

MAPPING DIGITAL IDENTITY: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract: *This research creates a theoretical framework for understanding how young people build their identities in an age dominated by social media. Because the use of digital platforms is becoming increasingly common in connecting people together, how people create, present and perceive who they are has transitioned from being something that an individual creates based solely on their experiences to something that is dynamic and mediated by both their actions as individuals as well as the limitations placed upon them by platforms.*

To create the Digital Identity Matrix, several theoretical schools of thought including Goffman's (1959) [1] Dramaturgy theory, and Bourdieu's Theory of Fields and Capital, Narrative and Dialogical Identity, and Sociotechnical Affordances, have been synthesized. Using the Digital Identity Matrix, the construction of identity can be framed across two intersecting dimensions, and provide an understanding of the conflicts that exist in the creation of one's digital self-on the one hand an individual wants to create an authentic (i.e., true to self) version of themselves, while at the same time striving for unification (i.e., coherence, or all elements working well together) of the constructed identity; yet on the other hand they feel pressure (from peers, society, etc.) to be authentic and performative and provide enough coherence between all of the characteristics of their constructed identity that they do not fracture themselves completely.

The theoretical frameworks outlined in this paper provide a way for media and cultural studies to further understand identity-as a fluid, negotiated, context-dependent process in a digital cultural environment-and establish a basis for the design of future empirical-based research on this topic.

Keywords: *Digital Identity; Digital Culture; Identity Construction; Social Media; Young Adults; Self-presentation; Sociotechnical Affordances; Cultural Capital; Narrative Identity.*

КАРТОГРАФИРАНЕ НА ДИГИТАЛНАТА ИДЕНТИЧНОСТ: КОНЦЕПТУАЛНА РАМКА ЗА ИЗГРАЖДАНЕ НА ИДЕНТИЧНОСТ В СОЦИАЛНИТЕ МЕДИИ

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital culture is an instrumental part of today's society as it is changing how people communicate with each other, how they connect to their relationships, and how they create meaning for themselves. Societal expression via social media channels like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook has allowed for new opportunities for individuals to express their identity continually throughout their daily interactions with others and to modify or reconfigure it on an ongoing basis. Therefore, as a byproduct of society shifting from traditional social systems to digitally mediated environments, new ways and methods will arise in which people's identities will be established within networked publics.

In cultural and media studies, there is widespread agreement that identity is something that is created in a dynamic and constructed manner. For Hall (1996) [2], identity is constantly changing and being shaped through representation and discourse, while Goffman (1959) [1] highlights that when individuals interact with one another, they perform an act of portraying themselves to others while managing the impressions of themselves regarding particular audiences. In today's digital communities, the way identity is shaped is amplified as users continue to construct visible representations of themselves on the internet by selecting what they post, share, and communicate regarding themselves on various platforms. Castells (2010) [3] also points out that as people communicate via the internet, their relationship with others is changing, and people are beginning to identify themselves within the global flow of information and culture that is taking place across multiple platforms. Research has begun examining identity through social media in the context of how participants utilize the tools provided by these platforms (e.g., Facebook) in a variety of ways for identity expression, experimentation, and self-presentation.

The vast majority of the research in this area indicates that social media has opened up new avenues for creativity, self-exploration, and establishing relationships, while also establishing new sets of social and platform-related expectations associated with visibility, validation, and audience expectations. However, in most cases, researchers have typically looked to identity as an outcome of representation or focused on discrete elements such as performativity, narration, or the use of various technologies. Less research has examined the interaction of the elements of representation and the various elements of performance, narration and technology with respect to creating an entire framework where we can examine identity under continuous negotiations of authenticity and performativity as well as unity and fragmentation. This research study addresses these issues by developing a conceptual understanding of identity among young adults within social media settings [4].

To create this framework for understanding identity in social media, the authors combine multiple theoretical perspectives, including multiple theories of social constructionism, to construct what is termed the Digital Identity Matrix. The Digital Identity Matrix creates a structured method for examining individuals' negotiation of creating new identities based on interaction with digitally mediated contexts. To support this research, three research questions are posed:

1. What role does self-presentation and digital capital accumulation play in constructing identity for young adults in social media?
2. How do processes of narration and dialogue significantly contribute to either the coherence or fragmentation of identity construction when looking at digital contexts?
3. What affordances do sociotechnical systems provide for enabling and constraining the construction of identity within social media?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Digital culture and identity formation

The digital culture has changed the way that we build and define our identity, offering many new ways to interact with each other, express ourselves and participate in social activities. Social media provides a new type of 'networked' environment for individuals to continually develop their own identities through communication, creating content and building relationships with others [5], [6]. It is in these networked spaces that individuals create and negotiate their identities within a globalised context, through a redefinition of the boundaries between public and private life.

2.2 The fluidity and contextuality of identity

Current research on identity suggests a trend toward viewing identity as fluid, multiple, and contextual. Researchers note that identity is not a stable entity, but rather an ongoing process that is shaped and reshaped through social interaction and representation [2]. Within the digital context, this concept of fluidity is compounded by the ability for individuals to participate on different platforms, each requiring a different type of self-presentation and interaction; this leads to identities becoming adaptable and being constantly reconfigured.

2.3 Self-Presentation and Digital Performance

Through their use of social media, researchers have learned about how self-presentation influences the creation of one's identity; users post content to give others a sense of themselves and interact with the audience to promote or hinder their image based on what is expected of them [1]. The motivation for each of these activities is based on the standards and culture of the social media platform utilized, as well as the desire for visibility, validation, and recognition. The resulting Identity-Performance relationship occurs because users feel the need to balance the illusion of being authentic along with the strategic presentation of self during the course of their identity.

