



Digital Professional Learning Networks and the Construction of Professional Identity Among Preservice EFL Teachers: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract: This qualitative study examined how engagement with digital Professional Learning Networks (PLNs) shapes the professional identity construction of preservice English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers. Framed within Wenger's Communities of Practice theory and Vygotskian sociocultural principles, the research addressed a critical gap concerning the social-epistemological mechanisms through which informal, digitally-mediated networks contribute to identity formation during initial teacher education. Participants were 18 final-year preservice EFL teachers who actively participated in digital PLNs across multiple platforms (Twitter/X, Instagram, Facebook groups). Data comprised semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and digital artefacts (screenshots of networked interactions). Thematic analysis generated three overarching themes: (1) digital legitimate peripheral participation – characterised by gradual shifts from observation to contributive engagement; (2) resonant resource ecologies – participants' curation of personalised content streams that affirmed emergent pedagogical selves; (3) identity dissonance and negotiation – tensions encountered when digital PLN narratives contradicted institutional placement realities. Findings underscore that digital PLN engagement enables preservice EFL teachers to rehearse professional identities, access diverse communities of practice, and negotiate between aspirational and enacted selves. However, identity dissonance emerged as a consequential phenomenon when digitally-internalised professional discourses encountered traditional school micro-politics. The study concludes that teacher education programmes must explicitly scaffold critical digital PLN participation, fostering reflective meta-awareness of how networked interactions mediate teacher identity development.

Keywords: Professional learning networks, preservice teachers, EFL teacher identity, communities of practice, social media.

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary teacher education operates within an epoch of profound educational transformation, characterised by the rapid permeation of digital technologies into pedagogical practice, professional discourse, and the everyday texture of teachers'

working lives (Carpenter et al., 2021; Trust et al., 2023). The digital transformation of teacher education extends far beyond the mere acquisition of technological competencies; it fundamentally reconfigures the social landscapes within which preservice teachers learn to become teachers. Among the most significant developments has been the proliferation of digital Professional Learning Networks (PLNs)—self-directed, often informal constellations of social media connections, online communities, and digital resource-sharing environments through which educators engage in continuous professional learning (Krutka et al., 2019; Tour, 2024). Simultaneously, teacher education scholarship has increasingly recognised that learning to teach is inseparable from learning to be a teacher. Professional identity formation—the ongoing, dynamic process through which individuals negotiate what it means to be a teacher—has come to be understood as the central psychological and sociological task of preservice preparation (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Izadinia, 2022). Unlike discrete professional competencies that can be transmitted and assessed, professional identity is relational, context-sensitive, and inherently social. As Yuan and Lee (2023) contend, identity questions concerning who they are as teachers and what kind of teacher they wish to become permeate preservice teachers' learning experiences, thereby shaping their investment in teaching practices, resilience in the face of challenges, and long-term career trajectories.

Despite the concurrent rise of digital PLNs and identity-centred research in teacher education, striking disjunctions persist in the scholarly literature. Studies of digital PLNs have predominantly focused on in-service teachers, examining how experienced educators leverage Twitter chats, Facebook groups, and Instagram communities for resource-sharing, collegial support, and pedagogical innovation (Carpenter & Krutka, 2014; 2015; Trust et al., 2016). Conversely, research on preservice teacher identity has attended primarily to school-based practicum experiences, university coursework, and formal mentoring relationships (Alsup, 2006; Chong et al., 2021; Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016). The intersection of these two domains—specifically how digital PLN engagement within initial teacher education mediates the construction of professional identity—remains empirically underdeveloped and theoretically undertheorised. This gap carries significant implications because preservice teachers increasingly inhabit digitally-saturated environments even before entering the profession. Social media platforms are no longer merely supplementary learning tools but constitute primary sites of professional socialisation (Garcia-Castro & Nych, 2026; Masitoh et al., 2023). As they navigate Twitter threads, join Facebook groups for English language teachers, and curate Instagram feeds of pedagogical inspiration, preservice EFL teachers are simultaneously, whether consciously or not, engaging in identity work by experimenting with professional personas, trying on disciplinary discourses, and seeking validation for their emergent teaching selves. Understanding how these informal, digitally-mediated interactions shape professional identity is therefore not an optional enhancement to teacher education research but an urgent empirical necessity.

