Interaction Between Virtual Identity and Real Identity: Dual Identities

Kübra Melis Avcu

Correspondence: Kübra Melis Avcu, İnönü University, Turkey.

Abstract

This study examines the interaction between virtual and real identities and explores middle school students' perceptions of dual identities using a qualitative approach. Employing a phenomenological research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 middle school students in Malatya. The data were supported by audio recordings and analyzed descriptively, revealing themes related to identity construction, privacy concerns, social acceptance, and self-expression challenges. Findings indicate that students selectively reflect their real-world characteristics online due to privacy and safety concerns, while simultaneously constructing identities influenced by social acceptance and experimentation. Positive online interactions enhance students' self-confidence and social skills offline, whereas negative experiences, such as cyberbullying, result in diminished self-expression. Participants demonstrated significant awareness of identity differences between online and offline contexts, often highlighting increased freedom and reduced social pressure in digital environments. The study emphasizes the necessity of digital literacy and ethical communication education to address challenges in managing virtual identities.

Keywords: virtual identity, real identity, digital identity, identity construction, dual identity

1. Introduction

Today, social media platforms have become one of the main spaces where individuals express themselves, interact with various communities, and shape their digital identities. As people become more active online and continuously share content, a large amount of information about themselves is directly or indirectly revealed. Every post made, every comment written, and every interaction displayed on these platforms leaves traces of a person's digital identity and offers clues to others about that individual. Although the accuracy or reliability of the content shared by users on social media is not always clearly understood, the way these contents are perceived by others plays a decisive role in the construction of a person's digital identity and social status. In other words, the content shared by a user directly influences others' opinions about them, the image formed about them, and, more broadly, perceptions regarding their identity. At this point, identity is shaped both by the information the individual presents and by the meanings attributed by the community; this demonstrates that identity in social media environments possesses a dynamic, multilayered, and variable structure (Fire, Goldschmidth, & Elovici, 2014; Kaya, 2021).

The concept of identity began to be systematically addressed in the social sciences literature in the 1950s with Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory (Markovikj & Serafimovska, 2018). Erikson explained identity in connection with the ways individuals resolve crises encountered at different stages of their lives, and, by emphasizing the search for identity especially during adolescence, made it one of the fundamental fields of study in social sciences.

In its broadest sense, identity is the sum of the biographical and characteristic features, along with behaviors, that define an individual (Blockchain Türkiye, 2019). Elements that a person is born with (such as gender, race, and place of birth) and those acquired throughout life (such as profession, beliefs, values, and worldview) constitute the main building blocks of individual identity. In this regard, identity can be considered both a fixed and a changeable phenomenon, as well as both individual and social. Put differently, identity is closely related to how individuals define and perceive themselves, and how they are perceived by others. In this sense, the process by which individuals make sense of their own identities and establish relationships with others around them reveals the dynamic and multilayered nature of identity (Avcıoğlu, 2011).

The construction of identity in online environments is not limited to merely transferring real-life identity elements (such as age, gender, race, religion, language, etc.) into the digital realm. Users can remain anonymous on these platforms, conceal their real identity information, or highlight the identity traits they wish, thereby creating a different digital persona. This provides individuals with opportunities to experiment with their identities, discover different aspects of

themselves, and sometimes even construct a new self, independent of their actual reality. Furthermore, updates on social media profiles, the interests and likes indicated by users, function as important signals in the construction of identity. These signals both reflect how the user wants to present themselves and influence how other users perceive that person (Kaya, 2021). For example, someone frequently sharing quotes from a particular type of book may create the impression of having an intellectual identity, while sharing travel photos may give the impression of being adventurous or sociable. In this way, users can construct a desired image via social media and continuously reinforce it by updating this image.
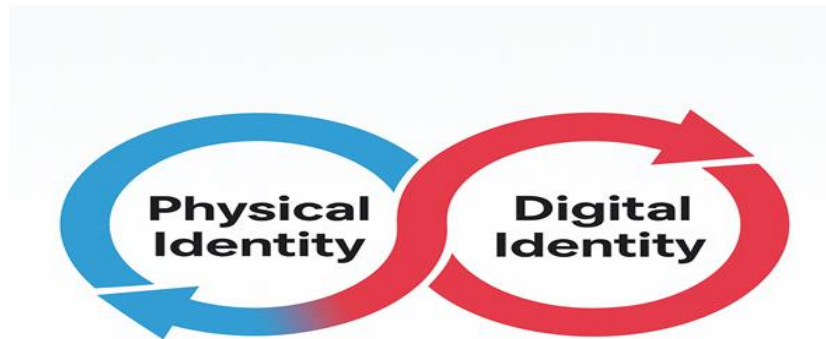

