

The Gap Between Real Self and Virtual Self (Avatar) Among Social Media Users: A Qualitative Study on Bahraini Youth

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Abstract

This study examines the gap between the real self and the virtual self (avatar) among social media users in Bahrain. Using a qualitative approach, it analyzes in-depth accounts from 25 Bahraini youth aged 18 to 35 years to explore how individuals construct and negotiate digital identities. The findings reveal a significant disparity between the real and virtual self: 48% of participants reported only partial alignment, while 36% reported no alignment between their real and virtual identities. Participants consistently described virtual identities as idealised, selective, and often detached from everyday reality. While these digital self-presentations were associated with psychological benefits, such as increased self-confidence and temporary stress relief, they also generated psychological strain, particularly due to the pressure to maintain idealised images and manage fragmented forms of self-representation. These findings highlight the ambivalent nature of constructing a virtual identity, presenting it as a potential source of psychological tension as well as a resource for self-enhancement.

Keywords: real self, virtual self (Avatar), Identity Gap, social media users, Bahraini youth

1. Introduction

The number of social media users worldwide is increasing, as a result of immersion in the worlds and environments created by the digital revolution—worlds where humanity identifies with a new form of existence and self-expression. This revolution has become a sharp turning point, transforming the natural world and its spheres into the digital realm. It is a serious attempt to digitize humanity, creating sensory alternatives and representations of identity for its “true self” in the virtual world. Because young people are the most frequent users of these digital spaces and the most attuned to these rapid technological shifts, they are vulnerable to fragmentation and psychological and social conflicts due to the multiplicity of identities and personas they construct for themselves on social media platforms. In this context, researcher Don Tapscott describes how “today’s youth are so immersed in a digital deluge that they believe it’s part of normal life”. (Tapscott, D, 2008).

A study by (Ducheneaut, N., Wen, M. H., Yee, N., and Wadley, G, 2009) indicates that avatars are one of the tools users employ in digital spaces to construct idealized and more appealing identities than their real selves. In other words, an avatar is a means of constructing an alternative self that reflects users’ self-perceptions and displays only the aspects they desire. It may also reflect their wishes, but it does not reflect reality.

Furthermore, the virtual self is not merely a simple extension of the real self; rather, it is an opportunity to reshape an entirely new self built upon idealized perceptions and positive dimensions. The emergence of enhanced versions of the self that do not align with reality has psychological and social consequences that affect individuals and influence their interactions in both the real and digital worlds. This study aims to achieve a primary objective:

1. Understanding the implications of the gap between the virtual self and the real self among Bahraini youth. This primary objective leads to two sub-objectives.
2. Identifying the factors that influence the construction of the virtual self.
3. Identifying the consequences of the existence of the virtual self.

A qualitative methodology, guided by the virtual self model, will be employed to address these objectives.

1.1 Theoretical Importance of the Study

This study is among the first to address the gap between digital and real-life identities among Bahraini youth, adding a new cultural and geographical dimension to the global body of knowledge. It also offers an in-depth analysis that enriches existing knowledge and addresses the gap in both foreign and Arabic literature on this topic. It also aims to raise awareness, particularly among young people, about the negative consequences of the identity gap and its psychological and social repercussions. It also encourages the balanced use of the virtual self.

1.2 Practical Importance of the Study

- a) Researchers and Decision-Makers: This study helps researchers and decision-makers understand how young people construct their digital identities and how this affects their real-life self-image.
- b) Psychologists, Social Workers, and Educational Professionals: This study helps these professionals understand the effects of the gap between digital and real-life identities, its relationship to mental health, and its impact on social life.
- c) Academics: This study helps academics design training programs that help understand the role of digital identity, how to use it in a balanced way, and to explain the damages resulting from the gap between digital identity and real identity.

1.3 Previous Studies

After reviewing previous literature, the researchers were able to narrow it down to two main key vocal points, which are as follows:

1.3.1 Studies on the Gap Between Digital Identity and Real-world Identity in General

The study by Maesurah (2025) sought to uncover the experiences of social media users in constructing their digital identity, focusing on the differences between real-life identity and the ideal digital representation of the self. Using a phenomenological approach and employing in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of 10 to 15 participants, the study revealed that digital identity is characterized by flexibility and malleability, shaped by impressions and perceptions. It also found that while social media platforms provide a free space for self-expression, they impose psychological constraints related to digital representation. Furthermore, participants reported experiencing high levels of emotional stress as a result of the discrepancy between their ideal digital identity and their real-life identity.