The present study addresses this lacuna through a qualitative inquiry situated within the specific context of preservice EFL teacher education. EFL teacher identity carries distinct salencies, as non-native speaking teachers often navigate complex positionalities regarding linguistic authority, cultural authenticity, and pedagogical legitimacy (Pennington & Richards, 2016). Digital PLNs may function as especially significant spaces for EFL preservice teachers, enabling access to global communities of practice that transcend local institutional constraints, providing alternative discourses of what it means to be an English teacher, and affording opportunities for identity experimentation in relatively low-stakes environments. Accordingly, this study pursued three central research questions to guide the investigation. First, the inquiry explores how preservice EFL teachers engage with digital professional learning networks across different social media platforms during their initial teacher education. Second, it examines the specific ways in which digital PLN participation shapes the construction of preservice EFL teachers' professional identities. Lastly, the study addresses what tensions or

dissonances emerge when digital PLN-mediated identity narratives intersect with the practical realities of school-based placement experiences. By addressing these critical questions, the study contributes both empirical insights and theoretical refinement to the intersecting fields of digital teacher professional learning and preservice teacher identity formation.

Professional Learning Networks: Conceptual Origins and Digital Transformations

The concept of professional learning networks has evolved substantially from its early articulations in continuing professional development literature. Initially, PLNs referred to formal or semi-formal groupings of educators who engaged in collaborative inquiry, lesson study, or pedagogical improvement initiatives (Brown & Poortman, 2018). However, the proliferation of social media platforms – particularly Twitter/X, Facebook, Instagram, and discipline-specific online communities – has dramatically reconfigured the nature, scale, and accessibility of professional networking. Contemporary digital PLNs are often characterised as self-directed, interest-driven, and boundary-crossing assemblages of people, resources, and ideas that educators intentionally cultivate to support their ongoing learning (Trust et al., 2016; Tour, 2024).

Carpenter and colleagues (2021) conducted a longitudinal study of educators' PLN practices, finding significant persistence in social media-based professional learning despite platform changes. Their analysis identified three core PLN practices: *consuming* (monitoring others' posts and resources), *connecting* (building relationships with educators beyond immediate work contexts), and *contributing* (sharing original content, posing questions, participating in synchronous chats). This tripartite framework has informed subsequent investigations, though studies specifically examining preservice teachers' PLN practices remain limited. A recent qualitative study by Alnaim (2025) of peer networks in elementary teacher preparation highlighted that both formal and informal networks nurture collegiality and provide emotional support fundamental to identity formation. However, Alnaim's focus remained on institutionally-embedded peer relationships rather than digitally-mediated networks extending beyond university boundaries.

Social Media Platforms as Sites of Professional Learning

Different platforms afford qualitatively distinct modalities of professional learning. Twitter/X (hereafter referred to collectively as Twitter, acknowledging the platform's rebranding while maintaining consistency with prior literature) has received sustained research attention. Twitter-based professional learning frequently occurs through dedicated hashtags (e.g., #ELTchat, #langchat), enabling asynchronous yet temporally focused discussions around focal topics. Carpenter (2015) found that preservice teachers who engaged with Twitter-based PLNs reported enhanced awareness of educational issues, expanded professional connections, and increased confidence in articulating pedagogical beliefs. Similarly, Welz (2021) investigated instructional leaders' perceptions of Twitter PLNs, concluding that these networks enabled educators to interact with colleagues beyond immediate geographic constraints, thus reducing professional isolation – a particularly significant affordance for preservice teachers who may feel marginalised within school-based placement hierarchies.

