

Identity in the Digital Age: Virtual Selves and Online Communities

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The rapid expansion of digital technologies and social media platforms has reshaped how individuals construct and express their identities. In the digital age, people increasingly create "virtual selves," shape representations that may differ significantly from offline personas. This paper explores how identity is shaped and transformed through online interactions, examining the roles of anonymity, social validation, and self-presentation in virtual environments. The concept of multiple, fluid identities is discussed, as individuals engage in different communities across platforms, adopting varying roles depending on context. Online communities, from social networks to gaming platforms, provide spaces where users can explore new aspects of their personalities, build relationships, and experiment with identity in ways that may not be feasible in the physical world. This digital landscape presents both opportunities and challenges for identity formation. While it allows for freedom of expression and belonging, it raises concerns about authenticity, cyber bullying, and the pressures of constant self-presentation. The paper concludes with a discussion on the psychological impact of digital identity formation and the need for self-awareness and balance in navigating virtual worlds. Understanding how digital environments influence identity is crucial for comprehending the evolving nature of the self in the 21st century.

Keywords: virtual identity, online communities, self-presentation, digital age, social media

In the contemporary digital landscape, the internet and social media have revolutionized how individuals perceive and express their identities. These platforms allow people to present themselves in ways that may not always align with their offline selves. The ability to curate a "virtual self" enables individuals to create an identity that can be idealized, modified, or even entirely fabricated, which significantly affects how identity is both experienced and perceived (Turkle, 2011). The concept of identity, traditionally rooted in the physical world and shaped by immediate social environments, is now increasingly fluid, fragmented, and negotiated in online spaces (Gergen, 1991).

The Virtual Self and Identity Construction

The notion of the "virtual self" refers to the digital persona that individuals create on various online platforms, such as social media, gaming communities, or other digital forums (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Unlike face-to-face interactions where identity is constrained by social roles, appearance, and physical presence, online environments offer a flexible space where individuals can select which aspects of themselves to display or conceal. This selective self-presentation is often influenced by the desire for social validation, which plays a crucial role in shaping one's online identity (Walther, 1996). Moreover, the internet's anonymity enables users to experiment with multiple facets of identity, which can lead to dissociation between online and offline selves. For instance, a shy

individual in real life may adopt a more extroverted persona online, as the internet provides a safe space for identity experimentation. This disconnection, however, can also result in identity fragmentation, where the coherence of one's self-concept is challenged by the existence of multiple, sometimes conflicting, digital personas (Turkle, 1995).

Online Communities and Identity Formation

Online communities play a significant role in shaping identity. In these spaces, individuals often find themselves associating with specific groups, ideologies, or subcultures that they may not encounter in their physical environments (Baym, 2015). These virtual communities enable people to find like-minded individuals, offering both a sense of belonging and a platform to express and develop their identities. For example, participation in fandom's, gaming communities, or support groups can influence one's identity, as individuals often adopt roles or attributes that resonate with the collective values and norms of the online group (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Social media platforms have a feedback system that plays a big role in shaping a person's online identity. Likes, comments, and shares act as approval or disapproval, either supporting or questioning the identity someone shows. The search for this validation can sometimes lead to the construction of inauthentic or exaggerated versions of oneself, modified specifically to gather approval from online audiences (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006).

Psychological and Social Implications

The construction of virtual selves raises important psychological and social questions. On the one hand, these platforms provide opportunities for self-exploration and identity experimentation that can promote personal growth and confidence (Turkle, 2011). On the other hand, the pressure to conform to online norms and seek constant validation can have detrimental effects on self-esteem and mental health. The phenomenon of "social comparison" is

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particularly prevalent on platforms like Instagram and Facebook, where users often compare their lives to the designed, idealized lives of others, leading to feelings of inadequacy or anxiety (Chou & Edge, 2012). The fluidity of identity in digital spaces also challenges traditional notions of authenticity. In a world where individuals can present multiple, often contrasting versions of themselves, the question arises: What is the "real" self? While some scholars argue that online identities are merely extensions of offline selves, others contend that the internet allows for the creation of entirely new identities that may not have existed in the physical world (Gergen, 1991).

