship with media technologies. This means that humans create technology, which in turn shapes them. This is the basic concept of media ecology theory. In the current era of convergence, media significantly influences all aspects of society. Media ecology theory is a field of study that examines the media environment, emphasizing the central role of technology, mode, information delivery, and communication codes.

The first study by ([Steven, 2022](#)) found that McLuhan's media ecology theory remains valid, with Instagram's influence on young people and university students still being significant. In addition to using Instagram for interaction and entertainment, students also use it as a primary information source. The second study by ([Rohimah, 2021](#)) examined the application of media ecology theory within the tourism industry. The results showed that media ecology theory cannot fully demonstrate a strong relationship between social media marketing and equity because of the lack of equitable distribution of tourism management and programs, minimal government consistency in implementing sustainable marketing, and weak empowerment of the community.

Research ([Nugraha, 2015](#)) explains that Instagram account owners can also post memes based on motives of curiosity, entertainment, love, expression, and self-esteem. Furthermore, research by ([Sakti, Bulan, 2018](#)) through their writing explains that Instagram, a social media platform for teenagers, is a place for constructing self-identity or a platform for self-expression. The results of other research ([Soraya, 2017](#)) illustrate that Instagram serves as a platform for personal branding, utilizing various available features. In addition to the three previous studies, Instagram is often used on social media to promote goods and services and to serve as an educational platform.

This study attempts to analyze the phenomenon of "begging" as a negative impact of Instagram social media from the perspective of media ecology theory. Considering several previous studies that have focused on the positive impacts and uses of Instagram, this study further deepens its insight into the phenomenon seen as the negative side of Instagram, which is a growing concern in Indonesian society. Through the Instagram social media comment columns of public figures who are the targets of netizens, the researcher attempts to describe the phenomenon that occurs in the literature. This is based on an understanding of media ecology theory, which posits that technology serves as a change-maker in human life ([Lopez, 2021](#)). Furthermore, the selection of the event "Konser Raya the Sul7ans" was due to the large number of public figures who are considered "sultans" in Indonesia. Therefore, the researcher chose this event to represent other public figures, and in this event, the seven "sultans" gathered and shared their goodness with the community.

Media ecology is a theory that holds the principle that society will never be able to escape the influence of ever-evolving media technology ([Droumeva, M., & Jordan, 2019](#)). McLuhan ([Allifiansyah, 2017](#)) established three fundamental theories of media ecology, namely: 1) media will influence people's

actions and deeds; 2) media improves perception and manages human experience; and 3) media simultaneously binds the world. The development of human civilization in the era of media technology, spanning several eras, including the tribal era, the literate era, the print era, and the electronic era, makes this media ecology theory particularly important (Droumeva, M., & Jordan, 2019).

2. METHOD

The researcher employed a qualitative approach, utilizing a meta-analysis study that drew on a literature review compiled from various studies. A summary of the findings from previous similar studies was then created (Cogaltay, N., & Karadag, 2015). The literature review in this study aims to answer the research questions. This method was used to provide a comprehensive overview of previous similar research on a specific topic by showing readers the findings obtained regarding the use of comment sections on Instagram by public figures.

As shown in Figure 1, this study aims to explore media ecology, specifically social media, from diverse expert perspectives. The following are several stages undertaken in this research: searching for and compiling several previous similar journals on media ecology and Instagram social media use; identifying the basic ideas used and the findings of previous similar studies; and analyzing these findings and drawing conclusions based on the reviewed research (Djamba, Y. K., & Neuman, 2014).

