

The Impact of Online Identity Conflict on Self-Perception and Social Anxiety

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Abstract: Many people have multiple identities on the Internet and are therefore in conflict when these identities are revealed. Such tension reduces the distinctiveness of one's self-concept and thus damages self-awareness, thereby increasing social anxiety for adolescents who are still forming their sense of self. This paper collects research results on the effect of virtual identity clashes on self-awareness and social cognition. Based on the theories of impression regulation and self-concept clarity, this paper believes that a combination of site-specific purposes, multiple user groups, and cultural elements leads to online identity conflict. This study also suggests that, through the cooperative efforts of individuals, teachers and Internet service providers, more instructional programs that promote genuine self-communication can be developed, and strategies will be proposed to reduce the burden on digital sites for identity presentation.

Keywords: online identity conflict; self-perception; social anxiety; self-concept clarity; Impression Management

1. Introduction

In the present day, as society is rapidly digitising, many people have created multiple accounts on various social media platforms to build different online identities for different services. For example, they may post some pictures on Instagram, share their views on current events on X, and build a professional brand on LinkedIn. Different identities are created by various purposes and users of a place online; thus, people may feel disconnected from themselves and experience social anxiety.

Digital identity disjunctions and their impact on self-concept and social anxiety. Based on the above research, many people have created multiple online identities on different platforms and are no longer sure who they are [1]. Research has also found that tension in virtual identity can reduce a person's sense of self-consistency, and therefore those without a stable self-concept are more likely to develop psychological problems [2]. Teenagers who engage in extended and significant cyber-social activities are more likely to experience psychological problems, such as stress and a lack of self-confidence [3].

Although the current studies have examined the effects of digital identity friction, most of the previous research has focused on identity representation or emotional changes and has paid little attention to how struggles with virtual identity affect Self-Perception and social anxiety. Therefore, this paper will examine the impact of internet-based identity tension on self-perception and social anxiety, and point out the need for further research on digital identity conflicts.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1. *Impression Management Theory*

Erving Goffman first proposed the concept of Impression Management, and now it is known that people are conscious of how others perceive them in daily life [4]. Although the subjects are in specific places at the time, they can create many different digital identities online, and these identities may vary depending on the platform. When these identities are different or are perceived by multiple groups at the same time, identity conflict may occur; as a result, there can be mental stress, anxiety and other emotional problems [5]. Therefore, Impression Management Theory offers a whole-picture system for investigating online identity conflict.

2.2. *Self-Concept Clarity Theory*

Self-concept clarity refers to the distinctiveness, consistency and reliability of one's self-awareness [6]. In other words, a person's sense of self remains relatively stable in all situations and is not internally conflicted. Conversely, when self-concept is unclear, one is more likely to be anxious, stressed or feel inferior. People with a strong sense of self-concept clarity have clear goals and values, are thus more adaptable; those without such clarity are more easily stressed by external factors. The digital realm is more apt to undermine an individual's self-concept clarity. Fullwood and others have pointed out that teenagers who are exploring all kinds of virtual identities may be lost and lose their sense of self [7]. Thus, they are more susceptible to psychological harm and regulate conflicting digital identities.

Impression Management theory and self-concept clarity theory can provide more all-encompassing explanations for the conflict in digital identity. Impression Management Theory explains why people construct all sorts of virtual identities, and Self-Concept Clarity Theory investigates the psychological effects of the conflict in one's cyber identity. It offers a whole-system concept for studying the effects of all kinds of online identity contradictions.

3. Status of Online Identity Conflict

3.1. *Definition and Core Characteristics of Online Identity Conflict*

Digital identity discord refers to having different personas on all the different electronic social media platforms. Different identities make some people feel anxious and uneasy. People maintain stable personas in real life, such as being a good son or a diligent student at home and school. People are free to build their identities in the digital virtual world and may therefore experience identity conflict among different online communities. Research shows that young adults with existential uncertainty and high social anxiety are more likely to present a false self online. The problem of managing multiple online identities causes people anxiety [8].

The basic features of digital identity discord include the simultaneous existence of multiple personas, but these personas are inconsistent and contradictory. People have many different identities on various online platforms; for example, they can be professionals on LinkedIn and post about their private lives on Instagram. However, if these personas are inconsistent or contradictory, they may cause friction and be difficult to reconcile. Michikyan [8] believes that the pressure to build an online identity stems from a lack of consistency and organisation in one's self-presentation online. The above reasons may cause nervousness, depression and anxiety.

3.2. *Causes and Contexts of Online Identity Conflict*

There are many reasons for the contradictions in virtual personas, such as different functions of these networks, various groups of viewers, and the current social environment.

Different Social Networks have different characteristics and atmospheres. LinkedIn is a professional website that generally has a formal nature for its users, and Instagram is a community sharing platform where people often post short videos of their daily lives. People often change the material they post according to the characteristics of that place. Marwick and Boyd have found that teenagers often present different identities on various social media platforms to meet the group's norms and expectations at all times [5]. Administration of several personas may lead to identity conflict and, as a result, mental stress and psychological discomfort.

Different Platforms attract different groups of viewers. Post humorous videos on TikTok to attract others with similar interests who will like and share them, and upload high-quality pictures to Instagram to attract more relevant people; every like is an indication of admiration or envy. Yang and others have studied that social networks provide young people with an ideal place to create elaborate personal shows in pictures and videos to gain attention and praise [9]. However, when various self-portraits are disclosed, there is a risk of personality conflict. For instance, should a witty recording posted on TikTok be observed by coworkers on LinkedIn, it may trigger anxiety for the person and cause them to feel humiliated.

