Chapter- 4

Multiplicity in the Digital Mirror: Navigating Complex Online Identities among College Students

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Introduction

In today's post-digital society, college students often navigate a complex and multifaceted management of their image, presenting a different online digital identity and an entirely different offline identity, with the primary reason for this multidimensional identity being the creation of an idealized, utopian self. Through a survey of thirty-six participants, the study investigates how college students negotiate their online presence across various social media platforms, revealing patterns and tensions in their digital identity performances. This particular study seeks to analyse how college students position themselves regarding their online identities and the ways in which they express the multiple facets of their constructed utopian selves.

Keywords: Digital identity, Online identity management, College students, Social media, Self-presentation

Introduction

The rigorous development of the Internet helps people to present themselves freely in digital space. Some people may reconstruct their identity on the Internet to make an online identity that is entirely different from their real identity in the society they live. With the development of social media, the Internet became a platform where content is created and mediated. In a scenario strongly influenced by the presence of participatory media and where the hurriedness and easiness of net access helps the interaction between different materials of knowledge, the individual flew between different online spaces and

builds a path that reflects his/her identity as a person. Immersed in a technologically rich environment and based on connections between people and systems, individuals articulate their presence among scenarios, groups and communities, harnessing the openness and flexibility of the web to build and reveal an identity that arches over many spaces. When social networks are often seen as an alternative space for the construction of identity, the reflection and understanding of the positive and negative implications of having an online presence becomes one of great importance. The digital landscape of college students is characterized by a multiplicity of online identities, as students navigate various social media platforms, online communities, and digital spaces. This study aims to investigate how college students manage their online identities, exploring the strategies, tensions, and implications of digital identity management in this critical phase of life.

Research questions include:
- How do college students negotiate their online presence across different platforms?
- What factors influence their digital identity performances?
- How do they balance authenticity and self-presentation in their online lives?

Analysing a case study, this paper reflects upon the importance of having an online identity, describing how a group of students from Degree Courses use online social networks in order to build an identity capable of revealing to peers and to the community their personal, academic and professional competencies and skills. In the next sections, the paper will address some of the key concepts related to the construction of identity in the digital world: digital literacies, and online social networks as a space for identity construction. Section one of the study describes the methodological procedures that guided the development of the research, section two talks about the case study conducted as part of the research. Section three introduces the case study's main results and section four reflects upon the importance and relevance of building an online identity in open social environments.

Theoretical Frameworks and Empirical Insights

The concept of digital identity has been extensively explored in various fields, including psychology, sociology, and communication studies. Theories such as Goffman's (1959) impression management and Turkle's (1995) identity fragmentation provide a foundation for understanding online identity management. Research has shown that individuals engage in strategic self-presentation (Ellison et al., 2006), context-dependent identity switching (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), and boundary management (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011) to maintain a cohesive online persona. The "dramaturgical metaphor" proposed by Erving Gofman (1959) supplied a means of studying everyday social interactions. In order to analyze how people steer interaction and the way they are perceived by others, Gofman, in his critical work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959),* developed a general "dramaturgical" theory. According to Gofman's "theatrical" vocabulary: people are performers who try to propagate a certain impression to their spectators. They give signals to others Through their performance. "Audiences" in turn decode these performances. People perform according to the situation that share secret information about the strategies used to convey those impressions. Performances occurs "front and back stage." In the front stage, people are aware of their spectators and emphasize particular aspects of their actions while suppressing those aspects that might undermine the fostered impression. Those suppressed aspects might reappear in the back stage and be shared with other members of the team. In order to stage their performance, people display a front, that is, the "expressive equipment" employed by an individual for self-presentation. Everyone who lives in the world is an actor and people are all trying to present an idealized version of self in every interaction with others, suggest Goffman's theory. Keeping the idea, studies specific to college students have highlighted the importance of social media in shaping their digital identities (Pempek & McDaniel, 2015). However, the literature also reveals conflicts and discrepancies in students' online experiences, such as the struggle for authenticity versus persona (Liu, 2017). The study contributes to this body of knowledge by exploring the nuances of digital identity management among college students.
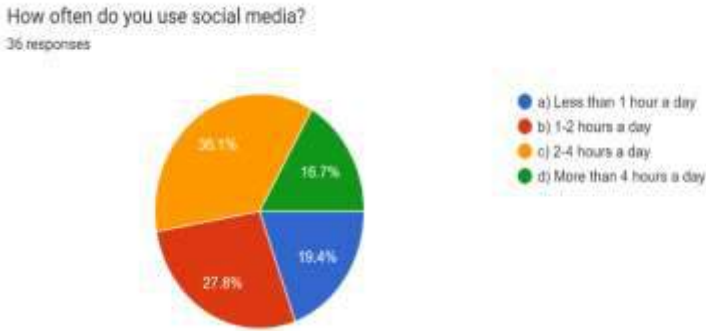
Chart 1: Distribution of social media using time by participants.