A study by Shirdel and Hahn (2024) sought to uncover the gap between digital and real-world identity in the context of international virtual exchange and online learning. Using a qualitative approach, the study employed in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of three participants selected after their participation in a virtual exchange program to ensure representativeness of the study population. The results revealed that the digital-real-identity gap widens when there is an imbalance between self-expectations and the perceptions of others. Furthermore, technological limitations exacerbate these gaps and reduce effective interaction.

A study by Aksar, Firdaus, and Pasha (2023) explored the conflicts between digital and real-world identity among Pakistani women stemming from dominant patriarchal cultural constraints. This study utilized a qualitative approach and in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of ten Pakistani women with digital experience. The results revealed that there are clear conflicts between digital and real identity among Pakistani women. They show how cultural frameworks, customs, and traditions affect their digital freedom. They also highlight the difference between digital and real identity, leading to psychological and social conflicts that negatively affect Pakistani women.

The study by Towner, Grint, Levy, Blakemore, and Tomova (2022) aimed to uncover the differences between self-disclosure in the digital world and face-to-face self-disclosure, and its impact on the quality of social relationships and psychological well-being among adolescents who use the internet. Using a descriptive-analytical approach, the researchers conducted a comprehensive systematic review of nineteen studies published between 2010 and 2021, extracted from the Scopus database. The results showed that self-disclosure in the digital world is less satisfying and less beneficial to relationship quality compared to face-to-face self-disclosure. However, some groups benefit more from online self-disclosure than in real life, such as those suffering from excessive anxiety or those aged 12-13, who prefer to disclose themselves digitally rather than in real life. Finally, the study suggests that self-disclosure, whether in the digital or real world, contributes to meeting the social needs of adolescents.

1.3.2 Studies on Avatar-Based Representation of the Virtual Self

A study by Macey, Bujić, Belousov, Kerous, Järvelä, and Hamari (2025) investigated the impact of avatar customization on the quality of presence, social interaction, and relational messaging in digital environments. The study employed an experimental design with a sample of 50 participants. The results revealed that avatars do not significantly affect the quality of presence, social interaction, and relational messaging in digital environments. Although both experimental

groups achieved high levels of social presence in digital environments, this suggests that these environments inherently provide a sense of presence and engagement without the need for avatar customization. Finally, the results indicated that when verbal communication is sufficient, the visual presence of an avatar is neither an influential nor a necessary element.

A study by Niu, Huang, and Tang (2025) shed light on how digital space and avatar characteristics influence the regulation of personal distance between users, in a context similar to face-to-face interaction in the real world. Using an experimental design with three experimental groups, each consisting of 22 participants, the study revealed that interaction in shared virtual environments increases feelings of psychological closeness. It also showed that humanoid avatars enhance feelings of comfort and closeness. Finally, the results indicate that the virtual gaming world is capable of regulating personal distance like real-world interactions.

The study by Peng, Cowan, and Ribeiro (2025) addressed the fragmentation of previous research on consumer avatars. Using a descriptive-analytical approach, they conducted a comprehensive systematic review and analysis of relevant previous studies. The study revealed that the motivations behind avatar consumption intersect with several theories, including self-concept theory, motivational theory, identity theory, and existence theory. It also showed that the construction of a virtual self through avatars is influenced by three main factors: individual factors, social factors, and technological factors.

The study by Zimmermann, Wehler and Kaspar (2023) aimed to understand how users represent their virtual selves through avatars in digital environments in Germany. This was achieved through an online experimental design implemented by Unipak with a sample of 365 participants drawn using both convenience sampling and snowball sampling methods. The results revealed a high degree of congruence between the demographic and physical characteristics of the avatars and the characteristics of the real self, indicating users' desire to represent their virtual selves in a manner closely resembling their real selves. The study also revealed an idealization tendency in virtual self-representation, with its features tending toward positive directions. Furthermore, it showed that virtual self-representation is influenced by the digital context in which it is used. Finally, the results indicate that the construction of the virtual self is influenced by social norms.

A study by Wu, Xu, Dai, and Pan (2023) shed light on user psychology and behavior when designing avatars. The researchers applied an experimental method to a purposive sample of 106 participants. The results revealed that the degree of similarity between the avatar and the real self decreases in informal digital contexts, accompanied by a decrease in overall self-awareness and a reduced desire for self-disclosure. Conversely, the degree of similarity between the real self and the avatar increases in formal digital contexts, accompanied by an increase in users' overall self-awareness and a greater desire for self-disclosure. This indicates that the digital context plays a significant role in how the virtual self is constructed and represented.