2.4 Coherence and Narrative Identity

Using the framework of narrative, we can see how narrative can support development of and coherent identity. However, production of narrative continues through use of social media and supports continued social construct between users to produce meaning with their narrative through documenting and sharing of experience on social media [7], [8]. As users are linking to many different platforms and devices and producing record of their experiences at a continually increased pace, the continuity of the narrative will be interrupted by different types of interactions and result in fragmented or fluid layers of identity.

2.5 Sociotechnical Affordances and Constraints

Digital platforms have a large impact on identity formation and development through their socio-technical affordances. Algorithm-based content filtering, measurement of profile visibility to others, and the ability to interactively use the platform to express oneself and connect with others all define how users identify and relate with others online [5], [6]. However, these socio-technical affordances of digital platforms can assist and also impose boundary restrictions as they support norms, guide behavior, and create additional pressures related to self-visibility and self-comparison.

2.6 Towards a Holistic Understanding of Digital Identity

Previous identity-related research has investigated several critical areas of identity development such as performance, narrative, and technical affordances; however, these areas have been investigated primarily individually. Limited research has examined how the different elements above work together within an all-inclusive conceptual framework for capturing the tensions between authenticity and performance, and coherence and fragmentation.

In this research, integrating these perspectives into a conceptual model, we posit that the process of identity development is dynamic and evolving as a result of multiple elements influencing identity in digital culture.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study builds a theoretical model for how digital identities are constructed and how that relates to users' lived experiences through combining theoretical insights from cultural sociology and media studies. Specifically, this study draws upon five bodies of literature: Goffman's dramaturgical approach; Bourdieu's theory of fields and capital; narrative identity theory; dialogical perspectives of identity; and sociotechnical affordances. The combination of these literatures allows for a multi-dimensional understanding of how digital identities are constructed, performed, and negotiated.

Goffman (1959) [1] provides a useful lens for understanding identity as a performance of self-presentation by the individual in relation to different audiences. Individuals perform self-presentation within the context of an audience and manage impressions in a manner consistent with the expectations of that audience. Self-presentation is now more evident and sustained within the context of the digital environment because users are curating material and creating visible identities on multiple social media platforms. Within this conceptual framework, the construct of performative distress is introduced as the psychological strain associated with the ongoing performance of self-presentation (impression management) within the digital environment, particularly in an environment characterised by high visibility, validation pressure, and surveillance by an audience. Finally, Bourdieu's (1984) [9] theoretical constructs of fields and cultural capital are used to situate the construction of identity within a structure where social relationships are produced through an ongoing interaction between the individual and the social order. The social media platforms of today may be described as

digital fields, where users are positioned according to the rules, hierarchies, and forms of capital that are present in that field. Collectively, individuals participating in these fields strategically use their engagement to create capital (by creating visibility) and positional competition within platforms, which consequently links their identity to the capital accumulation process and positional competition that occurs on platforms alike.

Narrative identity theory supports this positionality through the construction of self, where individuals use their life events to create a developing, cohesive narrative regarding who they are. In the context of digital environments, social media platforms are sites where ongoing narrative construction occurs through the continuous creation and updating of both individual and collective narratives about self. The multiplicity of platforms and interaction has the potential to create challenges related to the coherence of life narrative, resulting in fragmentation or fluidity of identity.

Identity is also a relational process, which is further defined through others, according to the dialogic perspective of identity as a relational process. The digital environment enhances the development of identity by incorporating communicative networks and social feedback from audiences. Juvenocentrism as a conceptual framework highlights that identity for young adults is constructed using peer-based interactions and digital engagement (i.e., social media or digital communication). Finally, a sociotechnical affordance perspective represents the relationship between the construction of identities and the design of platforms that impact the identities of users [5], [6]. Users are able to create and share their identity through digital platforms as a result of these examples (of visibility, algorithmic curation, quantifiable feedback). All of these affordances increase the ability for users to explore their identities, while they also can limit users in terms of how they express themselves, given the norms and expectations of certain digital platforms.

Through an integrated framework that relates multiple theoretical perspectives including but not limited to identity performance, capital (economic and social), narrative, relationality, and technology, we can conceptualize identity construction as something that is constantly shifting based on the interactions of elements that contribute to it (in this case, performative, economic, social, and technological). These elements interact and influence one another, and ultimately form what we will call the Digital Identity Matrix, which seeks to illustrate the tension between authenticity and performativity, and unity and fragmentation, in the formation of modern digital identities.

3.1 Goffman's Dramaturgical Approach to Digital Self-Presentation

Erving Goffman's Presentation of Self Theory offers a baseline approach to help researchers understand how young people construct their digital identities, viewing social media as spaces where young adults engage in mediated self-presentation and impression management with multiple audiences, sometimes different or even conflicting. Goffman outlines self-presentation as being closely aligned with the performance of one's identity and managing one's impression through social interactions.

In a digital environment, the performance component is greatly heightened with the use of curated content and interactive engagement. Managing an online identity creates a type of distress for young adults: the cumulative effect of performing and presenting one's

identity digitally, managing multiple audiences simultaneously, and functioning under the pressure of visibility, validation, and audience expectations causes this psychological distress.

In contrast to traditional theatrical experiences which have a clear distinction between the frontstage and backstage, digital experiences remove those divisions and create continuous experiences of self-presentation before audiences such as peers, family, potential employers and algorithmic gatekeepers.

