

The Dynamics of Social Identity in the Digital Era: An Analysis of Social Media's Role in the Formation of Virtual Community Groups



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ABSTRACT

KEY WORDS

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This paper explores the dynamics of social identity in the digital era, focusing on the role of social media in the formation of virtual community groups. Using a qualitative approach, this study synthesizes findings from various academic sources through a literature review to analyze how digital platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, influence the construction and negotiation of individual and collective identities. The research reveals that social media allows individuals to craft curated digital personas that may differ from their offline identities, providing new opportunities for self-expression and community affiliation. Virtual communities, built around shared interests and ideologies, offer individuals a sense of belonging and a space to explore identity beyond geographical and social constraints. However, the study also highlights the challenges posed by digital environments, including the creation of filter bubbles, echo chambers, and the reinforcement of in-group/out-group dynamics, which can lead to social fragmentation and polarization. By drawing on existing theories of social identity, the paper demonstrates how social media both empowers and divides users, with implications for social cohesion and collective behavior. The findings suggest that while virtual communities offer significant potential for positive social engagement, there is also a need for greater regulation and design improvements to address the risks of digital exclusion and ideological siloing.

1. Introduction

In the era of rapid technological advancements, digital platforms, particularly social media, have reshaped human interaction and community building. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, have transcended their original functions as tools for communication and information sharing to become dynamic spaces for identity formation, social connection, and collective action (Boyd, 2014; Van Dijck, 2013). The evolution of these platforms has led to the creation of virtual communities, groups of individuals who, despite geographical separation, share common interests, beliefs, or objectives (Howard, 2010; Rheingold, 1993). These virtual spaces enable individuals to explore and construct their social identities in ways that were not possible in pre-digital societies, where social belonging was often defined by physical proximity and face-to-face interactions (Castells, 2011).

However, despite the growing significance of social media in shaping modern social identities, scholarly attention has only recently turned to how these digital spaces contribute to the formation of social identity in virtual communities. While extensive research has examined the broader implications of digital technology on human behavior, relatively little has been done to address the specific dynamics of identity formation within these virtual groups (Boyd, 2014; Papacharissi, 2011). This research gap becomes even more apparent when considering the fluid and decentralized nature of virtual communities, which differ significantly from traditional, physically-bound groups (McKenna & Bargh, 2014). Given the increasing role of social media in modern society, there is a need for a deeper understanding of how these platforms influence individuals' self-concept and social affiliations in both inclusive and exclusive digital environments (Greenhow & Lewin, 2019).

The urgency of this research lies in the growing impact of digital interactions on various aspects of individual and collective life. Social media has not

only transformed the way people communicate but has also altered how people identify with others. This shift has implications for social cohesion, political movements, and personal identity in both online and offline contexts (Zhao et al., 2008). Understanding the dynamics of social identity in the digital space can thus inform various fields, including psychology, sociology, communication studies, and political science, by offering insights into how virtual communities contribute to social fragmentation or cohesion (Castells, 2011).

Several key studies have already examined the intersection of social media and identity, but they often focus on the broader effects of technology on society or emphasize certain demographics over others (Baym, 2015; Papacharissi, 2011). A few scholars have also discussed the role of online communities in fostering collective identities, but most have failed to examine the nuanced, often contradictory ways in which individuals engage with these communities on a personal level (Ellison et al., 2007; A. W. Smith & Duggan, 2013). This paper aims to fill this gap by exploring how social media facilitates the formation of virtual communities and how individuals navigate their social identities within these communities. Specifically, it addresses how identity is constructed and reconstructed in response to the participatory, networked nature of these digital spaces, which can either reinforce or challenge traditional social norms (Markman, 2012).

