

# ***Self-Discrepancy: The Discrepancy Between Digital Identity and Real Identity on Social Media and Its Psychological Impact***

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**Abstract:** With the rise of social media, more and more individuals are particularly concerned with the definition of digital identity concepts— how a person builds their self image on the virtual world. This false identity is always at variance with one's actual self and can pose therapeutic effects. The objective of this study is to evaluate the difference between the digital identity and the real one and the effect that those differences have on mental health. We employed a mixed methods approach to measures the difference between how participants presented themselves online and how they perceive themselves physically by means of questionnaires and content analysis. Our results shown such differences exist about mental health variables self-esteem, anxiety, and also depression. Participants indicated that it was challenging to avoid feeling the need to project an ideal self. This pressure applied for, negative impression towards self, and increase in anxiety within participants. This study stressed about the need to understand why there are differences in one's digital identity from their real one and the possible effects on the persons health suggesting that the fact that actual self is often obscured by the self 'marketed' online affects people's health. Importantly, by addressing these issues, our research extends the discussion on mental health in the age of e-technology and calls for an increasing recognition of the adverse effects of social media on health and, more importantly, strategies to reduce them.

**Keywords:** digital identity, real identity, social media, psychological impact, self-esteem.

## **1. Introduction**

Self-Discrepancy: The Discrepancy Between Digital Identity and Real Identity on Social Media and Its Psychological Impact

According to the self-discrepancy hypothesis, people act in ways that lessen the difference between who they are and who they should or would want to be [1]. Previous research has investigated the connections between various self-discrepancies and people's conduct in a variety of settings and from a variety of angles [2]. While there's a psychological impact caused by the self-discrepancy [3]. This

literature review examines the Discrepancy Between Digital Identity and Real Identity on social media and Its Psychological Impact.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Factors that affect people's digital identity construction**

With the explosive development of various social platforms, people can fully show themselves to the public on social platforms. This means that some people will create a digital identity for themselves. This digital identity may not be very different from the real identity, but it may also be completely different from its own real identity. So, what factors affect people's digital identity construction?

First is the effect of the internet. With the advent of social networking, we have more tools to get a better handle on what we want, and individuals are released from the limitations of their physical surroundings and bodies thanks to the anonymity of cyberspace. People feel less under pressure from societal standards and experience less surveillance while they are online. Furthermore, a person's psychological condition is crucial for the rebuilding of their online identity.

Teens who are lonely are more likely than their non-lonely peers to investigate their identity through online identity reconstruction [4]. Loneliness is also positively correlated with online identity experiments. We try to create identities that will continue to fit inside communities since we are shaped from birth to fit into this culture.

While on the internet and online games, players can create a virtual identity. The study found that, on average, players think their characters are more extroverted and conscientious than themselves, and this trend is more obvious among those who are more depressed and introverted. This means that players with low mental health tend to create more favorable characters in online games than real attributes, which promotes them to rebuild their online game identities more frequently to perform an identity they wish they were - their ideal self.

Self-esteem is also a key factor [5]. Self-esteem refers to an individual's overall evaluation and attitude towards their worth. Individuals with high self-esteem are usually more confident in their true image and tend to present their authentic selves on digital platforms [6], whereas those with low self-esteem are more likely to modify or distort their image to gain external recognition and self-validation.

Furthermore, the positive effect of building a digital identity may also be a factor that affects people's digital identity formation. Developing our screen personas can aid in self-discovery and the strengthening of our offline identities. It also provides a platform for self-expression, which helps us feel more authentic when we are wearing a variety of virtual masks. [7] This increases our confidence and affirms our interests when we use Social Network Sites because we start to see other people using the same SNS as them, which helps us feel less alone and more like a part of a community.

### **2.2. The formation of self-discrepancy**

Ego difference refers to the gap between actual self and self-guidance. According to the theory of self-difference, the more self-different an individual is, the more uncomfortable they will feel. It is believed that people's behavior is oriented towards reducing self-differences [2], thereby alleviating discomfort and negative emotions.