Social media users engage in impression management as a means of presenting an image of wealth or success during economic uncertainty as a way of meeting audience expectations and the universal need to belong or be accepted by peers. Research on different types of digital performance has defined two key ways that curated images and content support the unique audience (platform-specific) preferences of the platforms on which they appear (high quality/polished/etc.): 1) Self-Censorship and Selective Disclosure provide social order, avoiding conflict (peace-keeping visuals); and 2) Lurking and Influencer-ish styles let people participate (low-impact/high-impact).

The continuum between non-goal-laden lurking to highly resistant/influencer-style branding for maximization of Cultural Capital is referred to as "high visibility in digital environments." As a result, identity becomes relationally and strategically constructed; thus visibility equals validation. The peer reinforcement cycle (e.g., likes/shares/comments) and algorithm-generated content result in high levels of pressure for young adults to compare themselves to the increasingly narrower standards of acceptability/performative norms they encounter. In addition, childhood images coexist with future aspirations resulting in continuous (versus no longer) need to manage one's impressions without a traditional "backstage."

Through applying Goffman's concepts to the structure of the play that takes place on social media, it can be seen that social media theatres require actors to perform frontstage perfectly all the time (polished) while the algorithms are "invisible directors" who reward visibility through validation. Because impression management is a strategy for adapting as a function of the attention economy of the platform, it cannot be considered a voluntary performance.

3.2 Bourdieu's Fields

Agunbiade et al. (2013) [10] illustrate that while Goffman's analyses of theatrical production are illuminating, Bourdieu's theorisation of fields, habitus and cultural capital demonstrates how structural power relationships underlie all digital spaces. For instance, social media platforms are examples of 'fields' or structured social spaces with their own rules, rewards and hierarchies that young adults must carefully navigate to establish their identities and gain trust online [10].

Young people in these competitive digital fields draw on habitus to decode the platform-specific doxa and gain a positional advantage. The need to construct an identity is explicitly tied to the accumulation of capital; that is, young adults from middle-class backgrounds draw on digital resources such as aesthetic sensibilities; editing skills; and trend knowledge to navigate unstable job markets and maintain their social status amidst economic uncertainty [11], [12], [13], [14], [15], [16], [17].

An 'economy of visibility' transforms identity characteristics and aesthetic preferences into products that can be traded or exchanged for influence within the digital realm as well as the chance to belong and to have access to opportunities [18]. The structure of a given platform (or field) regulates how resources are distributed through algorithmically determined advantages that favour some performances and disadvantage others [10], [19]. For example, TikTok rewards immediacy of virality; Instagram emphasises aesthetic capital; LinkedIn grants increased professional legitimacy. Each digital field requires alignment of habitus to earn visibility rewards.

Bourdieu reveals that digital culture is structured in such a manner that capital is concentrated through platforms that favor users whose offline background corresponds to algorithmic preferences; thus creating digital aristocracies in which the visibility of individuals leads to increased visibility of like individuals. Additionally, youth identity is not freely expressed but rather emerges as a positional struggle within zero-sum fields in which cultural capital is an important factor in the ability to move socially between hierarchical positions on different platforms.

3.3 Narrative Identity and Digital Storytelling

According to Narrative Identity Theory, people build coherent self-identities by integrating their lived experiences into progressively evolving internalized stories by creating narratives about themselves on social media. Young people in particular are using social media platforms as their primary platform for contemporary "digital storytelling" [7], [8]. Beyond the static presentation of themselves on the web, social media platforms are permitting users to continue to edit their self-narratives throughout the duration of their lives through photo albums, video montages and status updates that illustrate the evolution and growth of their individual selves, their relationships and the future, set to music.

For young adults creating an "online biography" which is a digital memory archive, Instagram grids represent the evolution of aesthetics and TikTok stitches embody significant relationship shifts [11]. This continual revision of their self-narrative is inherently dialogic in nature, as users seek to align their personal internal 'I' with the collective external 'we' of their social audience, modifying the narrative that is contained in any particular post as they engage with their audience through comment threads, react emojis and repost content from their social network [8]. Each post can be viewed as an individual narrative chapter, with "stories" serving as transitional episodes linking older versions of themselves to their future selves.

For young adults who are transitioning to adulthood-especially South African youth who are living in the immediate post-apartheid era-digital narrative has provided space for negotiating tension between themes of individuality and collectivism, between local roots and global aspirations [8]. Social media platforms are acting as mechanisms for young adults to imagine their future selves, as aspirational content (graduation montages, travel reels, narrative vlogs) represents potential future selves, while they also shape their sense of identity through sharing retrospective posts through redemptive storytelling arcs.

However, there is an increasing risk of interruption to the flow of narratives due to algorithms: people have less time to concentrate because of infinite scrolling; micro-trends

encourage short-lived conformity; and switching from one platform to another means losing coherence of biography beyond its original composition on one platform.

As youth create multiple narratives for Instagram, LinkedIn and Snapchat, there is a chance of creating a disjointed digital record where no one platform will be able to hold together the full record of their life.

Narrative theory indicates a different chronological development of social media compared to linear autobiography as digital identity development occurs in a collaborative manner with algorithms and audience members. Algorithms and audience members have the ability to turn everyday life events into negotiated public meaning by giving youth both the ability to tell their own story and be a character in a constantly changing digital biography where each person has the opportunity to record an experience already lived and present an image of the future they want to achieve.