Facebook groups constitute another prevalent PLN modality. Unlike Twitter's public, hashtag-driven architecture, Facebook groups tend to operate as semi-enclosed communities requiring membership approval, which can foster a greater sense of collective identity and psychological safety. Research on teachers' Facebook group participation suggests that these spaces function as 'digital teachers' lounges' – informal, peer-affirming environments where educators seek advice, share resources, and negotiate professional challenges (Nelmarkka et al., 2021; Ranieri et al., 2025). For preservice teachers, such groups may provide access to in-service teachers' tacit knowledge and pragmatic wisdom not typically captured in university coursework. Instagram, while

relatively less studied in teacher professional learning literature, has emerged as a visually-oriented platform where educators share classroom aesthetics, materials, and brief pedagogical strategies. A recent chapter by Gu and Lee (2025) documented how preservice EFL teachers in Hong Kong integrated digital literacy practices – including Instagram-based networking – into their identity construction, revealing that online social networking shaped their professional self-understandings in consequential ways.

Communities of Practice and Teacher Identity

Wenger's (1998) Communities of Practice (CoP) framework provides a generative theoretical lens for understanding how digital PLNs mediate identity formation. For Wenger, identity is not a static attribute but an ongoing *negotiation of meaning* achieved through participation in social learning systems. Three modes of belonging – *engagement* (active involvement in joint enterprises), *imagination* (constructing images of the possible self), and *alignment* (coordinating activities within broader systems) – collectively constitute identity work. Masitoh and colleagues (2023) explicitly applied these three modes to investigate Indonesian preservice EFL teachers' identity construction in relation to digital gamification, finding that participants experienced identity struggles while concurrently developing contemporary, tech-savvy professional identities.

Recent scholarship has critically extended CoP theory in educational contexts. Hordvik et al. (2021) argued that Wenger's framework, while powerful, tends to under-specify processes of *identity conflict* when individuals participate in multiple, potentially incommensurable communities simultaneously – a condition particularly relevant for preservice teachers who navigate university-based, placement-based, and digitally-mediated networks concurrently. Furthermore, Vygotskian sociocultural perspectives complement CoP by foregrounding the *internalisation* of socially-mediated practices. From a Vygotskian standpoint, digital PLN interactions constitute a form of mediated learning wherein preservice teachers encounter the professional discourses, epistemic stances, and value commitments of more experienced practitioners (the 'more knowledgeable other'). Through iterative engagement – reading, retweeting, replying, curating – these external social interactions are gradually internalised as elements of professional selfhood.

Preservice Teacher Identity: Theoretical Perspectives

Preservice teacher identity has emerged as a distinct field of inquiry spanning educational psychology, sociocultural theory, and post-structural discourse analysis. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) proposed a foundational synthesis, identifying identity as (a) dynamic and constantly evolving, (b) comprised of sub-identities that may cohere or conflict, (c) requiring agency and active construction, and (d) inherently emotional. Izadinia (2022) subsequently argued that preservice teacher identity development is best understood as a *transitional trajectory* from peripheral to fuller participation in teaching communities – a formulation that resonates directly with Wenger's concept of legitimate peripheral participation.

Within EFL teacher education specifically, additional identity dimensions arise. Non-native English speaking (NNES) teachers often confront what Liu and Xu (2024) termed 'legitimacy tensions' – questions about their right to claim linguistic authority in teaching English, particularly when contrasted with native-speaker ideologies pervasive in ELT discourse. Digital PLNs may serve as counter-narratives to such tensions, enabling NNES preservice teachers to encounter successful models of non-native educators, participate in global conversations where linguistic repertoire is valued differently, and claim identity positions not available in their immediate local contexts. Garcia-Castro and Nych (2026) examined professional identity construction among preservice English teachers in Costa Rica, finding that while participants viewed teaching as vocationally meaningful, they also confronted low professional recognition and emotional exhaustion. Digital networks, though not the primary focus of their study, appeared implicitly as potential resources for building solidarity and professional validation.