The novelty of this research lies in its exploration of the evolving dynamics of social identity in the digital age, particularly in the context of increasingly complex virtual communities. While much research has been devoted to understanding individual identity in isolation or in face-to-face settings, this study provides a fresh perspective by focusing on the collective dynamics of identity formation in digital environments (Gaudette et al., 2021). By integrating theories of social identity with contemporary digital realities, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how individuals negotiate their identities in virtual spaces, considering both the opportunities for self-expression and the risks of



digital alienation (McKenna & Bargh, 2014; Rheingold, 1993).

This paper aims to contribute to the broader conversation about the digital transformation of social identity by addressing the following objectives: (1) to analyze the role of social media in facilitating the formation of virtual communities; (2) to explore how these communities impact individuals' social identities; and (3) to investigate the implications of social media for social cohesion and division in the digital age. The findings of this study are expected to provide insights into how digital platforms both empower and challenge individuals in their pursuit of social belonging (Zhao et al., 2008). Additionally, the research aims to inform future interventions and policies that promote inclusive and diverse digital communities (O'keefe, 2015).

Social Media's Role in the Formation of Social Identity

Social media has significantly reshaped the way individuals communicate, interact, and form social connections, making it a critical space for the formation and negotiation of social identities. Unlike traditional face-to-face interactions, which are geographically bound, social media platforms enable users to engage in interactions with individuals from diverse backgrounds, interests, and beliefs. This democratization of interaction allows individuals to explore and perform various aspects of their identities, be it through personal expression, community affiliation, or participation in online debates (Van Dijck, 2013). As individuals engage with social media platforms, they often curate their digital personas by selectively sharing information, images, and content that align with their desired identity (Papacharissi, 2011). This process of self-presentation in the digital world, where individuals have control over what aspects of their lives to showcase, can create a version of self that is distinct from one's offline identity.

Research has indicated that social media platforms act as "identity workspaces" where users actively craft and perform their identities, shaping how they are perceived by others within these digital spaces (Goffman, 2023). This process can be viewed through the lens of social identity theory, which posits that individuals define themselves based on their membership in various social groups (Tajfel et al., 2001). In digital environments, these groups may not always align with traditional categories such as ethnicity, gender, or nationality. Instead, users may form affiliations based on shared interests, political ideologies, or even virtual experiences, allowing for the fluid and dynamic construction of multiple identities (Boyd, 2014). As a result, social media facilitates the emergence of new forms of social belonging, allowing individuals to explore and negotiate their identities in ways that would not be possible in offline contexts (Steinfeld et al., 2008).

However, the impact of social media on social identity formation is not always positive or inclusive. While it can empower individuals to express themselves and find communities where they feel understood, it also has the potential to reinforce existing social divisions. Algorithms designed to filter content and target specific users can inadvertently create "echo chambers" that limit exposure to diverse perspectives, thereby reinforcing users' pre-existing beliefs and social affiliations (Pariser, 2011). This selective exposure can contribute to the polarization of social groups and intensify social identity boundaries, making it more difficult for individuals to engage in meaningful cross-group interactions (Sunstein, 2009). Thus, while social media provides a platform for the construction of diverse identities, it also underscores the complex interplay between individual agency and the broader structural forces that shape digital spaces.

Virtual Community Groups and Their Impact on Social Identity

Virtual communities, a term popularized by Howard Rheingold (1993), refer to groups of individuals who, despite being physically separated, interact with each



other through digital platforms (Rheingold, 1993). These communities often form around shared interests, hobbies, causes, or ideologies, and are not constrained by physical borders or traditional societal roles. The rise of social media has dramatically accelerated the formation of virtual communities, providing a space where individuals can connect with others who share similar experiences and values, regardless of geographic location (Wellman, 2001). In these communities, members can create new forms of social belonging, participating in activities such as group discussions, content sharing, and collaborative problem-solving (M. A. Smith et al., 2000). The virtual environment offers opportunities for individuals to express their identities in a way that may be less constrained by offline social norms and expectations, allowing for the creation of new group affiliations and a more fluid sense of self.