1.3.3 Critical Analysis of Previous Studies

- a) In terms of the scientific tools and methodologies used, the experimental method tops the list of the most frequently used scientific methodologies in this type of study. However, other researchers have employed additional methodologies, such as the qualitative method, the descriptive-analytical method, and the phenomenological method. Accordingly, research tools such as experimental design, in-depth interviews, and a systematic review of previous studies were utilized.
- b) In terms of the results: The findings of Maesurah (2025) were consistent with those of Shirdel and Háhn (2024) and Aksar, Firdaus and Pasha (2023), as these studies revealed a gap between digital and real-world identity among users. Maesurah's (2025) study supported the findings of Aksar, Firdaus and Pasha (2023) that the discrepancy between digital and real-world identity results in psychological and social conflicts among users. While previous studies have differed in identifying the nature of the criteria that might influence the construction of the digital self, the study by Wu, Xu, Dai, and Pan (2023) examined the role of the digital context in this construction, whereas the study by Zimmermann, Wehler, and Kaspar (2023) found that it is influenced by social norms, a finding consistent with that of the study by Peng, Cowan, and Ribeiro (2025).

The researcher argues that the studies confirmed the existence of a gap between the real self and the virtual self, but they did not define the nature and extent of this gap, nor did they address its implications. This necessitates further research to examine this phenomenon and understand its psychological and social consequences.

1.4 The Scope of the Study

A study by Zimmermann, Wehler, and Kaspar (2023) indicated that self-representation in digital environments is characterized by idealization, with users deliberately highlighting their positive aspects and concealing their negative ones. Although previous studies have addressed this practice, they have not defined the nature and extent of the gap between the digital self and the real self. Avatars reinforce this difference as a visual representation that substitutes for the real self, especially given their ability to be reshaped according to the perceptions users wish to project. In this context, this study explores the consequences of the gap between real and digital identities among Bahraini youth aged 18 to 35.

1.5 Research Questions

Q1. Is there consistency between real and digital identities among the study sample?

Q2. What factors influence the formation of digital identity among the study sample?

Q3. What psychological and social benefits do the study sample gain from the difference between their digital and real identities?

Q4. Does the presence of multiple identities on social media platforms cause psychological or social conflicts among the study sample?

2. Theoretical Framework of the Virtual Identity Model

Researchers turned their attention to studying virtual identity with the expansion and spread of the internet, particularly in the 1990s. Sherry Turkle is considered one of the pioneers who examined virtual identity in her book, **Life on the Screen**. Turkle highlighted the possibility of multiple and diverse identities in cyberspace, as it represents a fertile environment for experimenting with various virtual identities and discovering oneself. She also argues that users in the digital space possess multiple identities: a social identity, an emotional identity, a professional identity, and an imaginary identity (avatars). These identities serve to expand and enrich the real-life self (Sherry Turkle, 2011).

Given the successive digital transformations, researchers have focused their efforts on formulating theories to explain digital behavior. In 2013, researcher Russell developed the theory of the extended digital self, arguing that the virtual space is not merely a platform for interaction between users, but a free space for self-expression through images, posts, profiles, and avatars that constitute an extension of the real self (Russell Belk, 2013).

The study by (Nagy, P., and Koles, B., 2014) employed the constructivist conceptual model of virtual identity, as illustrated in Figure 1, to understand how virtual identity or self is constructed in the digital space. The model identifies three levels that influence the construction of virtual identity, as follows:

- **Individual level:** This level relates to the individual (the avatar) and their personal self-perception, and how they choose to present their virtual self in the digital community.
- **Micro level:** This level relates to the social interaction of the virtual self or avatar within digital environments such as social media platforms.
- **Macro level:** This level relates to the context of the digital environment itself, such as the intellectual, cultural, and political orientations that govern it.