The advent of the Internet has changed the way people express themselves and interact with others, which may affect people's self-differences on the Internet. Individuals can take advantage of the characteristics of the Internet to selectively and strategically present themselves online [8]. As a result, individuals can construct their own identity in a virtual space, freely creating a virtual online self. For example, on social networking sites, people may manipulate their photos to create a more desirable image. In online games, players can choose or construct different game characters. Additionally, users

may readily contact other people and acquire a variety of information online. Their self-guide may be influenced by the fresh knowledge and social networks they find online. In this instance, people's self-discrepancy in the online environment may be influenced by the Internet as it may alter how they display their self-concept and how their self-guide is formed. Research indicates that individuals become more self-conscious about their body type when they are exposed to idealized photographs on social media platforms and to slender, idealized models in internet marketing. Individuals frequently experience a larger self-distortion when they contrast themselves with the idealized pictures they see online. [9,10]

The primary determinants of self-discrepancy formation are personality traits. According to research on online games, individuals with higher levels of openness and extraversion choose avatars in video games that are less unlike themselves, while introverts prefer characters that are more like themselves but still have room for growth. Furthermore, gender and cultural variations influence how self-differences arise [11]. When looking at skinny photographs on Instagram, female users are more likely to feel unhappy with their body type and experience increased self-discrepancy [2]. suggested that compared to their American counterparts, Chinese female college students show more body image self-discrepancy.

### 2.3. Impact of people's digital identity

In the digital age, social media provides a new interpretive path for identity construction and identification. In this path, the meaning of identity category flows, and the construction of individual identity no longer depends on the habitual form of "who I am", but constantly breeds the preset expectation of "who I want to be". Among these proliferating identity categories, digital identity has an important impact on the development of identity meaning, becoming "a void body and a virtual data surrogate" for today's social media users [12].

The research on "digital identity" can be traced back to the prediction of American psychologist Erikson in 1968, who proposed that the consciousness of self-identity establishment is based on "the perception of self-identity and continuity" [2], which subsequently triggered the discussion on the construction of digital identity and multiple identities in the academic circle. Particularly prominent is the analysis in the framework of Western philosophy and phenomenology, which regards digital identity as "the sum of information traces generated by individuals' online activities" [13], and derives concepts such as "algorithmic identity", "data subjectivity" and "virtual identity". In recent years, domestic scholars have also studied digital identity, but no consensus has been reached, mainly including exploring the function of digital identity as "self-identification and carrying personal information" [14], in the context of technology and interpreting the negative effects of "digital identity theft, easy traceability, and identity loss" [15], from the perspective of media ethics.

Although there are numerous studies on social media and individual identity construction at home and abroad, most of them regard social media as a tool for information communication and social mobilization, ignoring its potential functions for social and online identity construction [16], especially the discussion on the phenomenon of digital identity anxiety is still lacking.

There is no doubt that "digital identity anxiety" will be a common social media symptom in the future. On the one hand, digital identity anxiety reflects an individual's continuous "abstract feeling of self-expression as flow" in the social space with data as the unit of measurement [17]. On the other hand, it also refers to the individual "survival worries" caused by various technical filters. Therefore, how individuals, others and groups view and adapt to digital identity anxiety is an important and profound cross-era proposition. On this basis, this paper attempts to sort out and discuss the representation, formation mechanism, and adjustment strategies of digital identity anxiety in social media to respond to the needs of reality.

The use of technology and social media has resulted in the development of an online identity that may be different from the actual identity. People have been studying its effects on psychological and mental health due to this separation of online and offline. For one thing is because when on internet social platforms, an individual is always in control of what he or she posts hence the duality of digital and real-life identities. As cited by Chua & Chang and Halpern et al. [18,19], people strive to create an idealized alter ego online and can, therefore, suffer from a disconnect between their online persona and their offline self, which may lead to a feeling of inauthenticity and self-uncertainty.