The impact of virtual communities on social identity is significant, as these communities offer individuals a platform for the development of collective identities. Social identity theory, which emphasizes the role of group membership in self-definition, can be applied to virtual communities to understand how individuals derive their sense of self from their membership in these digital spaces (Tajfel et al., 2001). Research has shown that online communities can serve as a source of social support, enhancing feelings of belonging and reducing isolation (Ridings et al., 2002). For example, individuals who may feel marginalized in their offline environments, due to factors such as social stigma or minority status, can find solidarity and acceptance in virtual spaces where shared experiences are valued and understood (Baym, 2015).

However, the formation of virtual communities is not always a wholly inclusive process. Just as social media platforms can create environments of echo chambers, virtual communities can also foster exclusivity. Communities may develop strong in-group/out-group dynamics, where members of the community reinforce their shared identity while excluding those who do not align with their specific values or behaviors (Uluğ et al., n.d.). Such dynamics

can lead to the creation of digital "tribes" that are highly insular and resistant to outside perspectives, which can exacerbate divisions and promote homogeneity (Sunstein, 2009). Furthermore, while virtual communities can provide a space for marginalized groups to express their identity, they can also perpetuate harmful stereotypes and reinforce negative social categorization. Thus, virtual communities, while providing a sense of belonging, can also highlight the complexities of identity formation in the digital era, where inclusion and exclusion are intertwined.

The role of social media in the formation of virtual communities has also contributed to the changing nature of collective action. Virtual communities have increasingly become spaces where individuals can mobilize for social, political, or cultural causes. The ability to communicate instantly and organize collective action through social media has led to the rise of "hashtag activism" and online movements that challenge societal norms and institutions (Sebeelo, 2021). The Arab Spring and movements like #BlackLivesMatter have shown how virtual communities can be powerful agents of social change. These online communities not only serve as a platform for identity expression but also provide a means for individuals to collectively address social injustices and push for political reform (Castells, 2015). In this sense, virtual communities are not just spaces for personal identity formation, but also for collective identity building, where individuals join together to enact social change and support shared values.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, specifically a literature review, to explore the dynamics of social identity formation in virtual community groups facilitated by social media platforms. The decision to use a literature review stems from the aim to synthesize existing theories, concepts, and empirical findings in the field of social identity and digital media. By reviewing and analyzing previous research, this study seeks to



identify key themes, gaps, and emerging trends related to the role of social media in shaping social identities within virtual communities (Fink, 2019). A literature review is particularly appropriate for this study because it allows for an in-depth examination of a wide range of studies across different disciplines, such as sociology, communication studies, and psychology, while integrating various perspectives on the topic (Papaioannou et al., 2016).

The data sources for this study are drawn from a variety of academic and scholarly publications, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, conference papers, and reports published between 2000 and 2025. The primary sources of data are scholarly articles available in databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and PubMed, as well as relevant academic books and dissertations. These sources were selected based on their relevance to the research question, their contributions to the understanding of social identity in the digital age, and their methodological rigor. Particular emphasis was placed on works that examine the intersection of social media, virtual communities, and social identity, as well as those that provide critical theoretical insights into the dynamics of group identity and individual self-concept in online spaces (Flick, 2022).

Data collection was carried out using systematic keyword searches across various digital libraries and databases. Keywords such as "social identity," "virtual communities," "social media," "digital identity," and "community building" were used to identify relevant articles and sources. Studies were included if they provided empirical data, theoretical frameworks, or conceptual discussions related to the role of social media in shaping social identities within online communities. The inclusion criteria also focused on articles published in high-impact journals or by reputable academic publishers to ensure the credibility and academic integrity of the sources.

The data analysis method for this study followed a thematic analysis approach, which is commonly used in qualitative research to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes within a dataset (Braun &

Clarke, 2006). This method was chosen because it allows for the flexible identification of recurring themes and ideas related to the research objectives. The analysis involved several stages, starting with an initial reading and familiarization with the selected studies to gain an understanding of the key concepts and findings. Next, key themes related to social identity, virtual community dynamics, and the role of social media were coded and categorized. The final step involved synthesizing these themes to develop a coherent narrative on how social media influences identity formation within virtual communities and the broader implications of these dynamics for social behavior in the digital age. Throughout the analysis, particular attention was given to contrasting findings and debates in the literature, allowing for a critical assessment of the strengths and limitations of existing research (Miles et al., 2014).