The pie chart illustrating social media usage among college students can be linked to how the selected thirty-six students present their identities online. Social media platforms are critical fields where individuals construct and showcase their identities, influenced by the amount of time they spend online. The pie chart categorizes usage into four distinct groups:

- **Less than 1 hour a day (16.7%):** Represented by the green segment, 16.7% of the students use social media for less than an hour daily. This indicates a small portion of students limit their time on social platforms, possibly due to high self-discipline, alternative interests, or busy schedules. Students in this group likely maintain a minimal online presence. They use social media only for essential communication and occasional updates. Their identity presentation is more controlled and limited, giving focus on their private lives rather than constant interactions. This group might prefer a face-to-face interaction for expressing their identities to others.

- **1-2 hours a day (19.4%):** The blue segment shows that 19.4% of the respondents spend between 1 to 2 hours on social media every day. These students use social media moderately, balancing it with other activities and responsibilities in their lives. These students might have a balanced approach to online identity presentation. They spend enough time to stay connected and share significant moments without being overly immersed into digital world. Their online personas are likely reflective of their real-life identities, blending personal achievements, social interactions, and interests in a controlled manner.

- **2-4 hours a day (27.8%):** Represented by the red segment, 27.8% of the students are on social media for 2 to 4 hours daily. This is a significant portion, suggesting that social media plays a prime role in their daily lives. Students spending 2 to 4 hours daily on social media are more actively engaged in building and exhibiting their online identities. They often update their profiles, share content, and interact with a wide network. This involvement allows them to explore and present various dimensions of their personalities, interests, and social circles. They are likely to participate in online trends and communities, which can shape their identity presentation in the digital world.

- **More than 4 hours a day (36.1%):** The largest segment, orange, indicates that 36.1% of the students spend more than 4 hours a day on social media. This suggests a high level of engagement, possibly close to extreme use. This group might be intensively active on social platforms, using them for communication or other digital activities. Their identity presentation is highly dynamic, constantly evolving with frequent updates, interactions, and content sharing. These students use multiple online platforms to exhibit different aspects of their identities. Their online presence is a major part of their overall identity, potentially influencing their self-perception and social relationships.

The amount of time spent on social media can influence how real or refined an individual's online identity is. Those with greater usage might select their online personas more precisely to fit social norms, trends, or desired perceptions. Increased use of social media often correlates with a greater need for feedback and validation.
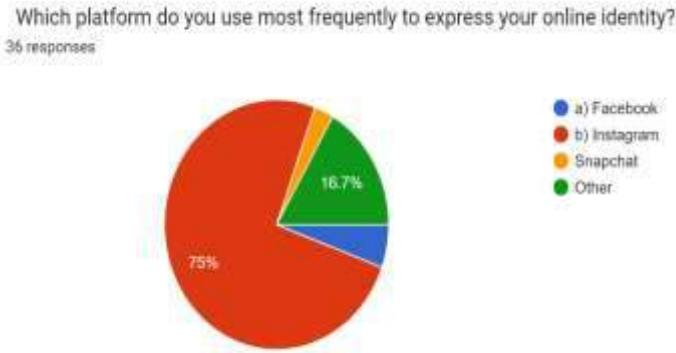
Chart 2: Distribution of social media platforms used by participants

The pie chart illustrates the platforms college students use most regularly to express their online selves, based on 36 responses. This data complements the previous analysis on social media usage and identity presentation. A notable majority, 75% of students, use Instagram most recurrently to express their online identity. Instagram's visual-centric nature, with reels, videos, and stories, allows for vibrant and thriving self-presentation. Students use Instagram's features like filters, hashtags, and stories to present their identities, showcase their lifestyles, interests, and social circles. 16.7% of students use platforms classified as "Other," which might include TikTok, Twitter, LinkedIn, or emerging platforms. This indicates a variety in preferences, where students may choose platforms that go more closely with their personal or professional identity needs. For instance, LinkedIn might be used for professional identity, while TikTok could be favoured for creative expression. Only 5.6% of students use Facebook. This gives with broader trends of younger demographics moving away from Facebook in favour of platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Those who do use Facebook value its comprehensive profile features, groups, and events to maintain connections and express identity in a more detailed manner. A small percentage, 2.8%, use Snapchat primarily. Snapchat's ephemeral nature might appeal to students who prefer more fugitive, casual expressions of identity, focusing on day-to-day moments and immediate interactions. In conclusion, the preference for Instagram as the primary platform for

identity expression among college students gives the importance of visual content in online identity construction. Understanding these preferences help in developing strategies to support healthy and authentic online self-expression.
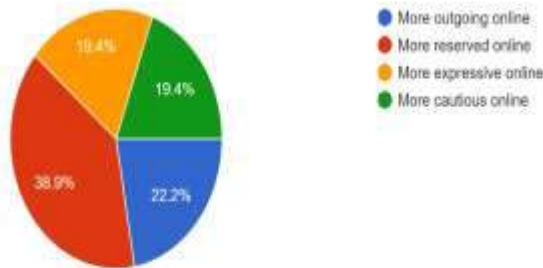

Chart 3: Difference between online identity and offline identity.