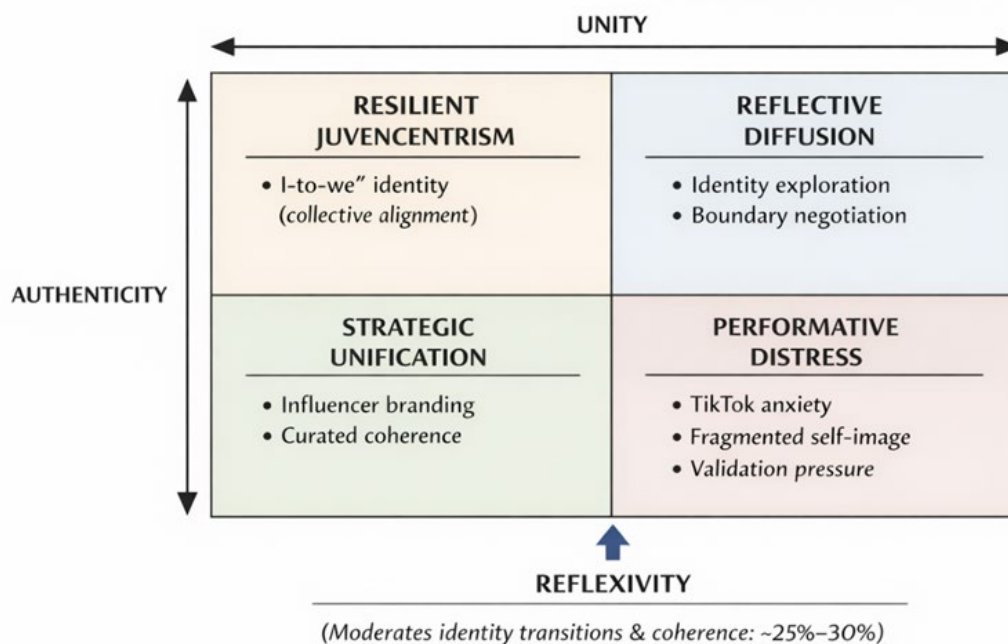


Figure 1. Digital Identity Matrix (source: authors' own elaboration).

The Digital Identity Matrix visualizes the theoretical tensions associated with Authenticity-Performativity (vertical axis) by Unity-Fragmentation (horizontal axis). The Authentic-Unity quadrant denotes resilient, juvencentric identity development through hybrid self-construction via dialogic narratives that convert cultural capital into new identities. Examples include changing from a South African "I-to-we" paradigm to Naga resilience. The practice of Strategic Unification entails the intentional reconstruction of consistent and coherent identities across multiple digital interfaces through curated self-presentation methods; an intention to maximize both social visibility and cultural capital. The practice of Fragmentation produces pathological manifestations of affordances: Performance Distress (TikTok virality; comparison anxiety), and Reflective Diffusion (trans-exploration through the lens of the everyday gaze). Reflexivity flow is indicated by bi-directional arrows demonstrating that deliberate mapping of narrative flow can produce coherence gains (25-30%) across transitions; thus defining the Matrix as a dynamic, rather than static, classification of identity.

3.4 Dialogic Identity and Juvencentrism

Dialogic identity (identidad dialógica) refers to how the self develops through continual interaction with and negotiation with others and highlights the influence of social media on identity construction among young people in the context of adult-dominant socialization structures [8], [20]. Digital platforms modify historically linear monologic identity development to evolve toward relational co-construction, allowing youth to continuously evaluate their individual agency against collective expectations through interconnected comments, reaction emojis, and viral challenges.

Recent research in Chile has demonstrated the phenomenon of “inclusive juvencentricism” (juvencentrismo inclusivo) through how youth have utilized digital networks to both access social relations that support their emerging values, as well as withdraw from social relations that do not support those values. Through digital networks, youth are capable of creating fluid forms of belonging that are not limited by geographic or institutional boundaries through active group curation, including following mental health advocates but not their families.

This form of digital agency also represents a new model of socialization for youth by creating new expectations for how they will interact with others, and how they will challenge adultocentricity through the use of memes, TikTok duets, and collective storytelling, thereby bypassing traditional forms of gatekeeping.

This new framework is defined by relational positioning, where identity becomes how one subjectively positions themselves in relationship to broader societal discourses; and algorithms serve to bring together individuals in resonant communities while obscuring them in non-resonant communities [20]. The space that exists for young people to be agents of their own desires, beliefs, and values is located at the intersection between visibility and withdrawal. Young people take risks around their identity by making public claims about their values via the aesthetics of their profile, while at the same time, curating their feeds privately in order to develop emerging worldviews.

Juvencentrism (youth-centered identity creation) demonstrates how power has been inverted by digital culture: the democratization of authority in relation to socialization through platform construction-putting young people in the position of being norm entrepreneurs, constructing interaction protocols through the influence of viral etiquette (trigger warnings, sharing pronouns, establishing content boundaries). Unlike youth in institutional contexts that expect conformity, individuals on social media are encouraged to experiment with how they discourse, developing their identity through negotiated choices rather than pre-assigned roles.

The dialogic framework outlined here indicates that young people have multiple identities concurrently: familial (Facebook), peer (TikTok), and professional aspiration (LinkedIn) all live within different relational ecosystems that require different dialogic positions from each of the young people that inhabit these ecosystems. Consequently, the platforms mentioned above define themselves as laboratories for the development of new forms of relationality and continually adjust the power between adults and youth, through the creation of technologies that enable the discourse of agency.