The Emergence of Virtual Selves

The development of virtual selves dates back to the early days of the Internet, where anonymity was a cornerstone of online interactions. Users of early chat rooms, forums, and role-playing games like "MUDs" (Multi-User Dungeons) had the freedom to experiment with different aspects of their personalities, constructing identities that could be entirely separate from their offline lives (Turkle, 1995). Anonymity allowed for exploration without the constraints of real-world consequences, offering a space where individuals could freely engage with aspects of their identity that may not have been fully expressed in their physical world. As technology evolved, so too did the complexity of virtual identity formation. The advent of social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter brought a shift from anonymous identities to semi-anonymous or even fully public personas. These platforms introduced the concept of "curate self-presentation," where users began to selectively showcase aspects of their lives, personalities, and preferences through posts, photos, and interactions (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006). Unlike the anonymity of early internet platforms, social media profiles tied digital selves more directly to the offline world, creating a bridge between real-world identities and online personas.

Virtual Selves and Identity Fluidity

Virtual selves highlight identity fluidity, where the digital realm enables individuals to craft multiple, contrasting identities compared to the relatively stable offline self. Gergen (1991) describes this as the "saturated self," where multiple social roles challenge the notion of a singular identity. This fluidity is evident in curated personas across platforms—professional on LinkedIn, idealized on Instagram, and anonymous on Reddit. The digital space allows for greater experimentation and self-expression, detaching online identities from offline constraints. Walther's (1996) hyper-personal model of communication suggests that online platforms enable more controlled and selective self-presentation compared to face-to-face interactions. Individuals can craft messages, choose flattering visuals, and emphasize positive traits, creating idealized versions of themselves. This process often highlights achievements and attractiveness while minimizing less desirable aspects.

Psychological Motivations for Creating Virtual Selves

The creation of virtual selves stems from diverse psychological motivations deeply rooted in human needs. A primary driver is the desire for social validation, as social media platforms provide instant feedback through likes and comments, reinforcing the crafted digital self (Chou & Edge, 2012). This often leads individuals to match their

online personas with societal ideals, sometimes resulting in exaggerated or inauthentic representations of their offline identities. Another key motivation is the need for social connection, as online platforms facilitate relationships and shared experiences that might be unavailable in the physical world (Baym, 2015). These spaces are particularly valuable for marginalized groups or those with niche interests, fostering belonging and acceptance. Additionally, virtual selves enable identity exploration; with the relative anonymity of certain platforms allowing individuals to express aspects of their personality they may suppress offline (Turkle, 1995). For instance, individuals constrained by societal norms might experiment with alternative identities in gaming or anonymous forums, gaining deeper self-awareness. This freedom to explore without fear of real-world judgment can be empowering, highlighting the transformative role of digital spaces in identity formation.

The Tension between Virtual Selves and Authenticity

The tension between virtual selves and authenticity arises as individuals create idealized versions of themselves online, blurring the lines between the "real" and "virtual" self. Goffman's (1959) theatrical perspective suggests that individuals engage in "impression management" by tailoring their personas to fit various social contexts, a practice common in digital spaces. This can lead to feelings of inauthenticity, especially when discrepancies between offline and online identities emerge (Kim & Lee, 2011). Social comparison, exacerbated by idealized portrayals on social media, can cause anxiety and depression (Chou & Edge, 2012). Furthermore, the reliance on social validation through likes and followers can negatively affect self-esteem, as individuals may measure self-worth by external approval rather than intrinsic qualities (Vogel et al., 2014).

Anonymity and the Construction of Identity

Anonymity in digital spaces allows individuals to explore and express aspects of themselves that may be concealed in offline life. By hiding their real-world identities, individuals gain the freedom to experiment with their self-presentation. This is particularly evident in online gaming, forums, and virtual worlds like Second Life. Such anonymity develops self-exploration and shapes how people construct their digital identities. This freedom encourages individuals to explore different facets of their identity without the constraints of offline norms.