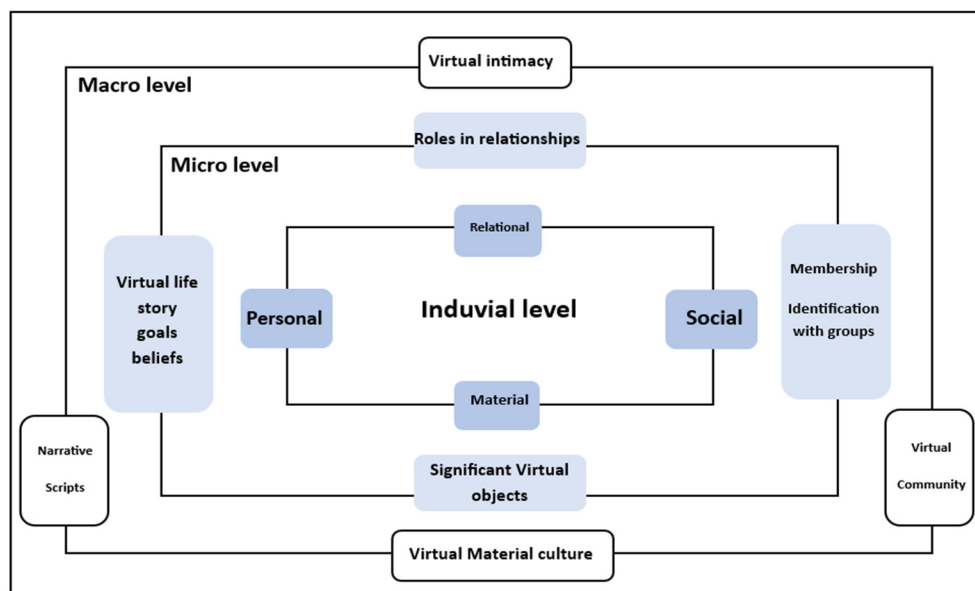


Figure 1. The conceptual structural model of virtual identity

3. Method

This study adopted a qualitative, exploratory approach, employing in-depth interviews to collect data on the phenomenon under investigation. This methodology helped the researcher understand the implications of the gap between the digital self and the real self among Bahraini youth. During the data collection process, informed consent was obtained from the

participants, and they were informed that all collected data will be anonymous, protected and used for research purposes only.

3.1 Sample

The study sample consisted of a purposive sample of Bahraini youth aged 18 to 35 years with an online presence on social media platforms. The researcher distributed a preliminary questionnaire containing only three questions, as follows:

1. What is your age group?
2. Do you have a digital identity on social media platforms? Yes or No?
3. What is your contact information?

The researchers then excluded individuals who did not meet the study criteria, resulting in a sample of 25 participants. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the sample:

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Characteristics of the Study Sample		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	17	68%
	Male	8	32%
Age	18 to 23 years	8	32%
	24 to 28 years	6	24%
	29 to 35 years	11	44%

3.2 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the Voyant Tools program for in-depth interview analysis, in addition to manual transcription.

3.3 Procedure for Accuracy and Reliability

1. Face Validity: The researcher presented the research instrument to three professors in the field of media and communication studies, who provided several suggestions for improvement. The researcher made the necessary modifications, and the panel of experts agreed that the instrument was suitable for achieving the study's objectives.
2. Reliability of the Research Instruments: The researcher conducted a pilot study of the in-depth interview guide with two individuals outside the main sample to ensure the clarity of the questions and their effectiveness in collecting the required data.

3.4 Data Collection Tools

The researchers relied on one primary tool in this study:

1. In-Depth Interviews: This involved designing an in-depth interview guide, with each interview lasting between 30 and 50 minutes. During this time, the researcher was able to gather as much information as possible about the participants.

4. The Cognitive Framework of Digital Identity, Its Types, and the Mechanisms of Its Formation

Real identity derives its meaning from an individual's awareness of the true self, including unique personal and psychological characteristics. Digital identity, on the other hand, is formed through a pseudonym, email address (which links the user to their social media accounts), avatar (the visual representation they choose), images, language used to express themselves in these digital environments, their online presence, content, and interaction with other users. These elements may reflect a part of the user's real self in the digital world or be entirely separate from it. Researchers Warburton and Hatzipanagos agree with this concept, linking digital identity to the user's digital performance rather than limiting it to personal account data and posts. (Warburton, S., and Hatzipanagos, S., 2012)

Digital identity is dynamic because it is reconfigurable and reshaped based on user modifications and interactions. A study by (Kenza Ben Slimane, 2022) classifies digital identity into three types, as illustrated in the figure. 2:

- Declared identity: This refers to all the data a user provides about themselves in digital environments, including their real or assumed name, age, gender, nationality, occupation, and how they present themselves.
- Active identity: This refers to a user's digital performance within digital environments and their interaction with other users. This performance contributes to shaping their digital identity.
- Calculated identity: This refers to quantitative or qualitative variables that result from complex mathematical algorithms linked to the electronic system, and the user does not intervene in them.