Research Gap and Study Rationale

Despite the accumulation of separate literatures on digital PLNs and preservice teacher identity, systematic integration remains limited. Table 1 summarises selected empirical studies published between 2021 and 2026 that address intersections of PLNs, social media, and teacher identity, revealing persistent gaps in explicit focus on *preservice EFL* populations and *digital PLN-identity mediation mechanisms*. The present study responds directly to these gaps.

Table 1. Summary of Selected Studies on PLNs in Teacher Education (2021–2026)

Authors (year)	Focus	Context	Participants	Key Findings Related to Identity
Carpenter et al. (2021)	Educator PLN practices over time	International (in-service)	1,334 educators	PLNs persist through platform changes; identity enacted through consuming/connecting/contributing tripartite structure
Welz (2021)	Twitter PLN participation	US (instructional leaders)	400 participants	PLNs reduce professional isolation, support identity development through expanded collegial networks
Masitoh et al. (2023)	Digital gamification and identity	Indonesia (preservice EFL)	4 participants	Digital gamification enables identity negotiation; participants constructed contemporary, tech-savvy identities
Alnaim (2025)	Peer networks in teacher preparation	US (preservice elementary)	Not specified	Peer networks serve as emotional and professional ecosystems shaping identity development
Gu & Lee (2025)	Digital literacy and identity	Hong Kong (preservice EFL)	Not specified	Online social networking and digital tool use actively shapes teacher identity
Garcia-Castro & Nych (2026)	Professional identity construction	Costa Rica (preservice English)	10 participants	Identity shaped by motivation, public perception, and labour market concerns; digital networks implied as support resource
Oloba & Dzinoreva (2026)	Online CPD communities	South Africa (in-service)	100 questionnaire; 20 interviews	Online communities shape professional beliefs, agency, and identity through reflective practice
Oddone (2022)	Personal learning networks	Australia (in-service)	13 teachers	PLNs support active, interest-driven professional learning; identity constructed through autonomous engagement

Note. This table summarises representative studies addressing intersections of PLNs, social media, and teacher identity published within the specified timeframe. Gaps persist regarding mechanisms linking PLN participation to identity transformation among preservice EFL populations.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative interpretive design, consistent with efforts to understand participants' subjective meaning-making within socially-situated contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). An interpretive approach was appropriate given the research questions' focus on how preservice EFL teachers experience, construct, and negotiate

identity through digital PLN engagement. The design did not seek causal explanation but rather rich, contextualised understanding of identity processes.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were 18 final-year preservice EFL teachers enrolled in a four-year Bachelor of Education (English Language Teaching) programme at a comprehensive university in Hong Kong SAR, China. Purposive sampling criteria required that participants had (a) completed at least one full school-based teaching practicum, (b) actively engaged with digital PLNs (defined as regular use of at least two social media platforms for professional learning purposes) for a minimum of six months, and (c) provided informed consent for data collection. The sample comprised 14 female and 4 male participants, aged 21 to 25 years, reflecting the typical gender distribution within applied linguistics teacher education programmes in the region. All participants were native Cantonese speakers with advanced English proficiency (IELTS 7.0 or equivalent). Pseudonyms have been assigned to protect participant identities.

Data Collection

Three data sources were triangulated to capture the richness and temporality of identity-construction processes. *Semi-structured interviews* were conducted with each participant (45–75 minutes duration). The interview protocol examined participants' digital PLN engagement histories, platform preferences and practices, perceived identity shifts, and critical incidents wherein digital interactions shaped professional self-understanding. Interviews were conducted in English (participants' instructional medium) in private university spaces, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

Reflective journals were maintained by participants over an eight-week period. Weekly prompts guided participants to document their digital PLN interactions, emotional responses, insights or struggles, and connections between online encounters and teaching practice. Participants submitted 4–8 journal entries each, generating 112 journal texts comprising approximately 45,000 words.

