

Exploring The Role of Online Identity on Self Identity Among Young Adults in Malaysia

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Abstract

In today's networked society, social media has become a key platform for identity performance, affecting how individuals perceive and present themselves. To explore the influence of online identity on self-identity among Malaysian young adults, 13 participants aged 18 to 34 were interviewed after being recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. The thematic analysis revealed that these young adults perceived their online identity as a curated form of identity, highlighting selective authenticity and curated positivity while concealing unfavourable aspects of themselves. The findings also show that the challenges faced in managing online identities include identity conflict, cultural constraints and misinterpretation within Malaysia's multicultural context. Furthermore, online identity was found to profoundly impact self-identity revealing two contradictory outcomes, namely entrapment of self-identity in online validation, where self-worth becomes inseparable from online feedback, and empowerment through online expression that boosts confidence. This research offers a culturally embedded understanding of how cyberspace shapes self-perception among Malaysian young adults. It advances existing digital identity scholarship and provides valuable insights for policymakers, mental health experts, social media designers and educators in promoting safer and more authentic online spaces.

1. Introduction

The internet has redefined self-expression, extending identity from face-to-face interactions into digital spaces by allowing people to present different versions of themselves online. Online platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and Facebook allow users to select stories, images and content in ways that reflect how they want to be perceived by others. According to Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory, identity is a performance in which people control how they appear in social settings. While traditionally perceived as a fixed notion by occupation, class and societal roles (Miller, 2013), identity is now acknowledged as contextual and adaptable specifically in digital environments where people can experiment with multiple aspects of themselves without the limitations of offline self (Pisano et al., 2017). Such flexibility introduces tension, as individuals navigate between authentic self-expression and socially desirable image.

Online identity, which is the distinctive set of traits that represents a person in a cyberspace (Kim et al., 2011), often deviates from offline identity, indicating selective ways people present themselves. While self-concept denotes an internalised understanding of one's identity and self-identity represents personal meaning and social belonging, online identity captures the performative trait of the self within online platforms (Abdul Rahman et al., 2023). Social media has reshaped identity management into a deliberate practice of curation and validation-seeking (Kim, 2018). Through this selective construction of the online self, individuals evaluate their personal value and explore various ways of expressing themselves, making it harder to distinguish between 'real' and shaped identities.

Young adulthood (ages 18-34) is defined by emotional regulation and sensitivity to social approval (Roberts, 2020). As digital natives, young adults actively craft their digital presence through reels, stories and aesthetic feeds (Olejniczak, 2022). Identity at this stage evolves across online and offline settings (Subrahmanyam and Šmahel, 2011), positive online self-presentation can strengthen self-concept and self-identity (Michikyan, 2020). However, over-reliance on external validation may weaken the boundary between genuine self and curated selves, especially when individuals rely on social feedback to assess their self-worth. Compulsive social media use has been linked to decline in mental health and performance (Li et al., 2021; Manjula, 2023) and amplifies conflicts between online and offline identities (Andreassen et al., 2017). The influential role of peers, intensified through online platforms, provides instantaneous feedback that guides identity exploration.

Malaysian young adults use social media as a platform to communicate, socialise and to stay informed about global events (Muhamad & Shahrom, 2020). Research on this population remains scarce, often examining adolescents or pre-pandemic platforms (Pawanteh, 2003; Husin, 2015). The rapid integration of digital tools has outpaced policy and scholarship (Granic et al., 2020), and the COVID-19 pandemic further influenced online identity construction (Victor et al., 2024). Malaysia's collectivist culture, which prioritizes familial expectations, cultural values and social harmony add nuance online self-expression, resulting in identity formation that is both individual and socially negotiated.

This study addresses the growing discrepancy between offline and online identities. Online social profiles provide unprecedented control over individual's online identity, enabling them to present themselves in specific ways to social media followers (Mazur & Li, 2016), yet this freedom comes at a psychological cost. Reliance on online validation may weaken self-identity, fostering confusion, self-doubt, and emotional vulnerability (Senekal et al., 2022). Questions integral to self-identity in particular "Who am I?", "How do others see me?" and "Where do I belong?" (Hällgren, 2019) become increasingly challenging to be answered in digitally curated spaces.

Building on this understanding, the study investigates (i) perceptions of online identity among Malaysian young adults, (ii) challenges in managing online and offline identities and (iii) the influence of online identity on self-identity. Locating the research in Malaysia's collectivistic context contributes a culturally grounded understanding of digital identity, providing insights for educators, policymakers and mental health professionals.

2. Methodology

2.1 Method and Design

This study adopted qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of Malaysian young adults in managing their online identities and the ways these identities influence their own self-identity. Qualitative research method was selected because it does not only provide answers but also reflects the reality of the phenomena under study (Nassaji, 2020).