3.5 The Sociotechnical Affordances Model

The Sociotechnical Affordances Model emphasizes the relationship between social and technological systems, particularly their role in technology development; social media platforms are also creating new identities through their architecture as opposed to merely providing tools to assist individuals in publicly expressing themselves or communicating [6], [21]. Social media platforms provide technical affordances, such as being able to like, swipe, apply filters, and interact with algorithmically generated feeds, which not only support user-to-user communication, but capture user behavior in ways that create behavioral norms and transform users into data-generated identities based on the platform's profit mechanism.

Core affordances that are part of the social media experience provide a degree of flexibility regarding visibility; the modifiability of a users' personal identity based on time limits or limited content; information regarding others' approval or viewership; and social networks that provide the existence of multiple social identities (i.e., trending topics and duet performances). Each of these affordances facilitates user-generated content that is visible and unique from another user, casting their behavior as "performative," ultimately creating a more constrained range of creativity as users rely on filters as the means with which to mask the underlying systems that engineered their behavior.

This dynamic is further exacerbated by the datafication of social media as each click, dwell time, and connection to a user is converted to an identity capital that fuels the personalization of each user's individual feed; thus magnifying their identity and further reinforcing their user-perceived normality while marginalizing alternative identities [21]. Algorithmically produced content not only reflects each user's identity but continues to develop this identity based on continued personalization; thus providing an echo chamber effect for youth to continue to receive identity-matched content and thereby continue the narrowing of identity-creating possibilities. Platform modulation of relationality structurally transforms our understanding of reciprocity (coercion to follow others creates pressure), competitive metrics of friendship (status gamified through streaks and badges), and the virality of social relationships (challenges). Thus, youth are being trained to optimize relationships, crafting friendships based on curating their connections for algorithms rather than for authentic relationships, thereby turning friendship into network capital [6].

Through governance via infrastructure, this model reveals the radical insight that constructing identity is subject to the platform setting. The design features of the platform dictate what constitutes acceptable personhood. For example, TikTok's vertical video mandates and privileges embodied immediacy, Facebook's timeline requires chronological legibility, and Snapchat's temporality favours spontaneous vulnerability. Youth identity is defined through these architectural ontologies, therefore continuously recalibrating their subjectivities via infrastructural nudges.

This model also reveals the structural determination of digital identity. Platforms do not host self-expression; rather, they create legible and monetizable subjectivities based on affordance-driven behavioural conditioning that alters social relationships, visibility, and self-perception by virtue of competition in the attention economy.

3.6 Synthesis – Negotiating Digital Identity Duality

The three frameworks, when combined theoretically, show that digital identity for young adults is a continuously evolving idea composed of two contrasting components – the Goffmanian performance and the Bourdieusian narrative authenticity as mediated through sociotechnical affordances. Using Goffman's Drama Theory (1959) [1], young adults use the impression management strategies available to them to project themselves but desire space to express their emergence as youth-centered identities and continually adapt their projected selves to emerging forms of authenticity.

This tension results in conscious balancing acts for the individual, enacted as the curation of slightly incomplete online biographies through strategic omissions (to maintain privacy) and aspirational additions (to link idealized self to actualized self), which transform identity into relational architectures shaped through ongoing decision-making. While the platforms they use (through the myriad tools they provide) provide the means to negotiate these tensions, they also employ structural constraints to the act of negotiating the tension (comparison anxiety, fragmented self-perception, gamification of visibility), which creates a systematic undermining of the narrative coherence.

The relationality of the strategy employed to negotiate the tension is defined through selectivity in what information is disclosed to particular publics within networks, informed by having multiple identities across different platforms (e.g. LinkedIn – professional; TikTok – conjunction of playfulness and creation; Instagram – visual coherence), within their respective contexts optimally aligned between impression management and validation through dialogue.

The intersectional nature of identity positionality creates additional challenges to the negotiation of this tension. Privileged youth move their cultural capital effortlessly and with ease across domains or fields (in stark contrast to their less privileged counterparts). Marginalized youth, on the other hand, face greater scrutiny and "legibility costs" through the lens of the structured inequalities all platforms employ to evaluate authenticity. This synthesis yields an emergent risk architecture in which sociotechnical affordances that offer empowerment create algorithmic panopticons, where the result of perpetual visibility is a hysteresis of self-temporal misalignment between one's digitally-recorded history and one's evolving offline self. The overload of ephemerality creates fractures of narrative coherence as an infinite number of micro-performances disrupt the coherent trajectory of an individual's life-story arc by collapsing the spatial and temporal contexts of their presentation.

Digital identity, therefore, is a form of stratified agency; the leverage that middle-class youth possess creates the opportunity for social mobility while working-class youth and people in the Global South confront capital deficits that limit their ability to negotiate within zero-sum attention economy systems – their negotiations yield diminishing returns.

Platformed identity is not simply a mediated identity. The ontology of identity is governed by platforms with young adults positioned as both co-architects and captives of the ideological infrastructure(s) that create a reward system for adherence to the guidelines set out for a digital organization and a punishment for deviation.

The theoretical synthesis also reveals the central contradiction that exists in social media – while youth are promised self-authorship, the ability to present themselves as they choose to be, they instead receive platform-controlled personhood. As a result, the way young

adults navigate their social media interactions is constrained, with respect to their presentation of their self-image and the coherence of their life story, through the limitation of the options available to them with respect to their ability to be empowered by virtue of their position.