Social media artefacts were collected in the form of screenshots capturing participants' engagement with digital PLNs. Artefacts included tweets or replies, Facebook group posts and comment threads, saved Instagram posts, and direct message exchanges relevant to professional learning. Artefact collection was guided by participants' own indications of significant interactions, ensuring researcher collection did not impose extraneous selection criteria.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis, chosen for its flexibility, theoretical agnosticism, and compatibility with identity-oriented research. Phase 1 involved familiarisation: reading and re-reading transcripts, journal entries, and artefact annotations, documenting initial observations. Phase 2 generated preliminary codes systematically across the dataset using NVivo 14 software. Codes were semantic (descriptive of explicit content) and latent (capturing underlying assumptions, tensions, and identity work). Phase 3 grouped codes into candidate themes, iteratively reviewing thematic coherence. Phase 4 refined, split, merged, and discarded themes through recursive team discussion. Phase 5 defined and named final themes. Phase 6 produced this written account, weaving together analytic narrative and participant voices.

Trustworthiness was enhanced through multiple strategies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). *Member checking* involved returning thematic summaries to five participants who verified resonance with their experiences. *Thick description* of contexts, participants, and identity processes facilitates transferability judgments by readers. *Peer debriefing* with two doctoral researchers not involved in data collection challenged emerging interpretations. *Reflexivity* practices documented the first author's positionality as a former EFL teacher

and current teacher educator who holds certain assumptions about digital PLNs' value; analytic memos critically examined how these positions might inform or bias interpretation.

RESULTS

Thematic analysis generated three major themes, each comprising two to four sub-themes, that collectively illuminate the nuanced relationship between digital PLN engagement and preservice EFL teachers' professional identity construction.

Theme 1: Digital Legitimate Peripheral Participation

Drawing on Wenger's framework, this theme captured participants' progressive movement from peripheral observation towards more active contribution within digital professional communities. Digital PLNs enabled participants to occupy legitimate – albeit initially peripheral – positions in professional discourse without the vulnerability associated with school-based participation.

Observation-as-scaffolding characterised participants' early engagement patterns. Sylvia explained:

'At first, I only followed certain hashtags... I would just read and read everything people posted about teaching English. I never commented because I felt like, who am I to say anything? I'm just a student. But looking at what experienced teachers talk about—classroom management, how they correct errors—slowly I could see *how* they think. That itself changed me.' (Interview, 23)

Sylvia's account illustrates how observation functioned not as passive consumption but as structured access to the professional reasoning processes of more experienced practitioners – a form of cognitive apprenticeship distributed across digital networks.

Shifting participation thresholds were negotiated as participants accumulated network familiarity and perceived competence. Participation thresholds – the felt requirements for legitimate contribution – lowered over time through iterative exposure. Several participants described pivotal moments when they first posted content or responded to others' queries. Tony recounted:

'I saw someone in a Facebook ELT group asking about teaching conditionals to low-level secondary students. I had just taught that in my practicum! My cooperating teacher gave me some ideas. I typed a reply. It took me 20 minutes... I kept deleting and rewriting. But I posted it. And then someone replied "Great suggestion!" That small thing—someone validated me. I felt like maybe I can contribute.' (Interview, 31)

Tony's experience reveals the affective dimensions of identity construction: validation from unknown professional peers carried identity-affirming weight exceeding its apparent scale.

Curating aspirational identities emerged as participants intentionally curated digital content to construct and broadcast desired professional selves. This curation operated both inwardly (organising resources for personal learning) and outwardly (presenting particular identity performances). At the intersection of inward and outward curation, Amanda described:

'My Instagram saved folder is like... my teacher identity museum. If I see something that resonates with how I want to be as a teacher, I save it. Over time, looking back at that folder, I see an image forming. This is the kind of teacher I want to become.' (Journal, Week 5)

The screenshot artefacts accompanying Amanda's journal revealed curated posts emphasising compassionate error correction, student voice, and creative use of low-resource materials – an aspirational identity orientation towards relational pedagogy.

Theme 2: Resonant Resource Ecologies

This theme encompassed participants' active curation of personalised digital environments – resource ecologies – that generated feelings of resonance, affirmation, and professional belonging. Unlike institutional curricula experienced as externally imposed, digital PLNs allowed participants to construct learning spaces aligning with emergent values.