3. Result and Discussion

The table presented below summarizes the findings from 10 carefully selected articles that were sourced from a broader pool of literature on social media, virtual communities, and social identity. These articles were chosen based on their relevance to the research topic and their contribution to understanding the dynamics of identity formation in digital environments. The selection process involved reviewing numerous studies and filtering out those that provided the most comprehensive and insightful perspectives on the subject. Key criteria for selection included the robustness of the research, the credibility of the publication source, and the alignment of the findings with the research objectives of examining how social media influences social identity and community dynamics.

This set of 10 articles represents a cross-section of current academic thought and empirical research, focusing on a variety of aspects, such as the role of social media in self-presentation, the formation of virtual communities, and the impact of digital spaces on collective action and individual identity. By synthesizing the key findings from these articles, this study aims to offer a well-rounded perspective on the



evolving relationship between social media and social identity in the digital age.

No	Author & Year	Title	Findings
1	(Papacharissi, 2011)	A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites	Explores how users perform their identities through self-curation on social network sites, indicating that social media allows individuals to project a constructed version of themselves.
2	(Azizi & Tambunan, 2018)	Constructing an Imagined Community of Fandom and Articulating Gender Identity: A Case Study on Indonesian Female Football Fans' Participation in Social Media	Discusses how social media helps in constructing imagined communities, specifically looking at how female football fans in Indonesia articulate their gender identity online.
3	(Van Dijck, 2013)	The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media	Argues that social media enables users to form virtual communities based on shared interests and ideologies rather than geographic proximity, offering a sense of belonging and identity.
4	(Castells, 2015)	Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age	Highlights how social media networks facilitate the rise of social movements, where individuals are empowered to challenge authorities and form collective identities.
5	(Boyd, 2014)	It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens	Examines how teens negotiate their identities, privacy, and social relationships on social media platforms, making these spaces central for their personal and social development.
6	(Baym, 2015)	Personal Connections in the Digital Age	Explores how social media plays a crucial role in maintaining personal relationships, contributing to an evolving sense of self within digital communities.
7	(Sunstein, 2009)	Republic.com 2.0	Introduces the concept of "filter bubbles," where algorithms on social media limit exposure to diverse perspectives, reinforcing pre-existing beliefs and increasing social divisions.
8	(Tucker et al., 2018)	Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature	Discusses how social media amplifies political polarization and disinformation, creating echo chambers that reinforce group identities and deepen social divides.

Interpretation of Data from the Literature Review Table

The data compiled from the literature review reveals several crucial insights into the role of social media in the formation of social identity within virtual

communities. A common theme across the reviewed articles is the dynamic interplay between individual self-presentation and community affiliation in digital spaces. For instance, Papacharissi (2011) explores how users perform their identities through self-curation on social network sites, indicating that social



media allows individuals to project a constructed version of themselves that may not necessarily align with their offline identities (Papacharissi, 2011). Similarly, Azizi and Tambunan (2018) discuss how Facebook facilitates identity construction through a process of digital empowerment, where users actively present curated personas, which highlights the centrality of self-presentation in virtual community dynamics (Azizi & Tambunan, 2018).

Furthermore, several studies underscore the influence of social media platforms in fostering new forms of social belonging. Van Dijck (2013) and Castells (2012) both argue that social media enables users to form virtual communities based on shared interests, ideologies, or experiences rather than geographic proximity (Castells, 2015; Van Dijck, 2013). These communities provide a sense of belonging and identity that can be particularly empowering for individuals who feel marginalized in offline settings. For example, boyd (2014) examines the experiences of teenagers on social media and illustrates how these platforms become spaces for negotiating personal identity, privacy, and social relationships (Boyd, 2014). Similarly, Baym (2015) emphasizes how social media plays a significant role in maintaining personal relationships, thus contributing to an evolving sense of self within digital communities (Baym, 2015).