Figure 1. From Physical Identity to Digital Identity. (Capgemini, 2018)

The active maintenance and development of digital identity is becoming increasingly important. Digital identity encompasses the entirety of an individual's online presence, including social media accounts, professional profiles, and other online content (Gill, Zampini, & Mehta, 2015, p. 1219). It is emphasized that a verified digital identity is fundamental for a secure and successful presence on digital platforms. Moreover, digital identity is not limited to officially registered information; it comprises a multi-dimensional and extensive range of data, including a person's digital connections, authentications, online profiles, and preferences (Hernaes, 2019). Within this framework, the digital-based, connective, and flexible nature of digital identities is highlighted as the main characteristics that distinguish them from traditional identities (Capgemini, 2018, p. 3). While physical (analog) identities are designed for face-to-face transactions, digital identities have been developed to offer advanced functions and facilitate operations in digital environments (Quintana, 1998; World Economic Forum, 2016).

Identity development is particularly significant at both individual and societal levels for vulnerable groups, such as children and adolescents. Middle school students are at a stage where they not only interact with their social environment but also actively participate in the digital world. During this period, while students develop their real-world identities, they may also adopt new roles and identities in virtual environments. This situation demonstrates that identity is not a fixed structure, but rather a variable, multi-dimensional, and dynamic process.

In this context, this study qualitatively investigates how middle school students experience the interaction between virtual identity and real identity, as well as their perspectives on this dual identity structure. The research aims to reveal the similarities, differences, and challenges encountered between the identities students display in daily life and those they present in digital environments. In this regard, the findings are expected to provide significant insights into children's digital citizenship and identity development.

2. Method

This study is conducted within the framework of a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research enables the examination of phenomena in their natural context using various qualitative data collection methods such as observation, interviews, and document analysis (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005). In this method, researchers are concerned with the concepts constructed by individuals and the meanings attached to these concepts (Merriam, 2013). Qualitative research also involves analyzing research problems through interpretative techniques and exploring the meanings attributed to social issues. Researchers thematically analyze data obtained through both deductive and inductive reasoning, while remaining sensitive to the context of humans and their environment. This approach makes it possible to examine and interpret data in depth (Creswell, 2013). In this study, the phenomenological design, one of the qualitative research designs, was employed. Phenomenology is a method that aims to collect information about phenomena by examining individuals' experiences (Kocabıyık, 2016). Events, experiences, perceptions, concepts, and situations that we encounter in life may emerge as phenomena whose meanings are not fully understood. The phenomenological design is preferred

to better understand such phenomena. Phenomenology draws on the sources and diversity of individual experiences; it analyzes, evaluates, and compares these experiences. This method provides an opportunity to examine unknown or insufficiently understood phenomena in detail, thus allowing for a broader and deeper understanding (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2011; Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2014).

In the phenomenological approach, data sources are generally individuals who have experienced the phenomenon under investigation. The main data collection method for such research is interviews. In addition, the observation method is used as a supplementary data collection tool. Since phenomenology is a part of qualitative research methodology, it does not aim to provide generalizable or definitive results; rather, it offers information that helps to clarify and understand phenomena in a more detailed and explicit manner. Studies present and explain case examples based on specific experiences, enabling a better understanding of the subjects explored (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2011).

2.1 Participants

In this study, the convenience sampling technique, which is one of the purposive sampling methods, was utilized. This method allows the researcher to select cases that are easily accessible and close at hand, thereby ensuring that the research progresses in a quick and practical manner. Convenience sampling is typically preferred in situations where other sampling methods cannot be applied, and it is a cost-effective and practical approach (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2011; Büyüköztürk et al., 2013). Using this method, the study was conducted with a total of 30 middle school students 15 girls and 15 boys who were studying at middle schools in the central district of Malatya. The principle of ease of access was prioritized in the selection of participants. The data collection process continued until sufficient and satisfactory information was obtained, and the study group was finalized after the interview with the 30th participant.

