

Building Virtual Identity Through Social Media

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Abstract—Creating a virtual identity on social media is a product of our engagement with these platforms. Modern technologies have reshaped the concept of identity, leading to the emergence of virtual communities that redefine our traditional notions of self. We now talk about virtual identities or multiple virtual identities, where a person's identity shifts depending on the social media, consciously or unconsciously formed by the user. This study delves into the concept of identity and virtual identity as tools for self-expression, aiming to identify the characteristics of virtual communities and their impact on our social and cultural interactions. It concludes by discussing the challenges facing our virtual identities, such as privacy and security issues, sparking debates about the consequences of integrating into virtual communities.

Keywords— Identity, Virtual identity, Social media, Virtual community.

I. INTRODUCTION

In today's era of rapid technological change, social media platforms play a crucial role in shaping our virtual identities. These platforms offer interactive spaces, freedom to express interests and preferences, and opportunities to create digital personas. Our virtual identities significantly influence our online reputations, reflecting how we see ourselves and how others perceive us. Building a virtual identity involves various factors, such as user activity, shared content, relationships, and the image curated on these platforms. However, this process encounters obstacles like privacy and security concerns and the need to balance privacy with authentic self-expression.

This study explores the creation of virtual identities through social media, examining how these platforms affect personal identity formation and influence our social and cultural behaviors online. It also highlights the challenges digital identities face, focusing on privacy and security issues.

1. Physical Identity and Virtual Identity

Identity is a holistic, personal process reflecting how individuals express themselves and interact with the world. It encompasses cultural, religious, ethnic, and social dimensions, shaped by upbringing, circumstances, and experiences. An individual's identity drives their behavior and biases towards societal issues, forming the foundation of their attitudes and interactions.

Identity is a collection of ideas which we accept as something which belong to us. (Denejkina & Serafimovska, 2018). With the rise of virtual communities¹, our identities have taken on a whole new digital dimension. We now have

¹ According to the Dictionary of Media and Communications, virtual community is a group of people who interact on the Internet, for example in chatrooms, because they share interests or business.

what's called a virtual identity, also known as an online identity or digital identity.

A virtual identity is one generated by the human user that serves as an interface between the real person and the virtual person other users see on their computer screen in online virtual communities, such as online chat rooms or online games. (Webopedia, Beal, 2021). But it's important to remember that this online identity may not always be a true reflection of who we really are.

Virtual identity plays a crucial role in shaping personal identity, allowing individuals to express themselves freely and creatively on social media platforms. Factors like age, gender, culture, education, and life experiences influence identity, making it a dynamic concept that evolves over time.

Creating a virtual identity is akin to crafting a different version of ourselves. This virtual persona, integrated into the digital world, often aims to please others, seeking their admiration and interactions. As a result, virtual identities are usually calculated and disciplined, striving to present the best or most acceptable version of ourselves. This can lead to a dissonance between our physical and virtual identities, as we constantly balance our true selves with our digital representations.

2. The Concept of Identity in Social Media

The borders between the physical and virtual worlds have blurred as people increasingly use the internet, spending significant time on social media platforms that transcend space and time constraints. They engage in virtual experiences and form relationships in digital spaces, often more than in face-to-face interactions, governed by proximity and chance.

The advent of augmented virtual reality,² augmented reality³ and mixed reality⁴ has further enabled individuals to create virtual lives that differ significantly from their physical ones. These technologies allow users to express themselves comfortably, live their dreams, and experience previously unavailable adventures, whether through their real personas or adopted characters.

Judith Donath explores the differences between the real and virtual worlds in her study of "Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community," noting that "In the physical world there is an inherent unity to the self, for the body provides a

² According to Webopedia, Virtual reality is an artificial environment created with computer hardware and software and presented to the user in such a way that it appears and feels like a real environment.

³ Augmented reality (AR) is a technology capable of inserting digital elements into real-world settings to offer consumers and professionals a hybrid experience of reality.

⁴ Mixed reality is the blend of physical and digital worlds to produce new environments and visualizations.

compelling and convenient definition of identity." There are differences in the virtual world. It is not made of matter, but rather of information. Information diffuses and spreads; the law of information conservation does not exist. Donath (1996).