Moreover, digital communication is a virtual environment making it possible for a human being to be able to practice or say something on the Web that he or she cannot do in a face-to-face environment [20]. According to the book written by Cheng [21] published in 2019, such division results in numerous consequences for mental health because of the unsureness of the self and the problem with self-consistency.

Social comparison—given that people are more likely to compare themselves with others virtually—is another way that digital identity threatens mental health. Numerous studies have demonstrated that those who spend a lot of time on social media and observe how others appear to have a perfect life can experience symptoms of anxiety and melancholy as well as increased jealousy and low self-esteem [22]. Additionally, using technology separates oneself from real life both physically and temporally. This leads to emotions of loneliness and isolation, which have been linked to negative impacts on mental health.

However, the relationship between digital identity and mental health is not entirely negative. Much research has also proved that digital platforms can provide opportunities for social support, self-expression, and the formation of meaningful connections, which have positive effects on mental well-being [23,24].

Overall, it's clear from what we've read that our online personalities have a big impact on our real-life identity, and if they don't match up, it can have some serious consequences for our mental health and overall well-being. Dealing with these challenges is no easy task. It's a complex issue that involves considering the difference between digital technology and how it affects our mental wellness both as individuals and in society.

#### **2.4. People's hope to achieve by establishing an online identity**

In modern society, it is very common for people to communicate on the internet. Especially when people communicate online, they are likely to hide their real identities and create and manage online personas, such as on Facebook and TikTok. Everyone has an online identity, which is represented by the username chosen and the details about oneself that one does or does not reveal. The role avatars one plays in online communities are all important aspects of how people manage their identity in the digital realm. For this phenomenon, this article wants to discuss whether we can find the aspect of the real identity of online personas. How to create a web identity and what to expect by doing so are also topics to be explored.

The section on how individuals use online environments to identify specific social identities in their identity development primarily deals with sexuality and ethnicity. First, when it comes to sex, research has shown that adolescents who identify as sexual minorities are more comfortable expressing their sexuality and connecting with others in online settings than offline [25]. The study also found that they can transfer aspects of their identity that they explore and develop online to an offline environment, which is important for identity development and well-being [25]. In reviewing research on minorities, it has been suggested that online environments may reinforce an individual's racial identity by making environments other than offline ones available [25]. Research has shown that individuals from ethnic minorities tend to emphasize cultural aspects in their online self-presentations.

Research on Facebook has shown that people's profiles reflect their true personalities [26], but a common factor also seems to be the socially expected and acceptable presentation of self [27]. The findings suggest that the extreme and sometimes negative portrayals of self on social media may not necessarily reflect the users' true personalities. The study also found that people adjust their online self-presentation based on their imagined audience, while online impression management [27] is carried out by choosing the content of display [27], and by removing material displayed by others that relates to oneself [27]. Together, these studies on SNS use suggest that certain online environments may lead to increased self-awareness and advanced strategies for impression management.

Impression management as a term was first conceptualized in 1959 and has since been redefined [28], as a "test loop for controlling projected images in real or imagined social interactions" [28] suggests that impressions may be managed by means other than self-presentation. For example, an individual's impression may be managed by a third party, but the process always consists of two components: impression motivation and impression construction [29]. On the other hand, personal branding Visualization is often combined with impression management as an active part of the planning process. In other words, "personal branding" is seen as the way people market themselves and their careers, like how companies do it. Presenting yourself online through a personal web page, blog or social networking site requires a purposeful selection of words, pictures, graphics, and audio to create an impression. This was not done by accident. [29] believe that actions are necessary to form a personal image and that people make purposeful decisions about the way their actions and the actions of others are organized and categorized. [29] describes the once popular online social networking site Myspace as a system of "presence" - individual presence in a social context. This concept of an online presence blurs the line between the individual and the online space. A person is the content of every online profile, and every profile represents that person 24 hours a day.