In this study, once it was determined that sufficient data had been provided and no new information was being obtained, the study group was considered complete. The participants were coded as P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, and so on. Additionally, the data obtained from the interviews were included in the findings section to support and provide evidence for the results.

2.2 Data Collection Tool

In this research, a semi-structured interview form consisting of open-ended questions prepared by the researcher was used as the data collection method. In the process of developing the interview form, the first step was to review the relevant literature and establish a framework encompassing the key points. Subsequently, the validity of the interview form was ensured by consulting expert opinions. In this context, the opinions of three faculty members from the Department of Turkish and Social Sciences Education at İnönü University were sought. In addition, two social studies teachers and one Turkish teacher also reviewed the questions. Necessary updates were made in line with their suggestions. After incorporating the required revisions and additions, this framework was transformed into the final interview form.

The questions expected to be answered in the interview form are as follows:

1. What do you pay attention to when introducing yourself or creating a profile on the internet? Which of your real-life characteristics do you reflect, and which do you present differently? Can you explain why you make these choices?

2. Can you describe an event you experienced in virtual environments (such as games, social media, forums, etc.)? How did this event affect your thoughts, feelings, or behaviors in real life afterwards?

3. What similarities and differences do you think exist between your online identity and your real-life identity? Can you explain?

4. What challenges do you face when expressing yourself in virtual environments? How do you overcome these challenges?

5. Do you find it more difficult to express yourself on the internet or in real life? In which environment is it easier for you to be yourself? Can you explain?

6. How do you think the identity you create on the internet affects your friendships, school life, or family relationships in real life? Can you explain?

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

This study was conducted with 30 middle school students studying in central district schools of Malatya during the 2024-2025 academic year. During the research process, pre-scheduled interviews were held with the participants. The locations and times of the interviews were determined according to the participants' availability. During the interviews, audio recordings were taken to enable detailed analysis. The data were analyzed using the descriptive analysis method.

In the analysis process, thematic categories were first established based on the research questions and theoretical framework. Then, the collected data were organized according to these categories. Finally, the data were presented with frequency values.

In order to enhance the reliability of the research and minimize potential subjective influences during the coding process, the interview data were independently analyzed and coded by the researcher and experts in the field. After the coding process, the findings were compared, and the number of agreements and disagreements between the coders was calculated to determine the level of inter-coder consistency. In this context, the reliability formula suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994/2016, p. 64), "reliability = number of agreements / (number of agreements + number of disagreements)," was employed. Based on the calculations using this formula, the reliability coefficient of the study was determined to be 91%. The inter-coder agreement rate of 91% indicates that an adequate level of reliability was achieved in the study. As stated by Saban (2009, p. 288), in qualitative research, if the agreement between expert and researcher evaluations is 90% or above, the desired level of reliability is considered to have been attained.

3. Results

In this section, the findings obtained from the research are presented and interpreted through tables.

Table 1. Participants' Views on the Question "What do you pay attention to when introducing yourself/creating a profile on the internet? Which characteristics do you reflect/show differently?"

Theme	Frequency (f)
Security and Privacy Concerns	15
Partial Reflection of Real Characteristics	12
Pursuit of Social Acceptance and Approval	10
Deliberate Differences and Image Management	9
Desire for Sincerity and Transparency	7
Exaggerated Presentation of Appearance and Interests	5
Experimental Behavior with Digital Identity	4

- *P2: "I hide my name and date of birth on my profile because I do not want my information to be used by others in the online environment."*

- *P5: "I try to reflect most of my real-life characteristic, but when choosing a photo, I use the one in which I look my best, because people always want to look good on social media."*

- *P11: "Sometimes I make my hobbies seem more interesting than they are. I do this to communicate more easily with new people and to be accepted."*

- *P14: "When creating my profile information, I try to be honest. Reflecting who I truly am makes me feel good. However, I prefer not to share some sensitive information."*