Phenomenology was particularly fitting as it zeroes in on individuals' lived experiences and the influence of additional elements including gender, culture and wellbeing (Cresswell, 2017). Considering that identity is intrinsically personal and developed through subjective interpretations, phenomenology offered the most fitting approach to capture on how young adults build, navigate and experience both their offline and online selves.

Semi structured interviews were applied, as they enable the researcher to ask probing questions to explore deeper into the nuances of self-identity and online identity among young adults (Wilson, 2014).

2.2 Sample and Location

This research recruited 13 individuals aged 18 to 34 years, an age group that signifies the important developmental growth of young adulthood. During this period, young individuals are known to go through pivotal transformations and challenges (Stroud et al., 2015; Rumbaut, 2004). Thirteen Malaysian participants who actively curated their online identity were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling to ascertain representation of diverse backgrounds to capture varied perspectives across gender, geographic locations and cultural groups. Sourcing participants from different states of Malaysia allowed the study to document diverse lived experiences that illustrate the nation's regional and cultural heterogeneity.

2.3 Research Procedure

The ethical considerations for this study were considered, and the study's ethical procedures were approved by the Ethics Committee of Asia Pacific University (Reference No.: APUFE/11/2025). Participants received an information letter and consent form to affirm their voluntary participation in the study. They were well-informed about their role as a participant and their right to withdraw at any point if they encountered discomfort. One-to-one semi structured interviews were conducted in both face to face and online to explore the lived experiences of young adults on the influence of online identity on self-identity. Interviews spanned around 45 to 60 minutes and were guided by a semi-structured framework that covered perceptions of online identity, challenges in managing online identity and the influence of online identity and self-identity. To guarantee confidentiality, each participant was provided with a pseudonym.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach to thematic analysis. First, transcripts were read multiple times to familiarise with the interview content, enabling a detailed understanding of participants' perspectives. Subsequently, inductive coding was conducted and the resulting codes were organized into preliminary themes. These themes were then refined through an iterative process of discussion and comparison to confirm that participants' lived experiences were captured accurately. To strengthen the trustworthiness and credibility of the analysis, reflexive journaling and peer debriefing were used throughout the research process.

3. Results

3.1 Perception of Malaysian Young Adults on Online Identity

The findings indicate that 11 out of 13 participants described their online identity was made up of selective authenticity. In essence, participants were not fully authentic in their online expression and actively decide on which parts of themselves to display online. At times, their primary focus was on their interests like hobbies and sports. Sometimes, they were selectively authentic to protect their real self. Moreover, participants also viewed their online self and offline self as two distinct things.

"I rarely post it online. And mainly I will just limit my post to regarding my hobby or regarding my favorite stuff where of course I enjoying having to do in real life. I enjoy the moment, so I rarely try to put myself on what I enjoy to the online world, the content. Yeah.." (Participant 01)

Participants also agreed that they preferred to be seen in a positive light by others. They made conscious efforts to highlight the best aspects of themselves and omit the flaws to be seen as positive and happy individuals. They also perceived their online identity as the idealized versions of themselves. Participants stated that they strived for perfection, and they deliberately tailored their online identity to look perfect and picturesque.

"Um, it's different as in people would think that my life is very good. Like they don't see the struggles– I think I mentioned it up there just now. Previously they only see the good side. So, they know how your life seems so perfect. You seem so happy. Yeah. You seem so active. Something like that." (Participant 11)

Participants viewed their online identity as a more positive version of themselves. Conversely, their self-identity was naturally flawed and faced more challenges in the real life which can also be viewed as a backstage of their lives.

3.2 Challenges Faced by Malaysian Young Adults in Managing Online Identity

Notably, seven out of thirteen participants talked on how their self-identity and online identity were conflicting with each other. The contrast between social expectations and self-expression brought struggles in maintaining authenticity with the strong desire to be accepted in online and offline.

Besides, participants also felt that they must constantly be seen as professional individuals in social media to match their respective career expectations.

"Previously, when I was still quite active in clubs and also active online then I will feel like oh, I need to post often to show that I'm doing something in uni or like I'm constantly learning or developing myself, or at least I'm enjoying life." (Participant 11)

About seven participants expressed cultural constraints in online expression as a challenge that they were facing in managing their online identity. The fear of being judged or backlash from their respective cultures, forced them to push the aspects of their true selves aside and obey cultural norms. Young adults admitted they refrained from voicing out freely on political and controversial matters online due to their deep-rooted cultural conditioning.

"My culture also don't encourage to react about the politics things because it's really sensitive issue." (Participant 07)

Eight out of thirteen participants reported that their online identities were almost always misconstrued. There were also times that they were misunderstood as an introverted person or an extroverted person in real life based on their online identity. At times, activities on social media were misinterpreted and shaped how they were perceived in terms of value and behavior. The false portrayals of their online self have induced self-doubt and confusion in young adults.