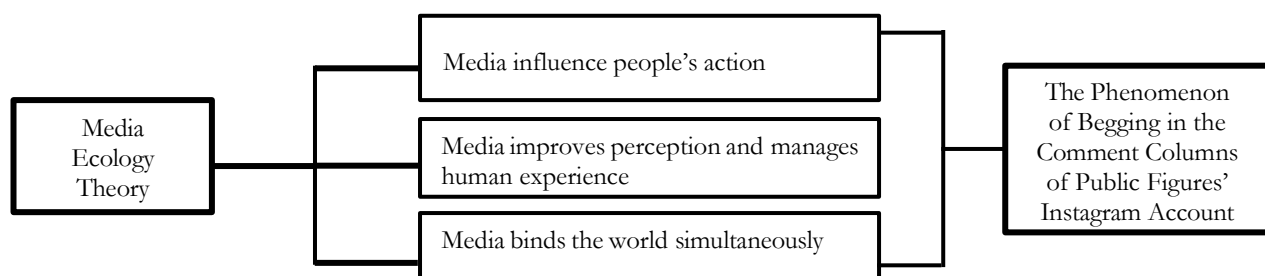


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Source: Researchers, 2025

This study aims to understand the social phenomenon ("begging" in Instagram comments) from the perspective of McLuhan's media ecology theory. This emphasizes a deep understanding of meaning and social context, which is typical of qualitative methods with descriptive research designs. Primary data were not collected via interviews or field observations. This study relied on previous journal articles, media documents, and examples of comments published on social media as secondary data. Furthermore, the author employed a meta-analysis of literature studies, analyzing the findings and frameworks of relevant previous studies, and then relating them to the phenomenon under study. The content to be analyzed consisted of comments from Instagram account users who requested funds in the comments section of public figures' accounts. This research is highly theoretical, emphasizing the conceptual analysis of media and public behavior grounded in communication theory.

Furthermore, this study employs a combined thematic and critical discourse analysis. The aim is to explore the phenomenon of digital begging in the comments of netizens on public figures' Instagram accounts. In addition, this method aims to find the meanings contained in the comment texts and to understand how social structures and power are articulated in digital communication practices through social media, particularly on Instagram. This study was descriptive-qualitative, employing a discourse analysis design based on McLuhan's media ecology theory. This approach was used to investigate how media (Instagram) as an information environment influences public figures' perceptions, actions, and

social interactions with their followers.

The key data sources are (1) Public comments (netizens) on seven Indonesian public persons' Instagram pictures, particularly those demonstrating a lavish lifestyle (examples: @juragan_99, @raffinagita1717, @indrakenz, etc.); (2) Visual documents consisting of screenshots of articles and related comments; and (3) Theoretical and empirical references from past research on social media, media ecology, digital interaction, and parasocial phenomena.

Data were gathered through documentation and literature research. First, comments were purposefully selected based on three criteria: pleas for aid (money, goods, and support); targeted public figure accounts with content that emphasizes wealth; and aspects of personal or religious narratives. Second, documentation was performed by copying and categorizing the comments for text analysis.

Data Analysis Techniques included thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was used to discover and organize the primary themes that emerged from the comment text, such as the glorification of wealth, hope and dependence, representation of economic pain, and digital ethics of asking. The process of theme analysis follows the methodology outlined by Braun and Clark, those are familiarity with comment data, initial coding based on linguistic patterns and story content, grouping themes from coded findings, reviewing and validating themes, and writing thematic narratives that synergize with theory

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA, Fairclough) was used to enhance the social and power context of the text. A CDA technique based on Fairclough's three dimensions was used for (1) Text (Text Analysis): Language structure, metaphors, narratives of pain, and selection of religious or emotional terms; (2) Discursive activities: How comments are formed and replicated as digital cultural activities; and (3) Social Practices: The relationship between the phenomenon of comments and larger social structures such as economic inequality, digital capitalism, and public figures' normalization of symbolic power.

The entire analysis process is synergized with McLuhan's media ecology theory, specifically three key assumptions, those are media influences human action, media shapes perceptions and experiences, and media simultaneously connects the world

This connection provides a theoretical framework for interpreting the results of thematic and discourse analyses as part of the changing structure of digital communication in society.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Result

3.1.1 Stages of Thematic Analysis

a. Familiarization with Data

This article presents original quotes from netizen comments on Instagram, for example (1) *"Assalamualaikum mba, mas, semoga Ramadhan bawa berkah utk aku & anak..."* and (2) *"Saya penjual mie ayam di Surabaya..."* These comments reflect personal narratives with emotional, religious, and economic overtones.

b. Initial Coding

From the comments, we can identify some important codes, such as emotion and hope (ex: *"semoga," "bismillah," "berkah," "amin"*), social status (ex: *"saya hanya dagang keripik," "penjual mie ayam"*), and glorification of public figures (ex: *"kakak dermawan," "sultan," "semoga dibaca"*)

c. Identify the Main Theme

Table 1 shows the themes that emerged.