- *P19: "I am shy in real life, but I present myself as a more self-confident person on the internet. I enjoy trying out different aspects of myself in the digital environment."*

The majority of participants stated that they avoid sharing all of their personal information online due to security and privacy concerns (f=15). In particular, keeping sensitive information such as real names, age, and location hidden or only partially sharing it is a common attitude. This behavior is motivated by the desire to protect personal security and avoid identity theft. The partial reflection of real characteristics (f=12) is manifested in students' efforts to accurately convey general character traits, interests, or achievements in their profiles, while choosing to hide or downplay certain features. Some students expressed that they are selective regarding aspects such as appearance or social status. The pursuit of social acceptance and approval (f=10) revealed that students tend to emphasize their qualities that may be considered popular on their profiles and sometimes portray themselves differently in order to receive more likes and make more friends. It was particularly noted that descriptions of interests or stories of achievement are sometimes exaggerated or selectively presented. The theme of deliberate differences and image management in identity (f=9) was associated with the desire to construct a preferred identity in the digital environment and to be perceived more positively by their social circles. Students reported a tendency to present themselves as more confident, cheerful, or successful in online spaces. On the other hand, some students stated that, due to a desire for sincerity and transparency (f=7), they try to reflect their real identity on social media as well, and that creating a fake or exaggerated profile makes them uncomfortable. A small number of participants indicated that they engage in exaggerated presentation of appearance and interests (f=5), attempting to make their digital profiles more attractive by sharing flattering photos,

selected achievements, or "interesting" activities. Finally, experimental behavior with digital identity (f=4) refers to students who wish to more comfortably express certain personality traits such as being humorous, bold, or assertive online, which they may not be able to display in real life. When creating profiles online, students try to balance security and social acceptance, selectively reflect prominent aspects of both their real and virtual identities, and sometimes remain open to experiencing themselves differently in the digital environment.

Table 2. Participants' Views on the Question "An event you experienced in virtual environments and its effect on real life"

Theme	Frequency (f)
Positive Social Experience and Increased Self-Confidence	11
Shyness After Cyberbullying or Negative Interaction	8
Change in Ideas and Perspectives	7
Digital Achievement and Motivation in Real Life	5
Development of Empathy and Tolerance	4
Awareness of Digital Addiction/Time Management	3
Improvement in Real Social Relationships	2

- *P1: "When a post I shared on a social media platform received a lot of likes, my self-confidence increased. I also started speaking more comfortably at school."*

- *P6: "I was insulted in an online game, and it made me very upset. For a while, I hesitated to express myself in social environments."*

- *P9: "When I debated with people from different countries in a forum, some of my prejudices were broken, and now I feel more open-minded."*

- *P14: "When I became the champion in a gaming tournament, I also became more motivated in real life and started a new hobby."*

- *P21: "After an argument I had with someone in a virtual environment, I learned to be empathetic; now I try to listen before judging people."*

- *P25: "I spent too much time on the internet for a while, then I realized this was negatively affecting my schoolwork and tried to control myself."*

The majority of participants stated that they experienced positive social interactions and increased self-confidence (f=11). In particular, situations such as receiving positive feedback, likes, or achieving success led to increased self-confidence and made students more active and comfortable in their social relationships. The second most common theme was shyness following cyberbullying or negative interaction (f=8). Participants reported that when they were exposed to negative or derogatory attitudes in virtual environments, they expressed themselves less and experienced a loss of confidence in real life for a period of time. The theme of change in ideas and perspectives (f=7) indicates that encountering different people and listening to their views in virtual environments helped students become more open-minded and empathetic. Some students stated that, thanks to the internet, they learned to approach different cultures and perspectives with greater tolerance. The theme of digital achievement and motivation in real life (f=5) revealed that achievements on online platforms led students to acquire new interests and increased their motivation in real life. The development of empathy and tolerance (f=4) demonstrates that after conflicts or arguments in virtual environments, students began to place greater importance on understanding and listening to others. The theme of awareness of digital addiction/time management (f=3) showed that students who realized that spending excessive time online negatively affected their academic and social lives felt the need to improve themselves in terms of time management and self-regulation. The theme of improvement in real social relationships (f=2) indicated that the social skills and experiences gained in virtual environments were reflected positively in students' real-life friendships. Overall, the positive or negative experiences that students have in virtual environments can directly affect their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in real life; in this process, differentiation may occur in areas such as identity development, social skills, and empathy.