The pie chart represents how college students recognise the differences between their online and offline identities, based on 36 responses. It categorizes these differences into four groups: A significant portion of students (38.9%) accept they are more reserved online compared to their offline identities. This indicate that these students choose to share less personal information or limit their online interactions, possibly due to privacy concerns or the nature of online platforms where information can be widely transmitted. 22.2% of the students feel more outgoing online. The anonymity or semi-anonymity of the internet can promote people to express themselves more freely than they might in face-to-face interactions. This group find it easier to communicate, engage, and share opinions online due to the decreased social expectations of in-person interactions. 19.4% of respondents consider themselves more expressive in online. Social media platforms provide various tools and formats (e.g., images, videos, blogs) that can enhance their self-expression. This group utilizes these tools to share their creativity, thoughts, and experiences in ways they might not feel comfortable doing offline. Another 19.4% of students are more vigilant in online. They might be more careful about what they post and how they

interact due to awareness of digital footprints and the long-term impact of online content. This caution reflects a conscious approach to managing their online presence. The pie chart reveals diverse ideologies among college students regarding their online versus offline identities. While some feel more reserved or cautious online, others find it a space for outgoing and expressive behaviour.
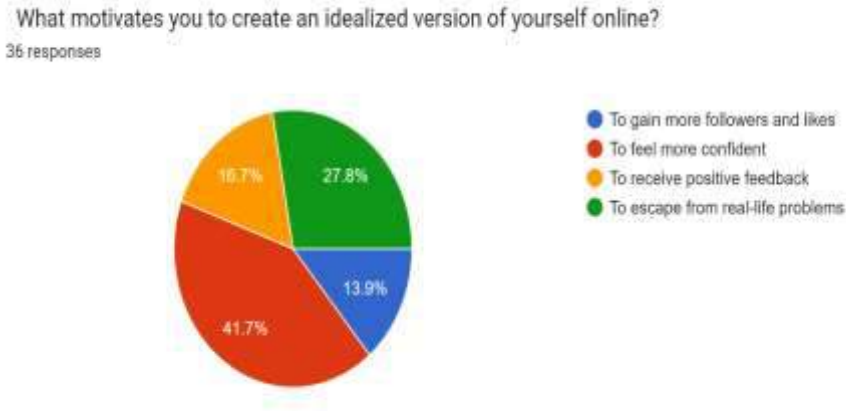
What motivates you to create an idealized version of yourself online?
36 responses

- To gain more followers and likes
- To feel more confident
- To receive positive feedback
- To escape from real-life problems

27.8%
13.9%
41.7%
16.7%

Chart 4: Motives behind online identity

The reasons why college students select their online identities can be understood through various motivations: to feel confident (41%), for positive feedback (16%), to escape from real-life problems (27%), and to gain followers and likes (14%). These motivations can be critically examined using Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory, which provides a framework for understanding how individuals present themselves in social contexts. For many students, their online identity serves as a means to boost self-esteem and feel more empowered. The curated nature of social media allows them to highlight their best attributes, achievements, and interests, which might not always be as visible in real life. This controlled self-presentation can lead to increased confidence. Goffman's dramaturgical theory posits that individuals perform different roles depending on the audience and setting. In "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life," Goffman explains, "When an individual appears before others, he will have many motives for trying to control the impression they receive of the situation" (Goffman, 1959). Online platforms offer a stage where students can perform an idealized version of themselves,