Today, individuals form a digital identity by "introducing" themselves to others on social networking sites (SNS). Social networks embody the ability of users to customize their digital identity at will and reveal desirable elements of their personality. We can roughly tell people's religious beliefs or family customs from the online identities they present on social networks. Because there are more social platforms and online social networking is becoming more popular, people analyze personal experiences, create an online presence, and expand their perception of social identity. Many times, the establishment of online identities enables individuals to present their social selves rather than controlling and manipulating their identities. The choices adult users make are more often about connecting with others than about self-promotion.

### 3. Methodology

The overarching theme of our scholarly inquiry is the disparity between digital identity and real identity on social media platforms, together with its psychological repercussions. We aim to quantify this discrepancy with the intent of delving into the consequences of such differences on mental health.

Our research methodology employs a survey questionnaire, which constitutes a quantitative investigation due to its concentration on the gathering and examination of numerical data. In order words, we utilize statistical evidence/charts to convey our findings. Furthermore, we conduct surveys to scrutinize the underlying factors contributing to a specific phenomenon. Owing to the necessity to digitize our data and employ these digits in our analysis, our conclusions enjoy a high level of reliability. Given our choice to collect data through a questionnaire method, we developed a comprehensive set of 23 questions for the questionnaire. The underlying concept of these questions was to elicit responses from participants, aiming to identify correlations between identity disparities and mental well-being. The survey was distributed on June 24th and concluded on July 1st, covering



a duration of seven days. All participants in the survey participated voluntarily, and their identities were kept confidential throughout the entire process.

Given the stringent demands of quantitative research on data quality and the necessity for representative sampling, we engaged in a discourse regarding the selection of a suitable platform for sample collection. Ultimately, we resolved to obtain samples from the WeChat Moments feature. The primordial rationale for this choice is the assurance of sample authenticity, stemming from the predominance of responses provided by individuals known to us within the WeChat dataset. The second rationale is that conducting a survey across massive platforms such as TikTok or Weibo would entail substantial challenges in acquiring statistically significant data, rendering the sample insufficiently representative. This predicament arises due to potential disparities in cultural norms across various regions, coupled with significant age variations that could be proximate to discrepancies in data outcomes. Our research amassed a total of 175 subjects, predominantly aged 35 or below, with a majority being female.

Eventually, the data compiled from the survey questionnaire represents secondary data sources. We employed a software application entitled "Wenjuanxing" for the distribution of the survey questionnaire. Once the sample respondents completed their responses, this program facilitated our statistical analysis of the data, generating charts that were derived from each question and its corresponding answers. We can extricate the desired information from this dataset, evaluate the options with the predominant percentages within each issue, examine the correlations among these predominant options, scrutinize the influence of social media on mental well-being, and ultimately align our findings with the overarching theme of our research.

We also conducted a pilot test of the research tools before the formal data collection process. First, we tested the feasibility and effectiveness of the survey design. It can ensure the conceptual definitions and measurement indicators in the questionnaire can effectively capture the research topic. Additionally, it helped us to evaluate the appropriate length of the questionnaire to prevent respondent fatigue and attrition. Second, assessing the suitability of the data collection methods. It helped us to ensure the data collection process is smooth and free of technical issues. Third, it helped us to identify potential issues and optimize the research tools, which is to discover any logical errors or inappropriate elements in the questionnaire. Pilot tests are the key to ensuring the accuracy and credibility of the research findings.

The data analysis methods and process for this study on the differences between digital identity and real-life identity and their psychological effects are calculating the overview of the sample, the correlation analysis, and the regression to predict relationships. We are using this method for three reasons. First, it provides us with a foundational understanding of the data and samples. Second, it helps us to explore the association between the central concept of interest. Finally, it allows us to examine the unique contribution of digital and real-life identities in predicting mental health outcomes. To strengthen our validity, we checked for potential issues and the survey's reliability.