Table 3. Participants' Views on the Question "Similarities and Differences Between Your Online Identity and Real Identity"

Theme	Frequency (f)
Preservation of Core Personality Traits	14
Differences in Self-Confidence and Expression	12
Role and Behavioral Changes in Identity	8
Similarity of Interests and Goals	7
Different Expression of Emotions and Thoughts	6
Change in Social Relationship Style	4
Difference in Anonymity and Privacy	3

- *P3: "I am helpful and humorous both online and in real life, and I maintain this in both environments."*
- *P7: "I am more shy in real life, but I express myself more comfortably online. Social media gives me courage."*
- *P9: "When talking to different groups on online platforms, I sometimes highlight aspects of myself that I don't show in real life."*
- *P12: "My interests and hobbies are the same in both environments. I shape my posts according to these commonalities."*
- *P16: "I can express my emotions more openly online, but I can be shy when speaking face-to-face."*
- *P21: "Being anonymous online sometimes gives me more freedom, but I am more cautious in real life."*

In the study, the theme of preservation of core personality traits (f=14) stood out. The majority of participants emphasized that they remain sincere, helpful, humorous, or serious online just as they are in real life, and that they do not change the fundamental aspects of their identity. The theme of differences in self-confidence and expression (f=12) reveals that especially more introverted or shy students are able to express themselves more easily and comfortably in digital environments, with social media providing them with a certain kind of courage. Some students stated that they are more willing to meet new people or share their thoughts online. Role and behavioral changes in identity (f=8) show that participants can highlight certain aspects of themselves online such as in different groups or games that they do not display in real life, sometimes presenting a humorous and other times a serious ones. This is related to the desire to "experiment" with identity in digital environments. The similarity of interests and goals (f=7) arises from students indicating that they have similar hobbies and interests both in real life and online, and that they shape their virtual profiles accordingly. The theme of different expressions of emotions and thoughts (f=6) demonstrates that students, in particular, can express their emotions more openly and comfortably online, whereas they are not as transparent in real life. Change in social relationship style (f=4) is based on some students' emphasis that they are much more social, active, and have a broader social circle in digital environments, while they are less social in real life. The difference in anonymity and privacy (f=3) shows that being anonymous or using a nickname online allows students to act more freely or boldly, whereas in real life, they feel their identity is under more control. Overall, when evaluated, students are able to experience their identities both similarly and differently online; while their digital identities provide them with opportunities for freedom and self-discovery, they do not stray far from their core personality traits.

Table 4. Participants' Views on the Question "Challenges Encountered While Expressing Themselves in Virtual Environments and Strategies for Overcoming Them"

Theme	Frequency (f)
Misunderstandings and Communication Breakdowns	18
Inadequacy of Written Expression and Inability to Convey Emotions	13
Fear of Cyberbullying and Negative Feedback	8
Concerns about Language and Spelling	6
Privacy and Security Concerns	5
Seeking Social Approval and Anxiety	4

- *P1: "My written messages are sometimes misunderstood. Since I can't fully express my emotions, it can lead to problems with the other person."*
- *P5: "It is difficult to express my feelings in writing, so I try to express myself better by adding emojis or short videos."*
- *P9: "Sometimes I receive negative feedback for a comment I made, and this bothers me. In such cases, I usually try to explain myself or distance myself from the topic."*
- *P13: "If I make a mistake while writing, people can misunderstand or make fun of me. I check my messages before sending them."*
- *P17: "I am hesitant to share my personal information. I feel safer by keeping my profile information private."*
- *P22: "Sometimes it upsets me when a post I share doesn't get likes or attention. I get support from close friends to keep expressing myself."*