Table 1. Main Theme

Theme	Description	Example
Parasocial and Dependence	One-way relationship between netizens and public figures, built on the basis of perception and expectation	Comments that hope for help even though they don't know each other
Wealth Glorification	Use of term "Sultan," interest in a luxurious lifestyle	" <i>Semoga dapat rejeki dari sultan...</i> "
Digitalization of Charity and Online Ethics	New norms about asking for help publicly on social media	" <i>Saya doakan kakak selalu dilancarkan rezekinya...</i> "
Self-Representation and Economic Hardship	Netizen convey narratives of personal suffering as an empathy strategy	" <i>Istri saya hamil, anak saya leukemia...</i> "

Source: [Researchers, 2025](#)

d. Theme Synthesis and Media Ecology

First, according to McLuhan, the media alter human behavior. Comments on social media platforms such as Instagram represent a new form of interaction. Second, media influences views, where public celebrities' extravagant lifestyles foster the notion that they are "worthy" of help. Third, the media connects the world and influences public opinion. Open remarks reach a wider audience, creating debate between supporters and detractors of "digital beggars."

3.1.2 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) Fairclough

The CDA approach examines text (Instagram comments) in the context of power relations, ideology, and social structures. First, the text analysis shows religious and casual language. "*Assalamualaikum*," "*semoga berkah*," "*Amin*"; narrative structure, such as many comments using personal storytelling; and digital beggar signs. There are direct requests such as "*boleh transfer*," "*minta traktiran*." Second, discourse practice shows that commenting on glamorous content can lead to a cycle of consuming, writing, and hoping for a response; netizens often recycle comments, which can become a trend and a social norm. The third is social practices. This phenomenon highlights digital economic inequalities between the working class and digital elites, as well as the normalization of social dependence on popular characters. The shift from offline to online support has led to a crisis of trust in formal institutions, leading to the use of "Instagram Sultans" instead of state aid, for example. The fourth is the final synthesis: deepening empirical and theoretical insights, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Final Synthesis

Aspects	Analysis Results	The Relationship Between Media Ecology Theory
Empiric	Digital commentary depicts social inequality, empathy exploitation, and dependency	McLuhan: Media as an extension of humankind
Discourse	There is a shift in opinion that public figures are the direct solution to economic suffering	Media shapes social perceptions and realities
Thematic	Parasocial themes, glorification of wealth, representation of poverty emerges	Media creates a space for interaction that shapes new cultures and ethics

Source: [Researchers, 2025](#)

Based on the theme and discourse analysis of the collected comments, it was discovered that Instagram users create stories of suffering to evoke compassion and help from prominent figures. These

narratives are more than just individual representations; they reflect a new cultural form in the digital arena created by media logic, where emotional intimacy and glamorization of wealth become motivators for action.

3.2. Discussion

3.2.1. Media Influence People's Action

In McLuhan's view, media is not limited to a narrow concept, such as newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and the Internet. McLuhan sees media in a broader concept as anything that humans use (Batubara, Abdul, 2014). Likewise, public figures use social media platforms like Instagram for various activities, such as explaining the concept of social media itself, namely as a means to represent oneself, interact, collaborate, and so on, which is done in cyberspace (Nasrullah, 2015). Figures 2 – 8 are collections of images of public figures' activities uploaded to Instagram, attracting the attention of netizens to leave comments.