Empowerment through Anonymity: Anonymity in digital spaces empowers individuals to explore aspects of their identity that may be suppressed offline, such as gender or sexual identity (DeVito, Walker, & Birnholtz, 2018). It provides a safe space for self-exploration, especially for marginalized individuals in hostile environments. Online platforms like gaming allow users to adopt different personas, developing identity experimentation (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2007). Anonymity also facilitates the expression of political views and social ideologies, leading to communities built around shared values (Bernstein et al., 2011). This freedom helps individuals better understand themselves in a low-risk environment.

The Ethical Dilemmas of Anonymity: Anonymity in digital spaces allows for freedom and identity exploration, but it also raises ethical concerns about authenticity and behavior. Without accountability,

users may create false identities to deceive or manipulate others, such as in catfishing (Furnell, 2017). Anonymity develops harmful behaviors like trolling and cyber bullying, where individuals engage in abusive actions without facing real-world consequences (Suler, 2004). The "online dis-inhibition effect" explains why people may act more aggressively in anonymous settings (Joinson, 2007). Trolling, often enabled by anonymity, erodes trust and civility in online interactions (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014).

The Balance between Self-Expression and Responsibility: The dual nature of anonymity in digital spaces raises the challenge of balancing self-expression with responsibility. Anonymity develops self-exploration but can also enable harmful behaviors, such as deception and trolling (Furnell, 2017). Solutions like private identity verification and platform moderation could promote accountability while preserving anonymity's benefits. Anonymity itself isn't inherently harmful; the ethical issues arise from its misuse. The goal is to create spaces that encourage responsible anonymity usage, facilitating self-expression without enabling harm. This balance is crucial for both users and platform developers.

Social Validation in Virtual Space

In virtual spaces, social validation significantly influences identity construction, with users seeking likes, comments, and followers as markers of approval (Chou & Edge, 2012). This feedback loop reinforces designed personas that align with societal trends, often prioritizing popularity over authenticity. Platforms like Instagram and Facebook amplify this by rewarding idealized self-presentation. This dynamic shapes virtual identities while sometimes challenging genuine self-expression.

The Role of Social Validation in Shaping Virtual Selves: Social validation in virtual spaces operates through feedback mechanisms like likes, comments, and shares, shaping how individuals measure their social worth (Dumas et al., 2017). This creates a cycle where users post idealized content, particularly on platforms like Instagram, to gain approval, reinforcing behaviors that align with societal trends (Manago et al., 2008). Over time, this prioritization of social approval often leads to designed virtual identities, shaped more by aesthetics and conformity than authenticity. The emphasis on visual appeal and trend adherence further increases the creation of socially accepted, but less authentic, personas (Stapleton et al., 2017).

Psychological Consequences of the Pursuit of Validation: The reliance on social validation in virtual spaces profoundly impacts self-esteem and mental health. Dependence on external feedback, such as likes and comments, often leads individuals to measure self-worth by online approval, causing detrimental effects when validation is inconsistent or negative (Sherman, Greenfield, Hernandez, & Dapretto, 2018). Excessive social media use, particularly among adolescents, has been linked to increased anxiety and depression due to pressures to maintain an ideal image and fear of missing out (Woods & Scott, 2016). Fear of rejection or negative feedback can heighten feelings of inadequacy, disconnecting individuals from their authentic selves. Platforms emphasizing visual content also reinforce unrealistic beauty standards, leading to harmful social comparisons and body dissatisfaction (Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian, & Halliwell, 2015). This impact is pronounced among young women, who often compare themselves to digitally enhanced images of influencers or celebrities, prompting behaviors like excessive dieting or cosmetic alterations (Chua & Chang, 2016).

Consequently, the pursuit of validation develops unrealistic ideals, undermining mental well-being and self-worth.

Reinforcement and Undermining of Digital Identities: Reinforcement and Undermining of Digital Identities: Social validation plays a dual role in shaping digital identities, serving to both reinforce and undermine them. Validation from online communities can foster a sense of belonging and self-assurance, particularly when the virtual self aligns with the offline identity. Positive feedback boosts self-esteem and enhances feelings of social connection, which are crucial for well-being (Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2010). However, the pursuit of constant validation can also undermine the sense of self, as individuals may prioritize their virtual persona over their authentic self. This reliance on external approval often creates a feeling of disconnect, leading to feelings of inadequacy or imposter syndrome (Rogers, 2021).