The most frequently mentioned challenge in the research findings was misunderstandings and communication breakdowns (f=18). Participants stated that the lack of elements such as tone of voice and facial expressions in written messaging often leads to misunderstandings. To prevent these misunderstandings, they reported using strategies such as writing explanatory messages, giving examples, or, when necessary, making a phone call. The theme of inadequacy of written expression and inability to convey emotions (f=13) points to the difficulty of fully expressing emotions through words. For this reason, students indicated that they try to express themselves better by using emojis, GIFs, or short videos. The fear of cyberbullying and negative feedback (f=8) shows that negative comments or mocking attitudes in response to posts on social media or forums decrease students' willingness to express themselves. Participants stated that in such cases, they sometimes withdraw, while at other times, they try to explain themselves. The theme of concerns about language and spelling (f=6) causes students to check their posts repeatedly out of fear of making spelling mistakes. This is particularly pronounced in formal or crowded environments. Privacy and security concerns (f=5) encompass the anxiety felt when sharing personal information. Participants mentioned that they cope with this concern by keeping their profiles private or remaining anonymous. The theme of seeking social approval and anxiety (f=4) reflects the anxiety experienced by students when their posts are not liked or do not attract attention. To overcome this anxiety, students generally seek support from their close circles or limit their posts. Overall, students experience communication, security, and social acceptance-based challenges when expressing themselves in virtual environments. They try to overcome these difficulties through various digital tools, privacy settings, and social support mechanisms.

Table 5. Participants' Views on the Question "Do You Find It Easier to Express Yourself on the Internet or in Real Life?"

Theme	Frequency (f)
Easier and More Comfortable Expression Online	15
More Sincere and Effective Expression in Real Life	9
Varies Depending on Environment and Situation	5
Courage Gained Through Digital Anonymity	4
Shyness in Face-to-Face Interaction	4
Better Conveyance of Emotions in Real Life	3
Difficulty and Sense of Distance in Online Communication	2

- *P2: "I express myself more comfortably on the internet because I have time to think while writing and I feel less shy."*
- *P5: "In real life, I can directly convey my sincerity and emotions to the other person, so I find it easier to be myself."*
- *P8: "Sometimes, if the environment is very crowded, I struggle in real life, but I feel more comfortable online because I am anonymous."*
- *P14: "There is a possibility of being misunderstood online, but I can be more courageous. On the other hand, I can sometimes be shy when speaking face-to-face."*
- *P19: "It depends on the situation; I am more comfortable face-to-face with close friends, but when meeting someone new, chatting online is easier."*
- *P23: "Sometimes I can't fully convey my feelings and thoughts online; talking in real life feels more natural to me."*

A large portion of participants stated that they can express themselves more easily and comfortably on the internet

(f=13). Especially in written communication, having time to think and self-regulate, along with feeling less social pressure and enjoying anonymity, allows students to feel freer in digital environments. Participants emphasized that feelings of embarrassment or shyness decrease online and that they are able to share thoughts they might not express in real life. On the other hand, a significant group indicated that they are able to be more sincere and effective in their expression in real life (f=9). They explained that the involvement of elements such as tone of voice, facial expressions, and eye contact in face-to-face communication enables them to convey their emotions and thoughts more completely and clearly. Some students reported that their ease of expression varies depending on the environment and situation (f=5); for example, while they feel more comfortable face-to-face with close friends, they find it easier to express themselves online when meeting new people. Courage gained through digital anonymity (f=4) shows that students are more self-confident and open in the online environment due to the comfort of their identities being unknown. Conversely, shyness in face-to-face interaction (f=4) revealed that students experience more shyness when communicating in public or with new people in real life. A small number of participants mentioned the theme of better conveyance of emotions in real life (f=3), stating that gestures and facial expressions make it easier to convey emotions. Finally, difficulty and sense of distance in online communication (f=2) reflect the experiences of students who feel that emotions and thoughts are sometimes not fully communicated, or that sincerity is lost in digital environments. Overall, when evaluated, students stated that depending on the environment, topic, and interlocutor, they experience different advantages and challenges both online and in real life; however, most of them reported feeling freer and more comfortable expressing themselves on the internet.