Figure 2. Raffi Ahmad Travels by Using Private Jet with His Friends

Source: Instagram @raffinagita1717



Figure 3. Maharani Kemala Holidays in Paris

Source: Instagram @maharanikemala

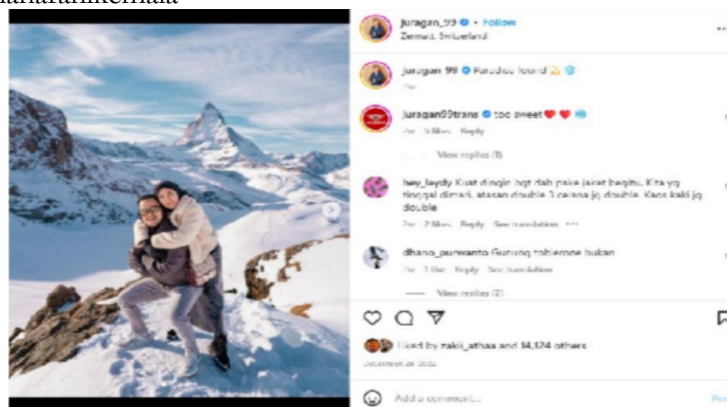


Figure 4. Juragan99 Holidays in Switzerland with His Wife

Source: Instagram @juragan_99



Figure 5. Rudy Salim with His Sport Car

Source: Instagram @rudysalim



Figure 6. Ahmad Sahroni with His Sport Car

Source: Instagram @ahmadsahroni88



Figure 7. Indra Kenz's Luxury Holiday

Source: Instagram @indrakenz

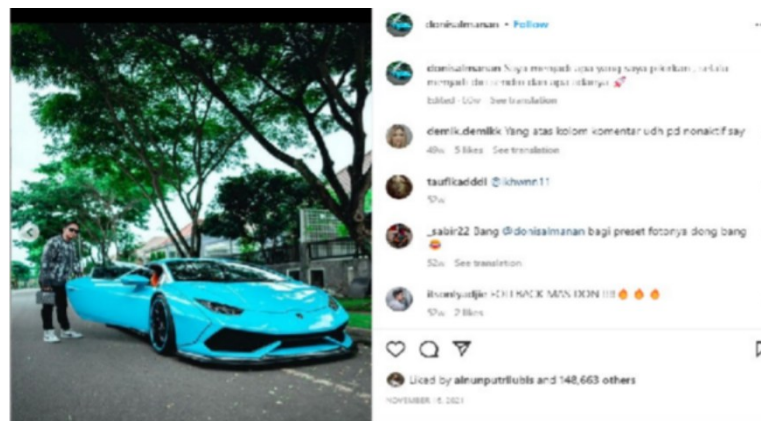


Figure 8. Doni Salmanan with His Sport Car

Source: Instagram @donisalmanan

Referring to the posts of the public figures mentioned above, it is clear that they utilize Instagram to represent themselves by showcasing their possessions and accomplishments. This is then exploited by Instagram users, who use content to gain the attention of other users. In line with this, a study explains that public figures' uploads of captivating photos and videos showcase the luxurious aspects of their content. This is, in fact, a characteristic of this social media platform, compelling account owners to upload beautiful, artistic, and attention-grabbing photos (Untari, 2018). Every piece of content uploaded by public figures garners significant public attention, as evidenced by the large number of likes and comments on it. As Effendy (Khair, 2021) points out, the initial stage in ecology media for audiences to perceive a public figure is attention and interest in everything they do, including posts on Instagram.

A study found that the perceived qualities of online news and social media influence preventive measures through trust in citizens or the government as public figures. Furthermore, although online news media increases trust in both citizens and the government, social media solely affects trust in citizens (Lee et al., 2021). Our research focuses on the shift in digital culture in Indonesia, namely the glorification of the wealth of "Instagram sultans," and the influence on netizens who feel "entitled" to seek assistance from these people. As previously discussed, there has been a shift in public trust in Internet media reporting. This illustrates the upheaval of societal values brought about by digital media: private norms

have become public, and seeking assistance has become an open spectacle. This is undoubtedly a novel finding of the present study.

3.2.2. Media Improves Perception and Manages Human Experience

The second assumption of media ecology theory is that media is viewed as a platform that directly influences human behavior. This means that media influences people through judgments, feelings, and reactions (Batubara, Abdul, 2014). It is not just public figures who utilize Instagram to interact with their idols in various ways, such as liking, sending direct messages, and commenting on their posts. Changes in the media will continue to occur in line with society's growth, movement, and needs. This is evident in netizen comments that request financial assistance from public figures.

There are various reasons why netizens ask for financial assistance from these seven public figures, such as to meet daily expenses, needs for religious holidays, purchase gifts for family or relatives, or even to try their luck by leaving comments in the Instagram comments section; This is similar to the comment that researchers found on the post by @maharanikemala, which reads: *"selalu sebat dan sukses, mai, tim gercep dar der, bismillah dapat keberuntungan dari mami."* Another comment that researchers found on the Instagram social media account @juragan_99: *"sama gantengnya kaya sebelumnya.. bismillah di tf 200."* This is, as stated by Praktiko (Khair, 2021), that the criteria for a public figure include the trust or (credibility) they give to the public, power, and attraction in the form of appearance, good looks, beauty, character, wealth, and so on (attractiveness). These three characters are associated with the seven public figures in this study, as the public believes that these figures have the power to help netizens in need of financial assistance. Furthermore, this power is reinforced by the allure public figures display through their Instagram posts, which often showcase their luxurious lives. Considering this state of netizens, it is undoubtedly related to the desire stage (the audience's desires/needs), which drives them to make such begging comments, which then become actions (Khair, 2021).