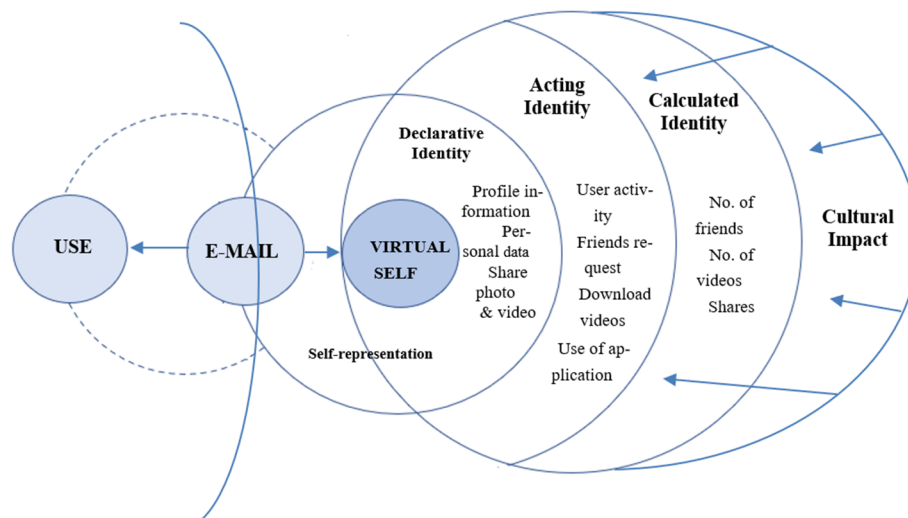


Figure 2. Digital identity categories

5. Results

In this chapter, we discuss the results of the in-depth interview guide as follows:

5.1 The Gap Between the Virtual Self (Avatar) and the Real Self

12 responded that there is a partial overlap between their digital and real-life identities. They commented that they are not trying to present a false or completely different identity but rather tend to showcase certain aspects of themselves in the digital community. 9 others believe that their digital identity does not align at all with their real-life identity. One of them stated that their digital identity provides an outlet for expressing thoughts and feelings free from societal constraints, while another described their digital identity as a mask concealing their real identity. In contrast, four other individuals believe there is a high degree of overlap between their real and digital identities. All participants agreed that their digital identity is characterized by idealization and disconnect from reality. Figure 3 illustrates the degree of overlap between the digital and real identities of the sample.

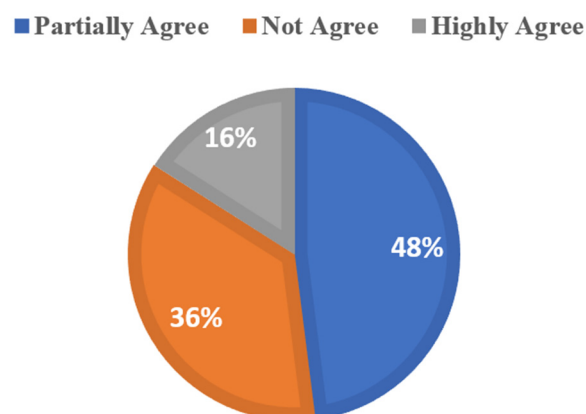


Figure 3. The extent to which digital identity matches real-life identity among the sample

Regarding the points of agreement between the two identities, 15 people answered that their digital identity reflects their interests, intellectual orientations, and real-life inclinations, while 5 others believe that their digital identity reflects their communication style, and finally, 5 others answered that their digital identity reflects a part of their real personality in the digital community. Figure 4 illustrates the points of agreement between real and digital identities among the sample. Figure (4) shows the features of agreement between digital and real identity among the sample members

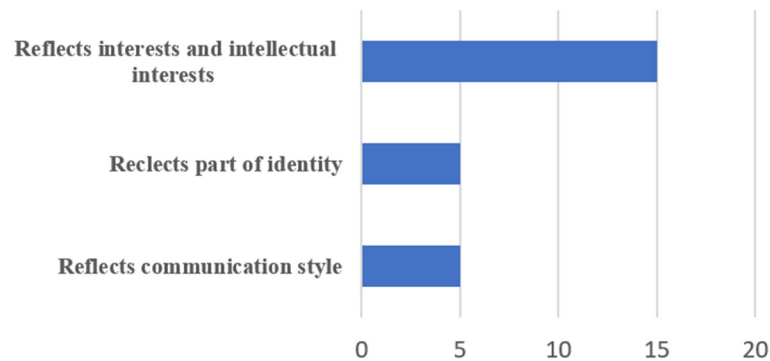


Figure 4. The features of agreement between digital and real identity among the sample

While 19 participants highlighted the difference between the two identities as concealing the negative aspects of their real identities, four others felt the difference lay in the fact that their digital identity did not fully reflect reality, and that they tended to be reserved about publishing and sharing certain personal information. Finally, two participants identified the difference as involving their use of pseudonyms in the digital community. One participant stated that he sometimes felt compelled to flatter followers to gain respect and project a positive image, which contradicted his true personality. Another described a barrier between himself and others in digital relationships, allowing him to hide his true feelings and reactions. Figure.5 illustrates the differences between digital and real identities among the participants.