Furthermore, people from all over the world who are studying abroad may have difficulty adapting to the different digital environments in different countries. For example, Chinese learners living in America and using social platforms such as X may experience significant social differences. Therefore, it is difficult for them to align their self-identity with the cultural norms of both places and thus experience more conflict online [7].

4. The Psychological Impact of Online Identity Conflict

With the development of the Internet in recent years, many people have begun to use it, and now problems with online identity have started to affect their mental health. The above problems will damage a person's self-esteem and emotions, as well as their relationships with others. The two main contents of this paper are: the impact of online identity conflict on self-perception. Research by Fadhilah and Listiara shows that a lack of self-concept clarity can reduce self-disclosure and conflict-resolution strategies; thus, people may be unable to express their true selves [10]. Second, there is an effect of online identity conflict on social anxiety. People fear negative evaluations, and some studies have shown that those with high social anxiety are more likely to be isolated due to stress from digital identity management or fear of evaluation [11]. Based on the above results, this section will investigate how online identity conflict affects people's emotions and self-awareness.

4.1. Impact on Self-Perception

Self-concept is a person's awareness and understanding of their own qualities, emotions, motivations and behaviours. The intellectual part is "What kind of person am I?", and the emotional part is "How do I feel about myself?" [12]. As people take on many different roles in their lives on the Internet, they may feel lost about who they are. Davidson and Joinson have proposed that people often engage in "shaping" by deliberately creating multiple self-presentations (e.g., using a formal profile on LinkedIn and a casual one on Instagram) [13]. This behaviour may increase social anxiety and fatigue, etc., in people.

Another Factor Affecting Self-Concept Is Lack of Clarity. According to self-perception theory, people infer their own attitudes and emotions by observing their own behaviour and the environment in which they are observed [12]. Reduced clarity of self-concept may increase anxiety about negative evaluation and inhibit self-disclosure, thus preventing accurate self-assessment [14]. For example, when interacting with different groups of people online, one may feel uneasy and lose the confidence to live independently, thus developing a weak sense of self.

Cyber-identity friction is a severe problem of personal identity. When people use multiple digital identities at the same time, there is a risk that they will lose a sense of self and become insecure.

4.2. Impact on Social Anxiety

Social anxiety is marked by distress, restlessness and fear of receiving a negative evaluation from others in social situations [15]. Participation in the Digital Space may Increase Social Anxiety. Michikyan found that young adults with a high degree of confusion about their overall identity (indicating poor clarity of self-concept) displayed a virtual persona on Facebook, suggesting an incongruence between their authentic and projected selves [8]. The gap between digital personas and one's sense of self occurs in anxiety.

Social anxiety is not only avoidance of social situations but also excessive self-monitoring and heightened fear of criticism [16]. Conflicting personas on various networks in the digital world often increase this anxiety. People may be anxious about an inconsistent public image, negative comments from all sides, or the shame and

complexity of being observed by intersecting circles at different times. Abdelaziz and Hussein's study of 420 Generation Z Facebook users in Egypt found that they had relatively high levels of social anxiety when maintaining several distinct profiles on Facebook simultaneously [17].

Friction in virtual identity may cause a discrepancy between the digital and real-life self-identification. Therefore, people are afraid of what others think, lose the ability to get along with others, and are ultimately anxious about society.

5. Implications

Research is being carried out on the effect of virtual identity struggles on self-esteem and social anxiety. Identity expression via digital networks may be a form of social participation, but it can also be the origin of conflict. Interventions that enhance the distinctiveness of self-concept may reduce the harm caused by maintaining multiple conflicting virtual personas [18]. Future research will investigate the extended effects of digital identity friction on self-concept and social anxiety.

At the same time, students' sense of virtual identity friction is also relatively strong. Youngsters and university learners, submerged in the digital realm for long durations, are currently "in the stage of developing their self-image and are more vulnerable to the stress of shifting between diverse digital personas. Teachers need to strengthen psychological support services for teenagers to help them develop a strong sense of self and organise more group activities to encourage them to express their true selves and reduce social anxiety.

Reduce the burden of digital identity for electronic social networking sites. Digital Communication Systems can make people feel better and reduce anxiety by creating a space free from identity-threatened tension and social evaluation.

6. Conclusions

Research on the Effect of Digital Persona Discord on Self-Knowledge and Interpersonal Discomfort. Impression Management Theory and Self-Concept Clarity Theory together offer a full theoretical system to explore the effects of friction in virtual identity on people's mental health.

Based on the above research, virtual identity discord is positively correlated with a person's self-concept. Navigating various digital personas may lead to a discrepancy between one's virtual and real selves, thus reducing the sense of identity consistency. Anxiety will also increase due to this identity conflict. People feel stressed about maintaining all the different identities in online communities, and they are afraid of negative evaluations or embarrassment from others.

This study has some deficiencies. Initially, the conclusions of this work are based on current research; most of this research is cross-sectional and generally focuses on teenagers and young people, and studies involving different age groups are lacking. Research has not been conducted on digital personas in various cultures either. Finally, the time span of publication for the cited papers is relatively short.

In the future, research will probably include long-term studies, expand the range of participants, and explore virtual identity friction in different cultures. Extend the experimental period to examine the effect of the struggle for an online identity on self-perception and social anxiety over an extended period. Future work may also develop interventions to explore how online identity friction specifically affects self-perception and social anxiety.

In brief, decreasing digital identity friction requires all-encompassing efforts. People, teachers, digital networks and all other parties need to work together to promote genuine self-identity and expression and thus alleviate social anxiety.

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