"That's something like. Mostly since I'm a female, I will post about the problems I face as female, so most people would think I'm a complete feminist. Like I, I hate men. Something like that. That's the main thing I always face. But to be honest, I... As a female I don't know what the men will face. But sometimes, I do know certain problem men face I do post that too." (Participant 06)

Many young adults also felt the pressure to modify their online identity to avoid false assumption and rumours which can also be considered a perceptual quicksand as it is very easy to completely lose oneself in this.

3.3 The Influence of Online Identity on Self-Identity of Malaysian Young Adults

Eleven participants admitted that their self-identity was entrapped in online validation. The attachment to online validation destroyed the way young adults saw themselves and restricted authentic self-expression. Participants noted that they became overthinkers in real life to create a single post on social media. This incessant self-doubt eroded their self-confidence and obstructed quick decision abilities.

In certain instances, young adults looked for assurance of their normalcy or correctness through the feedback they received on social media. The validation they received from likes and comments temporarily verified their stances and beliefs and shaped the way they saw themselves.

"Or anything. So, if I got a positive comment or feedback so it's such a soothing for me, you know? Like, oh, we have the same opinion. So, I'm a normal. I'm a normal person, so I can lift myself a little bit more." (Participant 08)

Apart from that, social comparison is inescapable when young adults derived happiness and satisfaction from comparing themselves to others online. This caused many young adults to feel inferior when they observed others as more attractive, successful or leading perfect lives compared to them.

4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate how Malaysian young adults perceive, navigate and are influenced by their online identities within a multicultural and collectivistic setting. Rather than acting as a solely individual way of self-expression, online identity surfaced as a socially evaluated practice determined by peer evaluation and cultural expectations. These results extend digital identity research by positioning online self-presentation within a multicultural framework where collective values and communal harmony remain significant.

4.1 Perception of Online Identity

Young adults viewed their online identities as selectively authentic, reflecting a conscious balance between social approval and self-expression. This selective authenticity aligns with Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework, where individuals manage impressions based on the audience and context, situating digital platforms as a salient "frontstage" environment. Individuals' tendency to withhold personal challenges while highlighting affirming experiences indicates that online identity less a clear representation of the self and more a carefully selected representation shaped by expected judgement from others.

Notably, this curation was not entirely driven by personal choice but was integrated within collectivist views that emphasize social harmony and family reputation. In this way, online identity functions simultaneously as a space of individual choice and cultural compliance. This twofold role highlights that digital self-presentation among Malaysian young adults is shaped by cultural expectations rather than being fully autonomous. It contributes to a deeper understanding of online identity in non-Western settings.

4.2 Challenges in Managing Identity

Managing consistency between offline and online identities arose as a key challenge. The pressure to maintain a socially approved online persona conflicts with the authentic offline identity, generating psychological distress and insecurity. This finding is consistent with previous studies underscoring the emotional strain involved in maintaining flexible yet stable self-presentation across different contexts (Michikyan, 2020; Nazzal, 2024).

Cultural constraints further amplified these challenges. Young adults' cautious participation with sensitive topics illustrates the regulatory role of multicultural and collectivist norms where divergence from established social views risks backlash. Although such restraint maintains social harmony, it concurrently inhibits authentic self-expression and critical reflection. This friction demonstrates how self-identity development in collectivist

settings is regulated rather than autonomous, supporting the idea that identity formation is influenced by social relationships (Ma & Zhou, 2022; Azmi et al., 2023).

Misinterpretation of online identity also emerged as a significant challenge. Curated online performances elicited inaccurate assumptions from viewers (Goffman, 1959; Edwards, 2022), forcing individuals to constantly modify their self-presentation to regulate external perceptions. This continual navigation highlights the psychological burden of high visibility digital environments, where constant judgement can heighten stress and decrease self-confidence.

4.3 Influence on Self-Identity

Online identity exerted a profound influence on self-identity through the dynamics of social comparison and validation. Young adults' dependence on comments, likes and engagement metrics as a measure of self-worth demonstrates the internalisation of external validation into self-identity formation. In line with previous studies, (Michikyan, 2020; Pisano et al., 2017) online feedback was frequently perceived as meaningful social validation despite its context-dependent and performative nature.

This reliance on validation prompted curated self-presentation aligned with perceived digital standards rather than personal values, producing self-doubt and excessive overthinking habits. Social comparison with influencers and peers further exacerbated these effects, intensifying feelings of inadequacy and eroding self-concept (Castellacci & Tveito, 2018; Chou & Edge, 2019; Hjetland 2022).