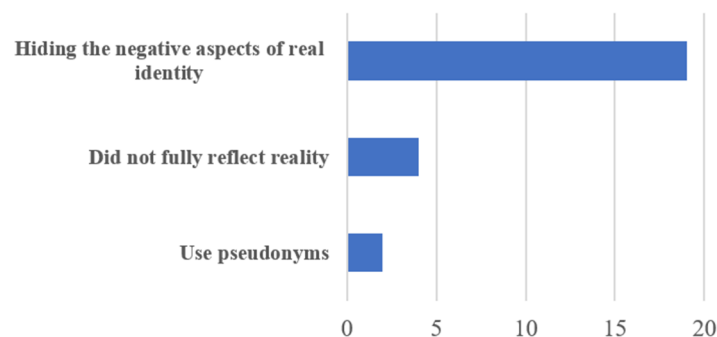


Figure 5. The differences between digital identity and real-world identity among the sample

As for the reasons behind this discrepancy between the two identities, participants offered a variety of answers, including:

- To maintain privacy by withholding certain information.
- To gain acceptance and approval from the online community.
- To project a positive image by constructing a digital identity that is an enhanced version of their real self.
- To maintain a positive impression among followers.
- To present a model of self they aspire to be in real life.
- To achieve personal goals, such as gaining fame and financial gain, through self-promotion and building a positive reputation.

5.1.1 How Does Your Digital Identity Affect Your Perception of Your Real Identity?

11 people responded that their digital identity positively impacts them because it supports the version of themselves, that they aspire to be. It also helps them understand and realize their true selves through artificial intelligence algorithms that store their search history and constantly remind them of their interests and intellectual learning. One participant described their digital identity as a goal board. 5 others agreed that their digital identity helps them enhance communication, build relationships, and enrich their knowledge, which positively impacts their real self. One participant stated that they have multiple personal accounts on the same platform, using each account to serve their personal goals. Conversely, 4 other participants in the sample reported that their digital identity negatively impacts them due to overuse, distractions, and the discrepancy between their digital and real identities. One participant expressed that their digital identity and its content raise the expectations of those around them, causing them psychological pressure. Another participant described how their

digital identity distances them from their true self, creating a perfect, imaginary world through interaction and support from followers, giving them a false sense of fulfillment and thus diminishing their desire to exert effort and achieve more. However, three other participants found that their digital identity provides them with a free space to express themselves in various ways, enabling them to understand their true selves. One of them described it as opening horizons that are unattainable with the same depth and speed in real life. Conversely, two other participants felt that their digital identity does not affect their perception of their true selves because they understand it to be a virtual identity that can be easily shaped and reshaped.

5.1.2 What Distinguishes Your Digital Identity from Your Real Identity, and Which Identity Do You Prefer and Why?

13 respondents agreed that the defining characteristic of digital identity is its adaptability and ability to be reshaped according to users' perceptions and desires. 8 respondents, however, believe that digital identity is characterized by its positive dimensions and idealistic tendencies, leaving a positive impression and supporting the creation of the desired online image, unlike real identities, which require significantly more effort to improve or change. 4 other respondents believed that digital identity is distinguished by its lack of time and place limitations, providing them with easier and faster communication opportunities. Furthermore, it offers them greater freedom to express themselves in diverse ways than they have in their real lives. As for their preferred identity, 17 respondents agreed that they prefer their real identity because it reflects their lived reality. One of them stated, "I prefer my real identity because it shaped my digital identity and determines its direction." While 8 people responded that they prefer a digital identity because it faces fewer societal restrictions, they choose and create it with great care; it showcases the positive aspects of their real-life self; and it connects them with other users who share similar interests, orientations, and inclinations. One of them stated: "My digital identity boosts my self-confidence due to the immediate and rapid interaction I receive from my followers." Figure.6 illustrates the identity preferred by the sample.

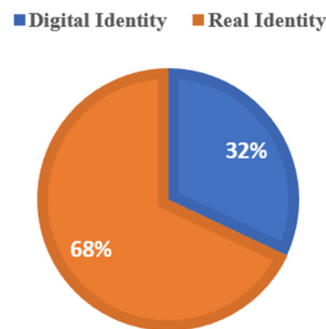


Figure 6. The identity to which the sample tends

5.2 The Focus Is On the Factors Influencing the Creation of a Digital Self

5.2.1 To What Extent Do Cultural Frameworks, Customs, and Traditions Influence the Formation of Your Digital Identity?

23 respondents agreed that a digital identity cannot be built in isolation from the cultural frameworks, customs, and traditions to which they belong. One explained, "Digital identity is inherently shaped within these cultural frameworks and references." Another clarified, "We create our digital identity to gain acceptance and endorsement from the digital community, so it cannot be created apart from these frameworks." Conversely, two respondents felt that these frameworks do not influence their digital identity formation because they are independent individuals in real life and are less influenced by these references, which is reflected in their digital identity.