enhancing their confidence. Positive feedback, such as likes, comments, and shares, serves as social validation and reinforces the desired self-image that students project online. This external validation can be addictive, creating a cycle where individuals continuously seek affirmation from their online audience. According to Goffman, individuals are concerned with maintaining a particular impression. He notes, "The individual must rely on others to complete the picture of the setting that he is attempting to create" (Goffman, 1959). Positive feedback from the audience helps complete this picture, validating the performance and encouraging its continuation. For some students, their online identity provides a refuge from real-life stressors and problems. By creating and engaging with an idealized online persona, they can temporarily escape from the challenges they face offline. Goffman's concept of "front stage" and "back stage" behaviours is relevant here. The online identity can be seen as a "front stage" performance where students can escape the "back stage" realities of their lives. Goffman states, "The backstage may be a place where the performer can reliably expect that no member of the audience will intrude" (Goffman, 1959). The online world becomes a controlled environment where students can distance themselves from real-life issues. The pursuit of followers and likes is often driven by the desire to increase social capital. A large following can enhance one's social status and perceived popularity, creating opportunities for influence and recognition. Goffman highlights the importance of audience size and engagement in sustaining a performance. He writes, "A status, a position, a social place is not a material thing to be possessed and then displayed; it is a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished, and well-articulated" (Goffman, 1959). The accumulation of followers and likes signifies a successful performance, indicating that the individual's presentation is being well-received by the audience.

The analysis of data collected through the survey allowed for the identification and characterization of the main aspects of the participants' online presence, including motivations, mechanisms and strategies adopted in order to manage online identity, and the evaluation of the potential and/or real impact of the identity built in digital environments.

Have you ever experienced any conflicts or misunderstandings because of differences between your online and offline identities?
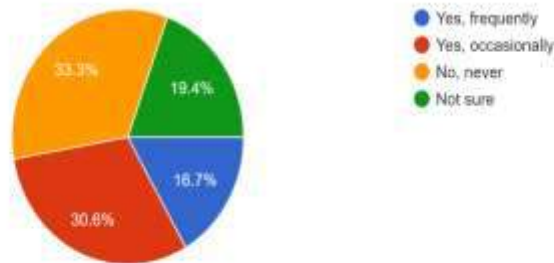
36 responses

Legend:
- Yes, frequently
- Yes, occasionally
- No, never
- Not sure

Pie chart values: 33.3%, 19.4%, 16.7%, 30.6%

Chart 5: Difference between online identity and offline identity.

During the case study, participants were asked to reflect about the way they express themselves online, how they managed their privacy, and also about the personal, social and professional impact of the identity they are building in online environments. Data gathered through the case study evidenced that, when thinking about their online identity, participants revolved around three axes: digital representation (information and content published by the individual in order to represent himself/herself in digital online environments); privacy management (mechanisms and strategies adopted by the individual in order to control and manage his/her digital persona); and reputation (the actual or potential impact of online identity built by the individual).

When technology evolved and changed our social way with online applications, the clear and absolute boundary between the backstage and front stage became blended and hybrid. Social media exposes the original backstage life on a front-stage platform, which causes the dramaturgical theory to play a role in the cyber world again. Students also started to act in this new world and even distinguish and classify the properties of various social websites; the judging criteria is whether the posts can be seen by the whole users or only the friends in the contacts. Through all the above preceding information, it is obvious that the unique online personal space is a tool to construct the self-version of every user; this function makes the identity of people turns to the curators of the exhibition. Students can build an independent and parallel character

through posting, commenting, and chatting; these ways are relatively cheap and direct. Hence, it makes more cheating and depictions happen in the cyber world. Then, people also possess a calmer and more mature attitude on the websites toward many kinds of scandals or frauds. At the same time, because of the features of social media, people easily show their style, which forms different types of bloggers and users who can change the stereotype and personalities of other users through their internet speech. For example, many girls become feminists after they browse related posts and comments or just chat with feminists. However, every coin has two sides, and everyone thinks differently about analysing a sentence or an incident. So cognitive mistakes usually happen online; at least one person can misunderstand almost every topic. Likewise, when online friends meet offline, they also will find some discrepancies between the real person and the person in their imagination. Undoubtedly, online cognitive mistakes often lead to some negative consequences, such as trolls and numerous psychological diseases. Because the completion of online society and the real world is equally for most people, hence the attacks on both societies are also the same. As a result, what should be controlled is the limit between the two worlds and encourage them to focus more on reality and be relaxed to surfing online.

Conclusion:

This study reveals the complex and dynamic nature of digital identity management among college students. The findings suggest that students engage in strategic self-presentation, context-dependent identity switching, and boundary management to maintain a cohesive online persona. These insights have implications for college students' personal and professional lives, highlighting the need for awareness, critical thinking, and digital literacy in navigating the online world. Future research should continue to explore the evolving landscape of digital identity, addressing the challenges and opportunities that emerge in this critical aspect of contemporary life. College students' preference for their online identities can be critically understood through the lens of Goffman's dramaturgical theory. The motivations to feel confident, seek positive feedback, escape real-life problems, and gain followers align with Goffman's insights into how individuals manage their self-

presentation in social contexts. By viewing social media as a stage for performance, we can better understand the complexities and implications of online identity construction. This understanding can inform strategies to support students in developing healthy, authentic, and balanced online and offline identities.

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