However, online identity is not wholly negative. Young adults' accounts suggest that online spaces are promoting identity exploration, psychological resilience and empowerment, especially in instances where real-life expression felt restricted. This finding reflects previous work indicating that strategic self-presentation promotes confidence and personal growth (Michikyan, Subrahmanyam & Dennis, 2014; Gonzales & Hancock, 2011). Thus, online identity serves as both a challenge and a resource, forming self-identity in dynamic and situational ways.

5. Implications

The findings of this research deliver crucial theoretical implications, specifically in extending Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory to the context of social media. The tailored performances of Malaysian young adults on social media reflect Goffman's idea of the front stage, where individuals consciously manage their impression in accordance with expectations of the audience. Prominently, this study highlights that the divide between backstage (offline) and frontstage (online) is progressively fluid, with online behaviours impacting offline self-perception. This indicates an evolution of dramaturgical theory, suggesting that impression management in digital spaces is context-sensitive, continuous and linked to social feedback, emphasizing that identity performance happens across multiple, interconnected platforms rather than isolated social settings.

These findings have important practical implications for social media designers, policymakers, mental health professionals, and educators. To encourage authentic self-expression, social media platforms should be designed to reduce the reliance on external validation indicators (e.g., likes, comments, share) while facilitating meaningful conversations. Programs in education and policymakers may raise awareness of the mental health consequences of selective online self-presentation and promote approaches that harmonize digital self-expression with psychological well-being. In this way, this study contributes toward the design of digital platforms that promote balanced and healthy identity negotiation, allowing young adults to manage societal pressures while maintaining mental resilience and genuine self-expression.

6. Limitation and Suggestion for Future Study

This study has a few limitations. Malaysia's multicultural context may have influenced how participants perceived and responded to the interview questions, possibly affecting the comparability of responses. The fast-evolving nature of digital platforms means that the findings capture a precise moment in digital identity formation and may lose significance as newer technology changes online interactions. Moreover, the study relied on self-reported data, which may have introduced bias or idealized view of self even with efforts to create a comfortable space for participants. Lastly, identity formation is an ongoing process, and this research captures only a brief glimpse of how young adults navigate their online and offline identities.

Grounded in these findings, future studies could apply longitudinal designs to study how offline and online identities change over time, as digital settings and life circumstances shift (Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011). Methodological approaches namely digital ethnography and diary studies may provide valuable and direct insights into identity practices (Marwick & Boyd, 2010). Researchers should also examine how merging technologies like virtual reality and AI-driven platforms, might impact the future of online identity development (Floridi, 2015).

7. Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the perceptions, challenges and influence of online identity on self-identity of young adults in Malaysia. Grounded in a phenomenological approach, the research was designed to capture personal experiences through in-depth interviews with participants, enabling their voice and perspectives to shed light on the complexity between personal identity and digital self-presentation. By focusing on subjective experiences, the study revealed the dual role of online setting in both empowering and constraining the identity negotiation of young adults.

The findings uncovered that participants immersed themselves in selective authenticity, tailoring their virtual presence to highlight perfection while hiding parts that might call for unwanted judgement. This process demonstrated the ongoing friction between conforming to cultural norms and being authentic. Such balancing of dual identities frequently resulted in dependence on external validation, fear of negative opinions and experiences of self-conflict. Nevertheless, the research also illuminated the potential of online identity to produce meaningful transformation: participants utilized social media to explore themselves, boost confidence, which over time promoted resilience and personal growth.

These insights present critical implications for mental health experts, parents, educators and social media platform designers. For experts in psychology, understanding the dual nature of online identity, both as a stressor and empowerment, can guide the creation of healthier and safer digital engagement applications. Likewise, parents and educators should encourage awareness on the value of authentic online self-expression and its psychological implications. For social media platform designers, the study highlights the need to design more supportive and safer digital environments that minimize critical evaluations and support authentic self-expression.

Essentially, this study introduces a culturally grounded viewpoint to the evolving discussion on digital identity and selfhood. By underscoring both the strengths and vulnerabilities of Malaysian young adults in navigating their virtual presence, it highlights the necessity for nuanced support systems that acknowledge online identity as a fluid process of self-expression, cultural negotiation and empowerment, thus refining Goffman's dramaturgical theory for the digital era.

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Conflict of Interest

Author declares that there are no conflict of interests regarding publication of the paper.

Author Contribution

*The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: **study conception and design:** Jeya Shree, Tan Wei Yu, Dr. Zhooriyati Sehu Mohd; **data collection:** Jeya Shree; **analysis and interpretation of results:** Jeya Shree, Tan Wei Yu; **draft manuscript preparation:** Jeya Shree, Tan Wei Yu, Dr. Zhooriyati Sehu Mohd. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.*

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