Social media platforms offer unique opportunities for communication and expression. People connect globally, form new friendships, engage in remote romantic relationships, share ideas and experiences freely, and explore new cultures and opinions. They immerse themselves in new environments and participate in activities unavailable in the real world.

Many of the clues and indicators that are present in in-person interactions are absent from online communication. The lack of signals is both a constraint and an asset; while it makes some interactions more challenging, it also gives people more freedom to explore their identities. (Collock & Smith, 1999).

Social media users must balance their virtual experiences with real-life interactions to avoid falling victim to the perceived infinite freedom of digital spaces. Understanding the impact of the virtual world on society enables individuals to make informed decisions about their online behavior and use technology responsibly.

One key feature of virtual communities is the sense of belonging and identity they offer their members. People often form strong bonds and friendships within these communities, sharing common interests and goals. Virtual communities are known for their diversity, bringing together people from different backgrounds, cultures, and locations, enriching societal experiences and creating a new parallel reality.

There is a significant overlap between virtual and physical communities, but virtual communities cannot completely replace real ones. They often rely on partial identities and non-integrated cultures, preventing the formation of strong, sustainable identities and being inherently unstable and constantly changing due to digital interactions.

In conclusion, while virtual communities offer unique opportunities for interaction and evolution, they cannot fully replace physical communities. The challenge lies in leveraging the benefits of virtual communities while maintaining the connections and values that underpin traditional communities.

3. Why Virtual Identity?

Virtual identity serves as a platform for self-expression through real or pseudonymous identities, enabling individuals to share interests and integrate into virtual communities with shared values and concerns. It opens up opportunities for skill and knowledge development, allowing people to share experiences and enhance their professional abilities.

In a professional context, virtual identity helps build a strong digital presence, enhancing personal and professional marketing opportunities. Individuals can showcase their skills and achievements, connect with potential clients and colleagues, and expand their career prospects. Moreover, virtual identity boosts self-confidence through positive online interactions, enabling individuals to share their achievements and receive encouragement and support.

Virtual identity also allows individuals to influence society and participate in social and political campaigns. By raising awareness about important issues and engaging with others, individuals can contribute to positive change and participate in meaningful discussions.

Overall, virtual identity significantly enhances social interaction, learning, professional development, societal impact, and convenience and flexibility in digital life.

4. Categories of digital identity

Declarative identity, acting identity, and computed identity are the three basic types of digital identification. Together, these categories form an interactive identity system where user interactions and self-representations in the virtual world create a cohesive system of interactive identity.

In the following figure about the three categories of digital identity, Fanny Georges focuses on Facebook as the primary example. (Georges 2009)



Figure 1 Facebook: declarative, action and calculated areas (Georges 2009)

Digital identity has been divided into 3 categories (Figs 1, 2, 3):

- (1) "Declarative identity" is constituted by data given by the user during the subscription process and which can be modified (name, birthday, picture etc.);
- (2) "Acting identity" is constituted by mails provided by the system and reporting user actions (requesting a friend etc.);
- (3) "Calculated identity" is constituted by numbers calculated by the system and appearing in the user profile (number of friends, number of groups etc.). Interactive identity is composed neither only of "acting" data (as they are the reflection of the user's interactions), nor of solely "declarative" data (as they are the direct produce of user interactions).

Interactive identity is composed of the whole system, by the medium of the self-representation, and especially the group “name-avatar”, by which the user interacts with the

virtual world. These 3 dimensions of identity are part of a unique sign system of interactive identity.