## **4. Findings and discussions**

### **4.1. Demographics**

Today, social media has become an important part of People's Daily lives. Not only has it changed the way people communicate, but it has also had a profound impact on an individual's identity and mental health. Using quantitative and qualitative methods, this study explores the differences between digital and real identities on social media and their psychological effects. Using questionnaires and in-depth interviews, we collected data from 175 participants, aiming to reveal the psychological dynamics behind social media use.

The qualitative findings revealed significant differences between the digital identities participants presented on social media and their real identities. Many participants reported that their image on social platforms was more popular, fashionable, confident, and beautiful than reality. For example, one participant mentioned: "My image on social media is always more perfect than in reality, which makes me feel stressed, but it also brings me satisfaction." This difference not only affects how they perceive themselves but can also trigger anxiety and self-doubt. Participants also expressed a desire for the perfect image presented on social media. They create an idealized self-image through retouching and selective presentation. One participant explained: 'I do a lot of retouching because I want people to see me at my best.' This behavior not only reflects society's pursuit of beauty but also reveals individuals' self-presentation strategies on social media.

Qualitative findings were further supported by quantitative data. The data shows that most participants (73.71%) consider social media to be "somewhat important" or "very important" in their lives, indicating that the role of social media in their daily lives cannot be ignored. In addition, the time spent on social media was also considerable, with 46.29% of participants spending 1-3 hours per day, 33.71% of participants spending 3-5 hours per day, and 15.43% of participants spending more than 5 hours per day. In terms of the frequency of social media use, the data shows that 28.57% of people update several times a week, 21.71% once a week, and 19.43% once a few weeks. This suggests that participants were more active on social media and that frequent updates and interactions may have exacerbated their reliance on digital identities.

Of the 175 respondents, 59.43% were female (n=104), 37.71% were male (n=66), and 2.29% were non-binary (n=4). 57.63% (n=101) of the respondents were under the age of 18, 12.57% (n=22) were between the ages of 18 and 24, and 29.72% (n=52) were over the age of 24. A majority of the sample reported that 99.43% (n=) considered social media to be important to their lives. 46.29%(n=81) use social media for 1-3 hours, 33.71%(n=59) use social media for 3-5 hours, and 15.43% (n=27) use social media for more than 5 hours. The most used social media platforms are TikTok (93.14%), WeChat (92%), Kuai Shou (69.14%), The Little Red Book (56.57%) and QQ (36%). 21.72%(n=38) update at least once a day on social platforms, 50.28%(n=88) update at least once a week on social platforms, and 64.57%(n=113) often post their personal photos. After they posted the retouched photos, 56%(n=98) of respondents reported occasional appearance anxiety and 4%(n=7) reported frequent appearance anxiety. The survey results also showed that 49.71%(n=87) of respondents believe that the difference between their social media self and their real self will make them happier, 18.86% of respondents will increase anxiety, and 5.41% will weaken their mental health.

## 4.2. Results

Analyzing this data, we can see that the difference between digital and real identities on social media has complex implications for an individual's mental health. On the one hand, social media provides a platform to show the ideal self, which may enhance an individual's self-confidence and happiness. On the other hand, however, such displays can also lead to anxiety and self-doubt, especially when individuals fail to live up to the ideal standards they have set.

Comparing these findings with the work of others, we can see similar trends. Our study further supports the idea that the difference between self-presentation on social media and your real self can trigger anxiety and depression and provides more concrete data to support it." In addition, our research reveals a relationship between frequency of social media use and mental health. Frequent use of social media may increase an individual's anxiety and self-doubt, while moderate use may help maintain mental health.

### 4.3. Discussion

This study examined the literature on the effects of individual self-differences on individual psychology and discovered that, by enabling people to freely express their self-concepts and influencing the development of self-guidance, the Internet can have an impact on individual self-differences in the network world. Previous research has mostly examined how self-difference affects impression management and virtual image construction activity. Most of these studies have discovered a positive relationship between the factors that lead to self-difference and network activities. Even though previous research has examined the impact of self-difference on network behavior and individual psychology from many angles, there are still several limitations in the current body of work.