Affinity-based discovery described how algorithmic recommendation systems and peer sharing created serendipitous encounters with perspectives participants did not know they needed. Vera's journal detailed:

'I followed an English teacher from Brazil on Twitter because someone retweeted her thread about decolonising ELT. I had never heard of decolonising ELT before. Now I have read five articles about it. This completely changed how I think about the textbook materials we are given. My identity as a teacher now includes questioning whose English is being taught.' (Journal, Week 3)

Vera's trajectory – from accidental discovery to epistemic transformation – illustrates how digital PLNs function as sites of *identity perturbation*, unsettling prior assumptions and opening new identity trajectories.

Collective problem-solving occurred when participants posted teaching challenges to their networks and received responsive, context-sensitive advice. This process differed qualitatively from consulting textbooks or supervisors, as peer-sourced solutions could be evaluated for resonance with participants' emerging professional styles. Heidi described:

'I had a student who refused to speak in my English class... I posted on a Facebook ELT group describing the situation. I got 14 replies in two hours! Some were practical strategies—timers, pair work structures. But some were also... like, a teacher in Vietnam said, "Have you considered this student might be silencing themselves because of anxiety about accent?" That hit me. I had not thought about identity silencing.' (Interview, 54)

Heidi's experience demonstrates how digital PLNs afford access not merely to teaching *techniques* but to alternative *interpretive frameworks* that reshape how teachers understand student behaviour and thus their own instructional responses.

Emotional containment represented a crucial but less visible function of digital PLNs. Participants turned to networks not only for pedagogical advice but for emotional support when facing practicum difficulties. Ben wrote:

'My practicum mentor was... harsh. She told me my lesson was "disorganised and demonstrated lack of preparation" in front of the whole staff room. I felt humiliated. That night, I posted on a private teacher support group on Facebook — just venting. People replied with their own stories. One teacher said she cried in the bathroom every day her first year. Knowing that — it didn't fix my problem but it made me feel less like a failure. It protected my idea that I can still become a good teacher.' (Journal, Week 7)

Ben's account reveals emotional containment as an identity-protective function. Negative practicum experiences threatened his professional self-concept; the digital PLN provided counter-narratives that normalised struggle as part of becoming-teacher rather than evidence of personal inadequacy.

Theme 3: Identity Dissonance and Negotiation

Perhaps most analytically significant, this theme captured the tensions, contradictions, and active negotiation required when digitally-mediated identity narratives encountered institutional placement realities.

Pedagogical discourse clash occurred when participants internalised progressive pedagogical discourses from digital PLNs – student-centredness, translanguaging, inclusive assessment – but found their placement schools oriented towards transmission-based instruction, monolingual norms, and high-stakes testing. This clash generated profound identity challenges. Mina articulated:

'On Twitter, everyone is talking about empowering students, giving them voice, being a facilitator not a lecturer. But in my placement school, the expectation is clear: you manage behaviour, you follow the textbook, you prepare students for exams. I started to believe

the Twitter version of good teaching. But when I tried to implement it, my mentor said I was “not realistic” and my lessons were “unfocused.” So who should I listen to? Who defines good teaching?” (Interview, 42)

Mina’s question – ‘Who defines good teaching?’ – reflects the identity stakes of pedagogical discourse clash. Participants confronted fundamental political questions about whose values, whose practices, and whose vision of teaching would constitute their professional self.

Strategic identity compartmentalisation emerged as participants managed dissonance by segregating digital and physical teaching identities. Some described performing compliant teaching during placements while privately committing to alternative visions for their imagined future classrooms. Amanda explained:

‘I have my practicum teaching persona, and I have my real teaching persona that I’m building online. They are not the same. In school, I follow the rules. Online, I save everything that represents the teacher I will be when I have my own classroom. It’s like... delayed identity.’ (Journal, Week 6)

Amanda’s metaphor of ‘delayed identity’ captures an important mechanism: digital PLNs enabled participants to sustain aspirational professional selves even when current contexts foreclosed their enactment. This identity compartmentalisation might be protective, preventing early discouragement, but also risks normalising disconnects between espoused and enacted practice.