5.2.2 What Role Does the Digital Platform You Use Play in Building Your Digital Identity?

13 respondents agreed that the platform's tools influence the creation of digital identity. For example, Snapchat offers the Bitmoji feature, which allows users to create avatars—visual representations of their virtual selves. These avatars reflect the physical characteristics and general personality of the users. Respondents commented that they use their avatars in a way that reflects aspects of their real identities, such as the clothing they wear, which may represent a specific profession or reflect their personal taste. However, for the other twelve respondents, the nature of the digital community on the platform plays a crucial role in determining the direction and general character of their identity. One participant commented, "I have a different identity on each platform. For example, on Snapchat, my identity seems more spontaneous and natural, while on Instagram, it's more formal and serious. On TikTok, it's more humorous and free-spirited."

5.2.3 What Other Factors Have Influenced the Creation of Your Digital Identity?

17 respondents indicated that their personal self-perception influences the creation of their digital identity. One participant stated, "I design my digital identity to resemble the version of myself I aspire to be in real life; it reflects my self-perception." Four respondents agreed that their personal interests and inclinations influence the creation of their digital identity. One commented, "At each stage of life, different interests emerge, which are reflected in the direction of my digital identity." In contrast, 3 other respondents believed that the values, principles, and ethics they uphold in real life influence the creation of their identity. One participant believed that their personal goals influence the creation of their digital identity. Figure.7 illustrates the other factors influencing the creation of digital identity among the respondents.

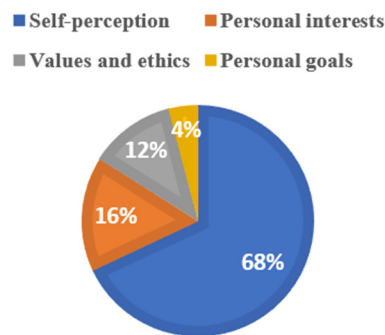


Figure 7. Other factors affecting the creation of digital identity among the sample

5.3 The Axis of Consequences Resulting from the Existence of the Virtual Self

5.3.1 What Psychological and Social Benefits Have You Gained from the Difference Between Your Digital and Real Identities?

Regarding the social benefits experienced by the sample group because of this difference, 18 people agreed that the benefit lies in strengthening social relationships, as the digital space connects them with other users who share similar orientations, interests, and inclinations. Seven people believed the social benefit lies in enriching their knowledge by staying informed about the latest developments and being exposed to a wider range of information and cultures. As for the psychological benefits, 12 people believed the benefit lies in experiencing enjoyable emotional experiences in the digital space, while eight people believe the psychological benefit lies in having a free space to express themselves in diverse ways. Two people saw the psychological benefit in alleviating the pressures and burdens of daily life, and finally, five people believed the psychological benefit lies in boosting self-confidence through positive interaction and gaining acceptance and support from the digital community.

5.3.2 How Has Your Interaction in the Digital Community with Your Virtual Identity Affected Your Real Self-Image?

14 participants answered that it had a positive impact, in several ways, as follows:

- Projecting a positive self-image.
- Enriching social skills and cognitive abilities, which positively impact the real-life self.
- Digital identity helps in discovering the real self through content that aligns with users' personal interests and preferences.
- Enriching real-life experiences through exposure to diverse content in the digital space.
- Contributing to the development of real-life goals through exposure to motivational content or additional information in the digital space.

As for the other 11 people in the sample, they believed that it negatively affected them, and this effect is evident in several aspects, which are as follows:

- Detachment from one's true self.
- Dividing oneself between multiple identities.
- Exposure to idealized content can lead to frustration among some participants due to their inability to emulate the idealized life in the digital world.

For some participants, interacting with their digital identity can distort general concepts such as beauty standards, body image, and lifestyle. Figure.8 illustrates the effect of interacting with a virtual identity in the digital community

on the real self-image of the sample.

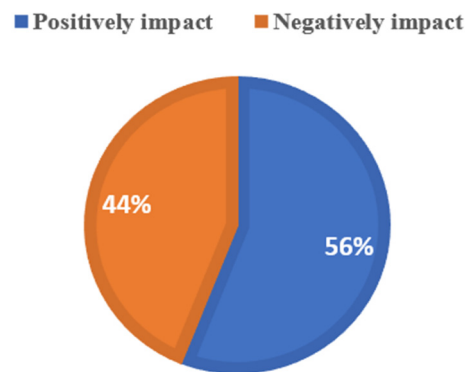


Figure 8. illustrates the effect of interacting with a virtual identity in the digital community on the real self-image of the sample

5.3.3 Has Having Multiple Identities on Social Media Platforms Caused You Psychological or Social Conflicts, and What Is the Nature Of These Conflicts?