The pressure to curate an idealized online identity can result in a fragmented sense of self, where individuals struggle to reconcile their online and offline personas. This disconnect is particularly evident when users feel their virtual identity is more of a social construct designed to gain approval rather than a reflection of their true self. Over time, the effort to sustain this misaligned persona can cause emotional exhaustion, as individuals grapple with maintaining a façade that contradicts their real values and emotions (Marwick, 2013). This tension between the need for social validation and the pursuit of authenticity poses a significant psychological challenge in the formation and maintenance of virtual selves.

The Concept of Multiple, Fluid Identities in the Digital Age

In the digital age, identity is fluid and context-dependent, with individuals managing multiple personas across platforms based on audience and environment. Digital spaces like social media, gaming, and professional networks enable the expression of diverse facets of personality, often tailored to fit specific norms. This flexibility contrasts with the more stable, offline identity of the past.

Fluidity of Identity across Platforms: The fluidity of identity in digital spaces is evident in how individuals tailor their self-presentation across platforms. On LinkedIn, they may project a polished, professional persona suited to a career-oriented audience, while on Instagram, they might share a more personal or aspirational version of themselves. Platforms like Reddit or online gaming communities often facilitate anonymous, uninhibited expressions of identity, enabling experimentation and freedom from real-world constraints (Turkle, 1995). Even within the same platform, such as Facebook, users adapt their behavior displaying expertise in professional groups while sharing informal or humorous content in private friend groups. This adaptability emphasizes the context-dependent nature of digital identities, allowing individuals to navigate diverse roles and audiences seamlessly (Baym, 2015).

The Psychological Impact of Managing Multiple Identities: Managing multiple identities across digital platforms offers control over self-presentation but comes with psychological costs. The phenomenon of identity fatigue arises from the mental strain of constantly switching between personas—professional, personal, or anonymous—requiring cognitive effort to meet varying platform expectations (Schlenker, 1985). This stress is heightened by the blurring of online and offline boundaries, where the omnipresence of digital platforms demands round-the-clock management of self-

presentation (Boyd, 2014). Over time, this can lead to exhaustion, confusion, and burnout, especially when online identities diverge significantly from offline selves.

Identity Confusion and the Fragmentation of the Self: Managing multiple digital identities can lead to identity confusion or fragmentation, where individuals feel disconnected from their "true" self, as described by Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, which emphasizes the importance of a coherent identity for psychological well-being (Erikson, 1968). The crafted nature of digital personas, tailored to specific audiences, often results in a dissonance between virtual and real selves, creating feelings of inauthenticity (Gergen, 1991). For instance, a polished professional persona on LinkedIn may conflict with personal struggles, fostering imposter syndrome, while maintaining an adventurous Instagram persona may feel burdensome over time. This tension can lead to psychological distress and challenges in reconciling different self-presentations (Marwick, 2013).

Solving the Complexities of Digital Identity Fluidity: To manage the complexities of digital identity fluidity, individuals often create separate accounts for different aspects of their identity, such as a public Instagram and a private account for closer circles (Boyd, 2014). They also utilize privacy settings to control who sees specific content, reducing the pressure to present a single persona (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Additionally, some adopt anonymous personas in digital spaces like forums or gaming communities, which allow for experimentation and freedom from offline identity constraints (Turkle, 1995). These strategies help manage identity fragmentation and alleviate cognitive load.

Online Communities and the Role of Digital Identity: In the digital age, online communities have become pivotal in shaping and reinforcing individuals' digital identities. These communities encompass a wide range of platforms, including social media groups, gaming clans, interest-based forums, and more. They provide spaces where individuals can connect with like-minded peers, seek validation, and explore interests that may not align with societal expectations in the physical world. Through these interactions, individuals can experiment with various aspects of their identity, allowing for growth and self-discovery in ways that offline environments may not facilitate.

The Role of Online Communities in Digital Identity Formation: Online communities play a crucial role in digital identity formation, as individuals join groups that align with their interests and values, providing a sense of belonging and validation (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). These spaces allow for self-expression and experimentation with various aspects of identity, such as in gaming or artistic communities (Rheingold, 1993). Online environments offer individuals the freedom to explore identities that may be marginalized offline. This freedom develops creativity and supports those seeking to express parts of their identity that may not be in accordance with societal norms.