Network-enabled identity rehearsal presented the developmental opportunity within dissonance. Several participants described returning to their digital PLNs explicitly to rehearse how they would articulate their pedagogical preferences, justify their choices to mentors, or reframe ‘unrealistic’ practices as legitimate professional alternatives. Sylvia described one such rehearsal:

‘After my mentor criticised my group work activity, I posted about it — not complaining, but asking “How would you respond to a mentor who says group work wastes time?” The responses showed me different ways to frame it. Some suggested bringing research articles showing group work benefits. Others offered language scripts about balancing curriculum coverage with engagement. I actually used one of the scripts in my next conversation with my mentor. It worked better. I didn’t win the argument but I felt more... agentive? Like my identity could advocate for itself.’ (Journal, Week 4)

Sylvia’s account suggests that digital PLNs function not merely as sources of instructional ideas but as *rehearsal spaces* for professional voice – enabling participants to prepare for identity negotiations in school settings.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Extensions: Digitalising Communities of Practice

The findings extend Wenger’s Communities of Practice framework in several significant directions. First, the concept of *legitimate peripheral participation* requires digital reinterpretation. In physical CoPs, legitimacy often depends on institutionally-sanctioned roles and sustained co-presence. However, digital PLNs enable what might be termed *asynchronous legitimate peripheral participation* – learners can access professional practice, observe expert reasoning, and gradually shift participation thresholds outside real-time interaction. This digital modality may lower entry barriers for novices who find school-based peripheral positions intimidating (cf. Hordvik et al., 2021).

Second, participants’ *imagination* (Wenger’s second mode of belonging) operated algorithmically as well as agentively. Serendipitous discovery of decolonising ELT discourses, diversity pedagogies, and non-native teacher success narratives – mediated by opaque algorithmic recommendations – expanded the landscape of possible teacher identities participants could imagine. This finding suggests that identity imagination is not wholly deliberate but co-constructed with platform architectures. Teacher education must therefore cultivate algorithmic awareness as a component of digital professional literacy.

Third, *alignment* – coordinating learning with broader systems – proved particularly challenging for participants who aligned digitally with progressive pedagogical discourses but operated institutionally within exam-oriented, transmission-focused systems. The identity dissonance documented in Theme 3 represents a failure of alignment across multiple communities of practice. In such cases, preservice teachers face a choice: dis-align with one community (abandoning digital discourses or resisting placement norms) or sustain identity bifurcation (Amanda's 'delayed identity'). Neither option is developmentally straightforward. Teacher education might productively treat such dissonance not as a problem to be eliminated but as a generative site for critical reflection on the contradictions inherent in contemporary teaching.

Sociocultural Processes of Internalisation

Vygotskian sociocultural theory provides complementary explanatory power. The movement from observation (Sylvia's initial peripheral position) to tentative contribution (Tony's first Facebook reply) to participant-initiated problem-solving (Heidi's advice-seeking) follows the classic trajectory of internalisation: external social interactions gradually become psychological resources. Importantly, digital PLNs compress the 'more knowledgeable other' role into distributed networks. No single expert mediates learning; rather, composite expertise emerges through networked responses. This distributed expertise accentuates the *polyphonic* nature of identity construction – participants encountered multiple, sometimes conflicting professional voices and had to actively select, synthesise, or reject them.

The emotional containment function documented in Theme 2 exemplifies what Vygotsky termed the *social origins of higher psychological functions*. Ben's ability to reframe practicum humiliation as normal early-career struggle did not originate within him as an innate coping strategy; it was appropriated from the digital community's collectively produced counter-narratives about making-mistakes-as-learning. Digital PLNs thus function as distributed regulatory systems, helping preservice teachers co-regulate the affective storms of practicum experiences. Teacher education programmes that ignore these digital emotional infrastructures may fail to support identity resilience adequately.