3.7 Intersectionality and Platformed Inequalities

The concept of intersectionality uncovers how the construction of a digital identity is compounded by the multiple overlapping axes of disadvantage (race, class, gender and sexuality) that are embedded into the design of platforms that reproduce structural inequities [22], [23]. Social media does not create an equal playing field; instead it produces offline hierarchies by way of algorithms that contain cultural gatekeeping and rationed visibility resulting in the privileging of hegemonic identities while marginalising all others.

For example, the construction of a platform's racial affordance impacts the participants in that platform, where Black users are subject to greater disparities regarding moderation-specifically the rate at which activism-related posts are deleted-while white influencers, due to their possession of "racially neutral" aesthetics, accrue favourability from the algorithms [23], [24]. Cultural proximity bias is evident, as seen in TikTok's For You Page, which systematically subjects Latinx queer creators to less exposure than their viral possibilities due to the cultural proximity bias that favours mainstream norms. The lines between race and class become increasingly blurred here, as working-class youth are disadvantaged as a result of their inability to leverage their identities as aesthetic within beauty economies due to their lack of access to premium filters, professional-level photography, and free time that would allow them to capitalize on trending content [25].

Platform participation defined by gender is often manifested through the toxic amplification of women's posts which elicit an average of three times more harassment than men's posts, leading to the necessity of women implementing defensive strategies (e.g., creating private accounts, filtering comments) that limit their visibility and networking capabilities [26]. LGBTQ+ youth navigate the algorithmically policed naming conventions associated with pronouns, where platforms can erase non-binary identities through default naming practices. In addition, geographic digital divides compound this problem and ensure that there is inequality; youth from the Global South are competing against influencers from the US and the EU, who have greater access to cultural and infrastructural resources, making them privileged on the platform. Hybrid marginalization leads to intersecting penalties: disabled women of colour experience increased levels of inaccessibility through the lack of alternative image tags (for blind users), uncaptioned trending audio (for deaf users), and major issues in accessibility for Indigenous artists who are faced with a cultural appropriation economy that allows white users to profit from sacred aesthetics. The monetization models used by platforms also contribute to the challenges faced by individuals who come from multiple marginalised identities; as influencer contracts tend to favour legible (and marketable) identities, individuals with multiple identities are systematically excluded from the monetisation process as their identities would be confusing (and therefore unmarketable) for brand safety purposes [27].

There are also differing rates of capital conversion; for example, white middle-class masculine identities convert most quickly into follower growth and sponsorship, whereas individuals from multiply marginalised identities receive progressively smaller returns on their efforts.

Young people are taught to view themselves through the eyes of their community; dominant identity intersections perform according to an authentic manner, those with subordinated identity intersections perform in an aspirationally legible way in order to gain access to opportunities. By exposing the reproduction function of digital culture, intersectionality reveals who does and does not receive visibility and virality in the attention economy, and that this visibility and virality is affected by the same structural divisions established in the offline world.

3.8 Digital Habitus and Platform-Specific Capital

The physical embodiment of competences, aesthetic instinct, and instinctual social interaction through prolonged use of a social media platform will help determine a user's navigational success within that field based on their individual immersive experience. Digital habitus is defined as these platform-specific dispositions based on continued interaction and use with the platforms [9], [28]. Each of the platforms has its own unique requirements for users; for example, users on TikTok are expected to have a good sense of style when editing videos, whereas Instagram users must curate photos very carefully and make sure they are framed to perfection.

In addition to acquiring a generalized sense of digital habitus, youth also acquire field-specific doxa; the term doxa refers to the unwritten rules that govern a field, and the unconscious understanding of these rules enables users to build relationships with other users, to engage with their levels of visibility and to build their social capital. By way of an example, TikTok users must develop the priming instincts to compress time (due to TikTok's 15-second duration), Instagram users must develop an instinct toward anticipatory aesthetic alignment from seeing the relationship between various images in an Instagram user's feed, and Twitter users must develop a reflexive instinct for encountering controversy based on an (often quantifiable) ratio difference between the amount of engagement and follower count relative to other users that engage in a similar type of controversy.

The results of developing and exercising these embodied competences will ultimately manifest themselves as digital capital (either algorithmically or through followers' funds), as the ability to use these behaviours will stratify users into elites that have the habitus most consistent with the platform's infrastructural demands.

Individuals who are unable to align their behaviours with the habitus most representative of any given field will experience digital hysteresis. For example, individuals migrating from MySpace to TikTok, users who were not previously active on Facebook, and others in the Global South will experience field dissonance when their historically non-Western cultural dispositions collide with the Western-centric norms that dominate TikTok and Facebook. Collectively, all of these users will experience lower levels of engagement and cultural illegitimacy, because their dispositions from life outside the digital world misalign with the doxa of the respective platform.

Middle-class youth have an inherent understanding of meta-platform awareness, such as how to cross-post and utilize trend arbitrage-all while working-class users reactively engage based on viral possibilities rather than creatively engaging based on intuition. Further, there are Matthew Effects in capital accumulation via specific platforms, with early users turning their temporal advantage into network effects (such as the early adopters of visual aesthetics establishing their own genre) and late users utilizing controversy navigation to develop a following of loyal contrarians. These same influences create and develop what we might call a digital aristocracy, where the alignment of one's habitus on a particular platform creates exponential visibility; that is, the development of the influencer (whose production and monetization potential stem from their fluency on a given platform) creates self-reinforcing cycles of content production and audience development by channeling the two together.