Validation and Belonging in Digital Spaces: Validation is essential in shaping digital identities, with feedback from online communities reinforcing self-concept through likes, comments, and shares (Maslow, 1943). Online communities meet fundamental human needs for belonging and esteem, offering support and affirmation (Maslow, 1943). Research shows that participation in such communities can improve mental health and personal growth, reducing feelings of isolation (Kummervold et al., 2002). By

connecting with others who share similar challenges, individuals can enhance emotional well-being and learn coping strategies, which can help in identity development.

The Downsides: Echo Chambers and Toxic Behavior: While online communities can support identity development, they can also create echo chambers, where users are exposed only to reinforcing beliefs, limiting critical thinking (Sunstein, 2009). Additionally, these spaces may develop toxic behaviors like group-think, discouraging dissenting opinions and perpetuating exclusionary practices (Janis, 1982). This can be harmful, especially for marginalized identities, leading to discrimination and exclusion. For example, gaming communities sometimes engage in harassment toward those who don't fit traditional gender roles (Kaye & Toronto, 2019). Such negative experiences can impact mental health and lead to withdrawal from online spaces.

Managing the Complexities of Online Communities: To manage the complexities of online communities, individuals can join diverse groups to expose themselves to a broader range of perspectives, helping to counteract the effects of echo chambers (Sunstein, 2009). Engaging with people from different backgrounds or communities that challenge one's viewpoints can foster critical thinking and personal growth. Self-awareness is key in managing online interactions, as individuals reflect on their motivations and make conscious decisions about where to engage, reducing exposure to toxic behaviors (Janis, 1982). Community moderators and platform administrators also play an essential role in fostering positive environments, setting clear guidelines, and promoting inclusivity (Kaye & Toronto, 2019). Addressing toxic behaviors, such as harassment, ensures the protection of vulnerable members and a supportive community.

Opportunities and Challenges of Digital Identity Formation

The digital age has revolutionized how individuals express themselves and explore their identities, offering unique opportunities and challenges. While online platforms provide spaces for self-exploration, connection, and acceptance, they also introduce complexities that can impact individuals' mental well-being and authentic self-representation.

Opportunities for Identity Exploration: The digital age offers significant opportunities for exploring diverse identities, particularly for marginalized groups like LGBTQ+ individuals. Online spaces provide a platform for self-expression and identity affirmation, developing connections with communities that share similar experiences (Russell et al., 2018). Social media enables individuals to design their identities, giving them control over their digital personas (Boyd, 2014). This ability to selectively present oneself empowers underrepresented groups to challenge stereotypes and reshape identity narratives (Shaw & Teneja, 2020). These opportunities enhance resilience and well-being by offering support networks and promoting self-acceptance.

Psychological Benefits of Online Identity Exploration: Exploring digital identities can yield positive psychological outcomes, such as enhanced self-esteem and greater self-acceptance. Engaging with supportive online communities often leads to increased feelings of belonging and reduced anxiety and depression (Ehrenberg et al., 2021). The anonymity of online interactions offers a safe space for individuals to express their thoughts and feelings without fear of

judgment, facilitating further identity exploration. This process can be particularly beneficial for those seeking validation and understanding from peers who share similar experiences.

Challenges of Digital Identity Formation: Despite the opportunities presented by the digital landscape, there are significant challenges in forming digital identities. One major concern is the pressure of constant self-presentation, leading to "performative identity" (Goffman, 1959) where individuals feel compelled to maintain an idealized online version of themselves. This can cause anxiety and self-doubt, especially among younger users, who may struggle with feelings of inadequacy when their online personas do not receive the expected approval (Vogel et al., 2014). Managing multiple identities across different platforms can also result in "identity fatigue," which is the stress and cognitive load associated with navigating contrasting personas (Zhao et al., 2020). Additionally, the risk of cyber-bullying and digital harassment poses a significant threat to users' well-being, leading to severe psychological consequences such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Hinduja & Patchin, 2018). These challenges are particularly harmful for marginalized individuals, as negative experiences can reinforce feelings of isolation and alienation.