Table 6. Participants' Views on the Question "The Effect of Your Online Identity on Real-Life Relationships"

Theme	Frequency (f)
Development of Friendships and Expansion of Social Circle	11
Increased Self-Confidence at School and in Real Life	8
Social Pressure or Misperceptions Caused by Digital Identity	6
Distancing and Reduced Communication with Family	5
Reflection of Virtual Behaviors in Real Life	4
Pursuit of Positive Image and Acceptance	3
Negative Experiences Affecting Social Relationships	2

- *P7: "When I present myself as more self-confident online, I also started communicating more comfortably at school."*
- *P10: "Sometimes my posts on the internet are misunderstood, and this can affect how my friends see me."*
- *P12: "Sometimes there is distance between me and my family, because when I spend too much time online, I talk to them less."*
- *P18: "I started using the humorous attitudes I developed online in real life as well, and sometimes this is received positively, sometimes negatively."*
- *P22: "When I try to present a positive image, I feel that my friends respect me more."*
- *P29: "I got involved in a controversial topic online, and as a result, I fell out with some of my friends."*

The vast majority of participants emphasized the theme of the development of friendships and expansion of social circles (f=11). They stated that they became friends in real life with new people they met online and expanded their social circles through shared interests. Increased self-confidence at school and in real life (f=8) indicates that students who are more active, outgoing, and articulate in virtual environments reflect these traits positively in their school lives as well. In particular, students who achieved success on social media platforms or in games noted that they became more outgoing in real life, too. Some students reported encountering social pressure or misperceptions caused by digital identity (f=6). Situations such as content shared online being misunderstood, causing gossip, or leading to prejudice among friends can negatively affect students' relationships. Distancing and reduced communication with family (f=5) points to themes such as spending less time with family due to long periods spent in digital environments, weakening communication with family, and increasing intergenerational distance. The reflection of virtual behaviors in real life (f=4) means that students adopt humor, styles, or behavior patterns they use online in real life as well, receiving various reactions from those around them. Some students stated that they carefully construct their digital identities in pursuit of a positive image and acceptance (f=3), and that this helps them receive more respect and attention in real life. Negative

experiences affecting social relationships (f=2) demonstrate that arguments or conflicts experienced online can harm friendships in real life. Overall, when evaluated, students stated that the identities they construct online positively develop their social circles and self-confidence; however, they also mentioned that, in some cases, misunderstandings, distancing from family, or social pressure can have negative effects.

4. Results and Discussion

This research reveals the complex and multidimensional nature of the interaction between middle school students' real and virtual identities. Findings indicate that students pay particular attention to safety and privacy concerns while creating their digital identities and are generally selective in sharing personal information. Participants expressed that they partially reflect their authentic characteristics online, but sometimes highlight different aspects of their identities influenced by the desire for social acceptance and approval.

One of the significant outcomes of the study is that experiences gained in digital environments directly impact students' real-life emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. Positive social experiences enhance students' self-confidence and encourage them to become more socially assertive in real life. In contrast, negative experiences, particularly incidents such as cyberbullying, lead students to become more reserved in social interactions. This finding underscores the profound influence digital environments have on students' social and psychological development, forming a crucial context for identity formation.

When examining similarities and differences between students' virtual and real identities, it was observed that participants typically maintained their core personality traits but exhibited different behavioral patterns in dimensions such as confidence and self-expression. Students reported being able to express their identities more freely online and, benefiting from anonymity, had opportunities to experiment with traits they typically could not exhibit in real life. This indicates that digital identities offer students valuable opportunities for individual growth and the enhancement of social skills.

However, the study also identified significant challenges faced when expressing oneself digitally. Difficulties such as misunderstandings due to the limitations of written communication, problems in conveying emotions, and cyberbullying were frequently reported. It was determined that students use various digital tools and social support mechanisms to cope with these challenges. Consequently, the research highlights the importance of educational institutions and parents taking an active role in promoting digital literacy and ethical communication practices.

The impact of digital identities on students' real-life social relationships emerged as an essential topic. According to research findings, social connections established online can expand students' friend circles in real life but may also create distance within family relationships. Additionally, misconceptions and pressures arising from digital identities in social environments represent critical considerations students need to manage in their social interactions. Future research conducted with broader samples and different age groups will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the interaction between real and virtual identities.

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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