Furthermore, conversion rates between various platforms reveal a rigid habitus on the part of the user, as for example, there is not a direct correlation between virality on TikTok and legitimacy on LinkedIn, or the aesthetics of Instagram and the discourse intensity of Twitter. Young users will learn about specialized platforms and will develop multiple habitus through code-switching (meaning, shifting registers spontaneously at the same time as that platform's doxa) and will thereby develop a wider strategy for having multivocal identity across multiple digital platforms.

In examining the digital habitus, we can see there is an embodied infrastructure of identity, whereby social media does not merely create a platform for self-expression but creates new subjectivity through field- and habitus-disposition types of embodied capital that inherently stratify the social media user population based upon their level of embodied platform competence, and therefore their position as emergent cultural elites in algorithmically governed economies of attention and influence.

4. METHODOLOGY: CONCEPTUAL METHOD

This study is grounded in conceptual rather than empirical research. Its purpose is to create an overall framework for understanding how people construct their identities in digital settings.

The analysis focuses on cultural and media-oriented concepts, one of which is Goffman's Drama Theory, as well as Bourdieu's Fields and Capital Theory. In addition, other theories of narrative construction, dialogical theory and the capabilities of sociotechnical systems are reviewed and included in the analysis. Each of these theories will be reviewed and combined with one another in order to determine similarities and issues between existing literature in this area.

The process of creating the framework was done in three different steps. The first step consisted of reviewing existing research to find concepts and mechanisms related to creating identity in digital settings. The second step included sorting through these concepts in order to create a list of the major dimensions of identity creation within the digital setting (e.g., authenticity-to-performance and unity-to-fragmentation). The third step was to combine these dimensions and create the Digital Identity Matrix (DIM) that serves as the basis for measuring how identity is formed through various digital platforms.

The next step in the study is to create a collection of research-based propositions that will help direct future empirical studies looking at identity formation within specific dimensions of the digital culture. While the propositions listed here will not be used to validate the empirical aspects of this study, they do offer insight into how future empirical studies could be conducted.

5. DISCUSSION

This research creates the Digital Identity Matrix, a concept that seeks to aid comprehension of identity creation in the digital sphere. The Digital Identity Matrix, shown in Figure 1, illustrates how identity is represented across the intersecting dimensions of Authenticity-Performativity and Unity-Fragmentation. By taking a multi-theoretical approach, this framework illustrates that identity is a living process that evolves based on the interaction of performance, narrative coherence, relational engagement, and platform mechanics.

5.1 Identity as a Negotiation Between Authenticity and Performativity

The results of this conceptual synthesis have identified that the structure of identity construction within digital environments emerges through a continual process of negotiation between authenticity and performativity. By utilising Goffman's (1959) [1] concept of self-presentation and Bourdieu's (1984) [9] concept of capital as a framework, the findings illustrate how individuals are active participants in managing their visibility and developing digital cultural capital through strategic practices.

This dynamic is illustrated by the quadrant of strategic unification, where by curating their self-presentation in accordance with the expectations of the platform on which they engage, individuals can maintain a consistent and coherent identity. However, through continued engagement in performative behaviours individuals can experience performative distress due to the psychological impact of continually engaging in the management of impressions on highly visible digital platforms.

5.2 Narrative Coherence and Identity Unity

The narrative processes within an identity coherence framework are also an important aspect of the Narrative Identity Theory, which suggests that individuals create meaning from the ongoing storytelling performed through various digital platforms. Coherent narratives that are supported through the social dynamics of society lead to a cohesive sense of identity, especially in dialogical environments where interaction and feedback promote self-construction.

The concept of Juvencentrism describes a youth-centred process of constructing identity through engaging with peers and collectively creating meaning. In this sector, identity is based both on relationships with others and on being coherent as an individual (with integration across the personal and social domains).

5.3 Fragmentation and Sociotechnical Affordances

The framework also highlights that sociotechnical affordances create the conditions that lead to fragmented identities. Specific platform features (e.g., algorithmic curation, metrics for visible engagement and continuous loops of feedback) influence how identities are formed and experienced.

These sociotechnical affordances create an environment where identity represents multiple distributional platforms and situations resulting in fragmented identities. Reflective diffusion depicts an exploratory identity practice that provides much needed fluidity in identity construction but may also disrupt coherence. The connection between fragmented identity and performative distress illustrates the psychological impact of navigating many different, and oppositional, identity constructions.

5.4 Reflexivity as a Moderating Process

The framework highlights the important contribution of reflexivity as a moderating influence on identity construction by allowing individuals to engage reflexively with their own self-presentation behaviours and to relate experiences across multiple platforms.

In addition to facilitating movement towards increased narrative coherence and stability of identity (even when this identity is dispersed across a number of different digital environments), reflexivity may also be a route to diminishing the tensions associated with the authenticity-performativity dichotomy and the relationship between unity and fragmentation.

The Digital Identity Matrix contributes to the fields of cultural and media studies in an integrative way by bringing together multiple previously fragmented research strands into one cohesive model. Instead of treating performance, narrative and technology as distinct entities, this framework provides a basis for understanding how these dimensions coalesce to construct an individual's identity in a digital context. Consequently, this study enhances our understanding of identity as dynamic, a process of negotiation, and context dependent, while creating a systematic foundation from which to analyse the complexities of digital self.

5.5 Implications for Future Research

The propositions developed as a result of this research serve as the basis for future empirical research into the relationships between performativity, narrative coherence, fragmentation, and psychological outcomes using quantitative or mixed methods. This future research will also allow for investigation of how these phenomena manifest in both Global South and developed world environments as well as how platform-specific affordances create or constrain identity construction over time.