The Amplification of Harmful Stereotypes: The digital landscape can also amplify harmful stereotypes and reinforce societal prejudices. Online discourse often reflects broader societal attitudes, leading to the perpetuation of negative narratives surrounding certain identities. Social media platforms can serve as echo chambers, where individuals are exposed primarily to viewpoints that reinforce existing biases, limiting exposure to diverse perspectives (Sunstein, 2009). This dynamic can hinder the formation of authentic identities, as individuals may feel pressured to conform to stereotypes or societal expectations rather than embracing their true selves.

The Psychological Impact of Digital Identity Formation

The construction and maintenance of digital identities have become a significant aspect of contemporary life, impacting individuals' psychological health in various ways. While the digital landscape offers opportunities for self-exploration and connection, it also introduces challenges that can affect mental well-being. This section explores both the positive and negative psychological effects of digital identity formation, highlighting the complex interplay between online personas and real-world identities.

Negative Psychological Effect: One of the significant negative effects of digital identity formation is the pressure to curate an idealized online self, leading to stress and anxiety (Vogel et al., 2014). This "performative identity" involves constantly maintaining an image that aligns with societal expectations, which can be burdensome (Goffman, 1959). The cognitive load of this performance can result in emotional exhaustion and contribute to mental health issues, such as depression (Huang et al., 2020). The desire for social validation also plays a crucial role in psychological well-being, with individuals seeking likes, comments, and shares as measures of self-worth (Tandoc et al., 2015). When negative feedback or a lack of engagement occurs, it can trigger feelings of inadequacy and isolation, exacerbating anxiety and depressive symptoms, especially in adolescents (Frison & Eggermont, 2016). Additionally, the disconnection between online and offline selves can lead to identity fragmentation, causing confusion and distress (Zhao et al., 2020). This internal conflict arises when individuals struggle to reconcile their digital personas with their real-world identities.

Positive Psychological Effects: Despite the challenges, digital identity formation can have positive psychological effects. Online spaces offer a safe environment for self-exploration, enabling individuals to try on different roles and identities, which can lead to increased self-acceptance and a deeper understanding of themselves (Shaw & Teneja, 2020). Anonymity on digital platforms allows for freer expression of thoughts and feelings, reducing the fear of judgment, which is particularly beneficial for marginalized groups like LGBTQ+ individuals (Russell et al., 2018). Participation in supportive online communities can boost self-esteem and provide a sense of belonging, enhancing mental health. Moreover, digital platforms offer opportunities for creative expression, fostering resilience and emotional well-being (Koehler et al., 2020). This creative outlet enables individuals to communicate their identities through various mediums, promoting connection with others. These experiences contribute to personal growth and a more confident sense of self.

Managing Challenges Effectively: To effectively manage the challenges of digital identity formation, individuals can foster awareness of the pressures of online self-presentation and practice mindfulness and self-compassion to balance their online personas (Neff, 2011). Setting boundaries around social media use and engaging in offline activities can reduce cognitive load and reinforce authenticity (Deloitte, 2020). Creating a positive online environment also helps individuals maintain a healthier space for self-expression. Seeking support from friends, family, or mental health professionals can provide tools to manage the psychological challenges of digital identity. Open conversations about identity and self-worth can foster personal growth and resilience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, digital identity formation is a dynamic process that blends self-expression, social validation, and personal growth. Online platforms offer opportunities for exploration, especially for marginalized groups seeking acceptance (Russell et al., 2018). However, the pursuit of social validation can lead to idealized online personas, fostering feelings of inadequacy and anxiety (Tandoc et al., 2015). "Identity fatigue" from managing multiple identities across platforms can strain mental well-being (Zhao et al., 2020). Maintaining self-awareness is a key to adjusting virtual selves with core identities and values. Mindful practices, digital detoxes, and limiting exposure to toxic environments can mitigate social media's negative impact (Deloitte, 2020). Supportive relationships and open dialogues about identity can foster healthier online behaviors (Shaw & Teneja, 2020). Ultimately, authenticity and self-awareness can help individuals cultivate a digital identity that enhances well-being.

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