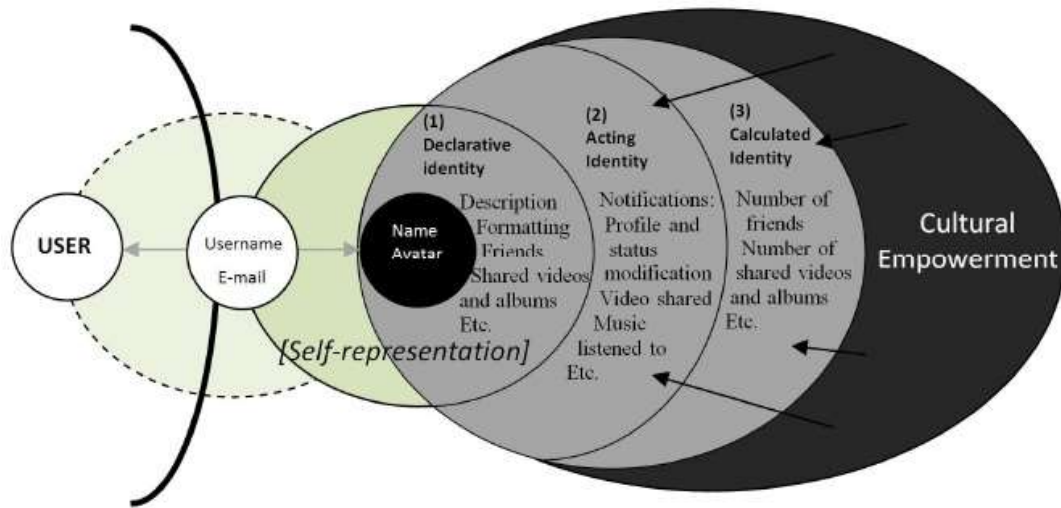


Figure 2 Self-representation and digital identity (Georges 2009)

The same referents may appear in all dimensions of the digital identity. The statement "x is now friends with y" relates to acting identity; the mention of "180 friends" for the referent "friend" relates to calculated identity (number of friends); and the representations of friends (see, for instance, the "autonomous ligator" dyad for a peer) relate to declarative identity (and to Self-representation). These three dimensions of digital identity correspond to three points of view on the same information. A piece of information's life-cycle on a profile page, for instance, begins with an acting notification (the action occurred), and it then concurrently becomes the topic of storage in the declarative zone and is tallied.

5. Virtual Identity Challenges

Despite its advantages, virtual identity also has downsides that can affect individuals and communities. Key challenges include:

	control it, and this leads to serious harm if it is misused.
Interaction with misinformation	Virtual identity can expose individuals to fake news, negatively influencing their decisions and opinions.

Source: Developed by the author

Despite the significant benefits of virtual identity, individuals must be aware of these negative aspects and take steps to protect themselves and manage their virtual identities responsibly.

II. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, virtual identity is a crucial element in modern life, playing a significant role in personal and professional identity formation and development. It provides a platform for self-expression, enables the building of new social and professional relationships, and enhances access to educational resources. Through virtual identity, individuals can connect with diverse communities, exchange ideas, and participate in discussions and campaigns on a large scale.

Virtual identity also enhances personal and professional marketing opportunities, allowing individuals to showcase their skills and achievements innovatively. It provides flexibility, enabling a better balance between personal and professional lives, increasing comfort and productivity.

However, these benefits come with challenges and risks. Privacy and digital security are major concerns, as privacy violations can have serious consequences. Issues like cyberbullying, counterfeiting, and plagiarism require awareness and preventive measures. Over-reliance on virtual identities can reduce real-life social interactions, impacting communication skills and relationship-building.

Negative psychological effects from social comparisons and the pursuit of acceptance on digital platforms can lead to anxiety and depression. Digital security and loss of control

TABLE 1. Virtual Identity Challenges

Issue	Description
Privacy concerns	People's personal data may be vulnerable to hacking or theft, which often results in it being used for illegal purposes.
Cyberbullying	Anonymity in virtual identities can facilitate harassment, causing significant psychological harm, especially to young people.
Over-reliance on virtual identities	This can reduce real-life social interactions, affecting communication skills and the ability to build strong real-life relationships.
Counterfeiting and plagiarism	Some people may impersonate others for malicious purposes, which leads to legal and ethical prosecutions and misleading others.
Mental health impact	Excessive social media use can lead to anxiety and depression due to constant social comparisons and the pursuit of acceptance.
Loss of control over information	Virtual identities can be targeted by hackers seeking personal or financial information, requiring strong security measures.
Digital security	Once an individual posts certain information on the Internet, it becomes difficult for him to delete it or

over personal information are also significant challenges that need ongoing attention and protection.

Ultimately, virtual identity holds great potential for enhancing communication, learning, and personal and professional growth, but it requires conscious and responsible management. By adopting strong digital security practices, staying aware of potential challenges, and taking proactive steps to protect privacy and security, we can leverage the opportunities of virtual identity while minimizing its risks, enhancing our digital experience, and making it safer and more positive for everyone.

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