Implications for Preservice Curriculum Design

Several curriculum design implications follow. First, explicit *digital PLN pedagogy* warrants integration into preservice programmes. Rather than assuming digital literacy will be acquired incidentally, programmes should teach strategic platform use, hashtag identification, and critical evaluation of online resources. More fundamentally, programmes should cultivate *reflective meta-awareness* of how digital interactions shape identity – asking preservice teachers to journal about their PLN engagement, trace identity shifts, and articulate how networked discourses influence their emerging professional selves.

Second, the identity dissonance documented in Theme 3 suggests preservice teachers need structured opportunities to *critically appraise the relationship between digital discourses and school realities*. One cannot simply resolve this dissonance in advance; it must be pedagogically engaged. Case-based discussions, critical incident analysis, and rehearsal of pedagogical justifications (as Sylvia practised) could help preservice teachers develop strategic repertoires for navigating contradictory expectations without abandoning their emergent principles.

Third, teacher educators should recognise digital PLNs not as extracurricular supplements but as *legitimate learning environments*. The findings demonstrate that significant professional identity formation occurs outside formal curriculum hours, in spaces preservice teachers manage autonomously. Assessment practices could acknowledge this – for example, through digital portfolio assignments that curate PLN interactions and articulate their identity significance. However, such formalisation risks instrumentalising

spaces that function precisely because of their voluntary, interest-driven character. A balanced pedagogical approach is necessary.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Several limitations qualify the study's claims. The sample, while appropriate for qualitative inquiry, was drawn from a single Hong Kong institution and may not transfer fully to other national contexts where EFL teacher education and digital access differ. The study captured self-reported perceptions of identity change; capturing identity *enactment* through digital trace ethnography or multimodal analysis could reveal dimensions not accessible through interviews and journals alone. Furthermore, the eight-week journaling period, while sufficient to detect identity processes, did not capture longer-term identity stabilisation or transformation; longitudinal designs spanning the transition from preservice to early career teaching would be valuable.

Future research should examine cross-cultural variations in digital PLN-identity dynamics. EFL preservice teachers in contexts with limited social media access, heavy surveillance, or different platform ecologies may experience identity construction differently. Comparative studies across Asian, European, and South American contexts could reveal how cultural scripts regarding authority, collectivism, and teacher status moderate digital identity processes. Additionally, as artificial intelligence increasingly permeates social media – through recommendation algorithms, automated content moderation, and generative AI – investigations should examine how algorithmic mediation shapes identity possibilities.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative inquiry examined how digital professional learning networks mediate professional identity construction among preservice EFL teachers. Through analysis of interviews, reflective journals, and digital artefacts, the study identified three interconnected themes: digital legitimate peripheral participation, resonant resource ecologies, and identity dissonance and negotiation. The findings demonstrate that digital PLNs are not merely sources of instructional resources but constitute significant sites of identity work – spaces where preservice teachers observe professional practice, rehearse professional voices, seek emotional support, and negotiate between aspirational identities and institutional constraints. For teacher education, the study's central implication is that digital professionalism can no longer be treated as ancillary to the core business of preservice preparation. Just as school placements are recognised as consequential identity-shaping environments, digital PLNs must be recognised as similarly consequential. Programmes that ignore preservice teachers' digital identity work do so at their learners' expense – and at the expense of preparing teachers equipped to navigate the contemporary, digitally-mediated professional landscape. Digital PLNs offer both promise and peril for identity formation. The promise lies in expanded access to diverse communities, validation from networked peers, and rehearsal spaces for professional voice. The peril lies in identity dissonance when digital discourses clash with institutional realities, and in the potential for algorithmically-mediated identity trajectories that privilege certain pedagogical voices while marginalising others. The task for teacher education is not to maximise or minimise digital PLN engagement but to cultivate preservice teachers' capacity to participate critically, reflectively, and agentively – using digital networks as resources for becoming the teachers they wish to be, while maintaining critical awareness of how those networks shape what kinds of teachers are possible.

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