3.2.3. Media Binds the World Simultaneously

The third assumption of McLuhan's Media Ecology theory posits that people can be aware of every event that occurs in other parts of the world. This means that the media binds the world together through economic, social, political, and cultural systems (Batubara, Abdul, 2014). This also shows that there are no longer any boundaries in the world to limit our knowledge of each person's activities. This concept is evident in the comments section of the Instagram social media accounts of the seven public figures, where many netizens responded to the begging comments with various reactions or responses. Researchers found replies to wargame comments that responded to begging actions such as *"kerja mba," "katanya butuh duit, tapi bisa beli kuota untuk main sosmed," "kerja donk mas"*

McLuhan (Batubara, Abdul, 2014) stated that mediation is closely related to money. He concluded that money is a basic need and a natural resource, where experts agree that money is like a magical power that allows people to gain access to it. This is what happens on the social media platform Instagram, where public figures display their wealth in their content, which is then used by the audience as a means of accessing money because they trust and are attracted to the public figure's glamorous appearance.

Media ecology and media practice approaches are useful in achieving this goal because they recognize the complex, multifaceted array of media technologies, professions, and contents with which social movement actors interact; they historicize the use of media technologies in social movements; and they highlight the agency of social movement actors about media technologies (Flesher Fominaya & Gillan, 2020). Related to this statement, this study investigates the phenomenon of "digital begging" in the comments section of public personalities' Instagram posts. In this situation, public figures participate in

social movements to promote their causes. However, the social trend that the researcher understands involves luxurious lifestyle content that elicits digital-based netizen reactions. Personal branding, fan interactions, and hoaxes are common topics of interest in social-media research. However, studies of netizens publicly requesting financial assistance in the comments section are rarely considered core topics.

Another study found that status-seeking gratification has a greater impact on news sharing when the news quality is prioritized. In other words, disseminating low-quality news might be detrimental to an individual's reputation; therefore, they avoid doing so. However, information gratification has a greater impact on news sharing for people who rely on credibility and may use heuristic selection methods. This work has created new prospects for future research, and it is hoped that it will help to improve the quality and experience of news sharing on social media (Thompson et al., 2020). Our research is unique in that it examines the issue of digital begging in public figures' Instagram comment sections using media ecology theory. Unlike earlier research that has focused on the positive features of social media, this study uncovers the negative side of digital interactions as a new type of cultural construction formed by the glorification of media wealth and connectivity.

4. CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of "digital begging" in popular people's Instagram comments, particularly those depicting wealthy lifestyles, is a new type of social interaction born from media logic theory. This phenomenon, viewed through the lens of McLuhan's Media Ecology Theory, demonstrates that media (1) influences human actions by encouraging netizens to form parasocial relationships and place their hopes in public figures, (2) shapes perceptions and experiences by glorifying wealth and normalizing openly seeking help in digital spaces, and (3) simultaneously connects the world, allowing this practice to garner attention, support, and criticism from a large audience.

Thematic analysis revealed important themes such as parasocial dependency, depictions of economic distress, public ethics in seeking assistance, and the glorification of money. Meanwhile, critical discourse research revealed that this practice reflects digital economic disparity and a movement in societal values away from institutional support and towards seeking assistance from public figures. Overall, this behavior is not just an individual expression but a new societal construct in the social media era, with ethical, psychological, and social ramifications for modern digital communications.

Ethical Approval

Not Applicable

Informed Consent Statement

Not Applicable

Authors' Contributions

RYS contributed to the conceptualization, research design, data analysis, and preparation of the manuscript. She also served as the corresponding author and managed communication during the submission and review processes. M contributed to the theoretical framework, particularly the application theory and assisted in interpreting the research findings within the broader context of communication studies. SUBS contributed to the data collection, thematic analysis, and critical revision of the manuscript for clarity, coherence, and academic rigor.

Disclosure Statement

The Authors declare that they have no conflict of interest

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available upon request from the corresponding author for privacy.

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