19 respondents stated that having multiple identities on social media platforms does not cause them any psychological or social conflicts, as they use them in a balanced way. Others said that their digital identity is merely a tool to achieve personal or professional goals, while still others said, "We recognize that our digital identity is a fictional construct reflecting one aspect of our lives, and we control and direct it according to our desires and objectives." In contrast, 6 other respondents felt that having multiple identities causes them psychological and social conflicts. These conflicts manifest as a feeling of alienation from their real selves and a sense of being torn between these identities. They also experience frustration or inadequacy due to exposure to content that glorifies individuals and their achievements, in addition to hesitating to express their true thoughts at times, because of fear of attacks from other users who disagree with them. One participant stated that being present in the digital community raises more doubts about their beliefs and perceptions of life in general.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study showcases a complex relationship between how young Bahraini users choose what to share on social media, the meaning of content based on context, and the conflict between authenticity and presenting an ideal self-image. Most of the participants said that their online personas partially, or not at all, match their real-life selves, and only a few felt the two were very much similar. This aligns with Turkle's (2011) idea of the fragmented self, whereby individuals reveal different parts of their real identity across different digital media apps. Even one person referred their online identity as "a mask hiding their real identity". However, others felt their online and real-life personas were very much the same, relating back to Belk's (2013) "extended self" idea that suggests digital profiles and content become part of who the person is over time.

All the participants said that online identity is typically idealized and does not necessarily reflect real-life. This aligns with Nagy and Koles' (2014) e-extended self-framework, which suggests that people build their digital selves by carefully choosing and polishing what they share. This is because people want to fit in and look good in front of others, and therefore, they choose to show a better version of themselves online.

Everyone in the study said online identity is often idealized and separated from real life. This supports Nagy and Koles' (2014) idea that people build their digital selves by carefully choosing and polishing what they share. People do this to fit in, look good to others, and show a better version of themselves.

Shared interests and intellectual orientations were the prominent points of agreement among participants who showed a primary bridge between real and digital selves. However, 19 of the participants stated that they would still hide negative parts of their real lives. This finding is a testament to how online self-presentation can feel like performance, whereby people need to impress their followers to win their approval and then reap the algorithms' benefits.

7. Theoretical Implications

The results of this study can contribute to the field of digital identity in three ways. First, this study supports Turkle's idea that identity can be scattered online. However, it also highlights that users often purposefully choose to do so, and it is

not a compulsive behaviour. Second, this study builds on Belk's "extended self" by providing further evidence that followers' approvals and algorithms shape how people view and value themselves. Third, it further enhances Nagy and Koles' framework by suggesting that people shape their online identities within their local cultures. 23 participants agreed that culture affects their digital identity, meaning that their online personas are still tied to real-world cultural contexts, and not floating free in isolation.

8. Psychological Consequences

The participants disclosed that being online allowed them to express themselves freely, provided a stress relief, and made them feel more confident. On the other hand, many reported being disconnected from their real selves, being emotionally triggered by idealized content they see on social media and therefore feel pressured by the unrealistic standards. The one person who said that the online identity made "a perfect, imaginary world" reported a lowered real-life motivation. This aligns with Turkle's (2011) idea that digital media can be inspiring and isolating at the same time. Although 19 participants said having multiple identities caused no problems, six reported feeling alienated, fragmented, or doubtful about themselves. This variance suggests that the mental exercise of juggling online and offline selves vary among people, depending on self-confidence and how well their two identities fit together.

9. Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations. The results may be biased and, therefore, might not apply to everyone because the study solely relied on qualitative methods. Interviews rely on people's own reports, who can be biased by wanting to look and sound good. In addition, the study was a one-time snapshot; therefore, it cannot accurately assess the gap between real and online selves that changes over time. For future studies, researchers can use a mixed methods approach to obtain more comprehensive insight and, over time, to see how identities develop. A cross-cultural studies will also show whether these findings are universal or can vary depending on culture. More studies can be done to investigate how technology and human identity interact since algorithmic feedback is a key player in informing people's decisions and shaping their personalities.

10. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that young people in Bahrain build their online personas by carefully selecting what to share with the purpose of attempting to present an improved version of themselves to their followers. They do this while balancing between the online norms and their local cultures. According to the surveyed participants, this leads to psychological benefits, such as improved confidence and stress relief. However, some of them felt overwhelmed by the idealized images and split identities. The findings from this study contribute positively to digital identity theory by providing additional evidence of algorithms' influence on self-view, how online identities are rooted in culture, and how people deliberately split parts of themselves online. Since digital platforms can dictate who we are, researchers and policymakers need to understand the mental effects of the gap between real and online selves.

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Author contributions

Zahra Aman was responsible for the study design, data collection, and data analysis. Afrah Faraj contributed primarily to the writing and translation of the manuscript. Naglaa Elgammal provided overall supervision and guidance throughout the research project. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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The authors declare that they have no competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this study.

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Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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