5.6 Building Testable Propositions from Research Questions

Table 1 demonstrates that the three main research questions correspond to outcomes of the Digital Identity Matrix, yielding a total of eight falsifiable propositions that link the synthesis of theory with empirical validation of these theories.

Table 1. Research Questions, Theoretical Dimensions, and Propositions (source: authors' own elaboration).

RQ	Theoretical Basis	Matrix Dimension	Relevant Quadrants	Propositions
RQ1	Goffman; Bourdieu	Performativity	Strategic Unification	P1: Performative self-presentation is associated with increased digital cultural capital and visibility. P4: Cultural capital mediates identity coherence within performative contexts.
RQ2	Narrative; Dialogic Identity	Unity	Authentic–Unity (Juventcentrism)	P2: Narrative coherence is associated with identity unity. P3: Dialogic engagement predicts youth-centered identity construction. P7: Global South contexts support hybrid and resilient identity formation.
RQ3	Sociotechnical Affordances	Fragmentation	Performative Distress; Reflective Diffusion	P5: Affordances enable identity exploration while increasing exposure to risks. P6: Identity fragmentation is associated with psychological strain (performative distress).
All	Reflexivity (Moderator)	Cross- dimensional	Across all quadrants	P8: Reflexivity enhances narrative coherence and moderates identity construction processes.

This table represents how each of the research questions is related to one of the theoretical dimensions from above and how these research question and theoretical dimensions correspond to the Digital Identity Matrix empirical propositions to provide a logical connection between the conceptual framework of this research study and the empirical relationships planned for analysis in this research study.

The theoretical insights presented in Table 1 are distilled down into structured propositions, providing direction for potential empirical research. By aligning theoretical insights with structured propositions, the conceptual framework will maintain analytic coherence and operational coherence across multiple research contexts.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In this study, researchers have created the Digital Identity Matrix as a framework for interpreting how people construct their identities through social media. It integrates key concepts in cultural studies (performance, capital, narrative, relational and sociotechnical) to organize the process of developing and negotiating one's identity in these online or digital contexts.

The analysis shows that identity is a constantly evolving and contextually dependent process and that it is shaped by the two opposing concepts of authenticity versus performativity and by the concepts of unity versus fragmentation. The framework includes a series of related concepts, such as strategic unification and reflective diffusion, which enable a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural complexities of digital selfhood within young adults, creating an enhanced ability to support young people in their identity constructions.

In addition to contributing to the literature by moving away from fragmented notions of identity and offering an intuitive model for understanding the multiple dimensions of young adults' digital culture, the study proposes a conceptual basis from which one may explore how young people's use of social media facilitates identity exploration while simultaneously constraining and developing new social expectations, and/or platform expectations. The Digital Identity Matrix provides a conceptual basis for new empirical research about how people construct their own identities in different ways across different media and cultural contexts, and how both reflexivity and system affect the way that people's digital practices and their identity-coherence relate over the long term.

In sum, the Digital Identity Matrix offers a theoretical framework for viewing identity as an ongoing interaction and performance that is mediated by technology through the various digital interactions that occur within our contemporary digital societies.

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TITLE, ABSTRACT AND KEYWORDS IN BULGARIAN

КАРТОГРАФИРАНЕ НА ДИГИТАЛНАТА ИДЕНТИЧНОСТ: КОНЦЕПТУАЛНА РАМКА ЗА ИЗГРАЖДАНЕ НА ИДЕНТИЧНОСТ В СОЦИАЛНИТЕ МЕДИИ

Резюме: Това изследване създава теоретична рамка за разбиране на това как младите хора изграждат своята идентичност в епоха, доминирана от социалните медии. Тъй като използването на дигитални платформи става все по-често срещано за свързване на хората, начинът, по който хората създават, представят и възприемат кои са, се е променил от нещо, което индивидът създава единствено въз основа на своя опит, до нещо, което е динамично и медиано както от действията му като индивиди, така и от ограниченията, наложени им от платформите.

За да се създаде Матрицата на дигиталната идентичност, са синтезирани няколко теоретични школи на мисълта, включително теорията за драматургията на Гофман (1959) и Теорията за полетата и капитала, наративната и диалогичната идентичност и социотехническите афорданси на Бурдьо. Използвайки Матрицата на дигиталната идентичност, конструирането на идентичността може да бъде оформено в две пресичащи се измерения и да осигури разбиране за конфликтите, които съществуват при създаването на дигиталното аз – от една страна, индивидът иска да създаде автентична (т.е. вярна на себе си) версия на себе си, като същевременно се стреми към обединение (т.е. съгласуваност или всички елементи да работят добре заедно) на конструираната идентичност; от друга страна, те чувстват натиск (от връстници, общество и др.) да бъдат автентични и изпълнителски настроени и да осигурят достатъчна съгласуваност между всички характеристики на конструираната си идентичност, така че да не се разпаднат напълно.

Теоретичните рамки, очертани в тази статия, предоставят начин медийните и културните изследвания да разберат по-задълбочено идентичността – като флуиден, договорен, контекстуално зависим процес в дигитална културна среда – и да установят основа за проектиране на бъдещи емпирични изследвания по тази тема.

Ключови думи: Дигитална идентичност; Дигитална култура; Конструиране на идентичност; Социални медии; Млади хора; Самопрезентация; Социотехнически възможности; Културен капитал; Наративна идентичност.