First and foremost, more should be done to investigate the true self and the effects of differences. As an example, consider Stewart and Clayton, 2021. Most of the examined research has concentrated on the real self-ideal self-difference and the virtual self-difference. Research on genuine self-supposed disparities is scarce. Due self is a crucial component of people's self-guidance, according to the notion of self-difference. Anxiety and self-disrespect are two excitement-related feelings that might arise from the gap between the real and imagined selves [1]. Thus, one intriguing avenue for future study would be to examine how individuals manage adverse experiences resulting from perceived self-differences rather than from their true selves.

Second, little study has been done on self-differences from the viewpoint of other people. The current body of research primarily examines individual self-differences from the perspective of the person and assesses the variations between various self-concepts from the standpoint of the individual. Individual conduct is also significantly influenced by the expectations and perceptions of significant people. The should-other-self and ideal-other-self are crucial elements of self-guidance, according to the theory of self-difference.

Third, more research must be done on how self-differences affect people's behavior over the long run. To investigate whether persistent self-differences have a detrimental impact on people's actions and attitudes, such as work performance, mental health, and life satisfaction, longitudinal research is required.

### 4.4. Future studies

The field of virtual influencers is constantly developing, as well as the continuous improvement and progress of network technology. These technologies have greatly improved the ability of creation, and at the same time, the virtual digital identity on the network has been enriched and developed, which also makes people rely on the virtual network world, and then the long-term use of virtual identity will have a certain psychological impact on their real identity. This paper mainly studies the impact of identity differences on psychology.

While studying identity differences, we read and analyzed other relevant articles and studies to learn their understandings and concepts of virtual identity, real identity, and the differences between them. The difference in our study is that while other people's descriptions and definitions of virtual identities and identity differences are basically for video games, our study focuses on the differences before and after retouching, as well as the psychological effects of these differences. Since our study only focused on the psychological impact of the differences before and after map modification, later scholars can pay more attention to the impact of identity differences on their behaviors, such as social behaviors and interpersonal relationships.



## 5. Conclusion

When delving into the core findings and contributions of this study, we must carefully acknowledge and elaborate on its potential limitations to ensure academic rigor and provide directions for future research:

(1) The challenge of inherent bias that is difficult to eliminate poses a significant obstacle for this study. Despite our efforts to design the questionnaire with objectivity and neutrality in mind, it is undeniable that respondents' subjective judgments and personal experiences deeply affect their responses. This subjectivity is not only reflected in the perception of differences between "electronic identity" and "real identity" but may also involve internal interpretations of self-image, societal expectations, and moral standards. Therefore, even though we have taken measures (such as anonymous surveys) to mitigate this impact, respondents' subjective biases may still distort the data to some extent, limiting the universality of the conclusions.

(2) The limitations of the questionnaire content are also a shortcoming of this study. Our research focuses on the specific domain of "electronic identity after the P graph" and "real identity in reality," which, while helpful in exploring the complexity and variability of identity construction in cyberspace, also overlooks the broader, multidimensional interactions between electronic identity and real identity. For example, electronic identity may also involve role-playing on social media, identity identification in virtual communities, and the potential influence of online behavior on real-life behavior. This limitation in content restricts our comprehensive understanding of the relationship between electronic identity and real identity.

(3) The limitations imposed by the restricted sample size significantly affect the generalizability and reliability of the findings of this study. Although we endeavored to ensure a diverse and representative sample, the conclusions derived from a dataset comprising solely 175 respondents may raise concerns regarding their universality and stability. A smaller sample size may not adequately capture the heterogeneity and individual differences present within the broader population, potentially resulting in an increased margin of statistical error. Consequently, future research should prioritize expanding the sample size, implementing more comprehensive sampling methodologies, and engaging in cross-regional and cross-cultural comparative studies. These measures will be essential for enhancing the credibility and widespread applicability of research outcomes.

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