However, the literature also highlights the challenges and risks of identity formation in these digital spaces. Sunstein (2009) points out the phenomenon of "filter bubbles," where algorithms create environments that reinforce users' pre-existing beliefs, thereby limiting exposure to diverse perspectives (Sunstein, 2009). This, in turn, can intensify social divisions and impact how individuals identify with certain in-groups or out-groups. Tucker et al. (2018) further elaborate on the dual nature of social media, suggesting that while these platforms offer opportunities for inclusive engagement and collective action, they also facilitate the creation of exclusive groups and echo chambers, which can polarize public opinion and reinforce social identity boundaries (Tucker et al., 2018).

Collectively, the findings suggest that while social media provides individuals with unprecedented opportunities for identity expression and belonging, it also introduces complexities related to self-representation and social division. As virtual communities become increasingly central to social interactions, understanding the nuanced relationship between identity construction and digital networks is critical. This synthesis of literature highlights the multifaceted role of social media in shaping both individual and collective identities in the contemporary digital landscape (Papacharissi, 2011; Sunstein, 2009; Van Dijck, 2013).

Discussion and Analysis

The findings of this literature review offer a comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between social media, virtual communities, and social identity. Social media platforms have transformed the way individuals navigate and perform their identities, as well as how they engage with others in virtual spaces. This transformation is particularly evident in the self-curation and self-presentation that take place on platforms like Facebook and Instagram, where users construct their digital personas (Papacharissi, 2011; Zhao et al., 2008). These curated identities are often idealized versions of the self, shaped by the desire for social validation and the need to belong to specific online communities (Van Dijck, 2013). This phenomenon is closely aligned with Goffman's (2023) theory of self-presentation, which argues that individuals actively manage the impressions they give to others in both physical and digital spaces (Goffman, 2023). In the digital age, however, the ability to craft and control one's identity becomes more pronounced due to the affordances of social media platforms that allow individuals to present themselves in a way that is distinct from their offline identities (DeAndrea & Walther, 2011).

In parallel, the creation and engagement in virtual communities further complicate identity formation. As Van Dijck (2013) and Castells (2012) argue, social

media platforms provide the infrastructure for individuals to form communities based on shared interests, beliefs, or ideologies, rather than geographical proximity (Castells, 2015; Van Dijck, 2013). This new form of community building enables individuals to find a sense of belonging and solidarity with others who may not share their offline identities. In today's globalized world, where physical boundaries are less restrictive, virtual communities offer a space for individuals to explore and express identities that might not be accepted or recognized in their immediate offline environments. For example, marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ+ individuals, often turn to social media to create supportive communities that affirm their identities (Boyd, 2014). In this sense, virtual communities can be seen as empowering spaces that facilitate personal and collective identity formation.

However, as the literature suggests, the role of social media in shaping social identity is not without its challenges. While these platforms allow for the formation of new, inclusive communities, they also foster exclusive and sometimes divisive dynamics. Sunstein (2009) highlights the role of algorithms in creating "filter bubbles," where individuals are only exposed to content that aligns with their existing beliefs, thus reinforcing social identity boundaries (Sunstein, 2009). This phenomenon is particularly evident in the context of political and ideological polarization, where social media can amplify divisions and deepen societal rifts (Kubin & Von Sikorski, 2021). This has been observed in recent political events, such as the rise of populism and the intensification of identity-based conflicts, where social media platforms have become battlegrounds for ideological clashes. These platforms, by narrowing the scope of discourse, often limit opportunities for individuals to engage with differing perspectives, thus hindering the development of a more nuanced or inclusive identity.

The findings also align with the social identity theory proposed by Tajfel and Turner (2001), which suggests that individuals derive their sense of self from their

membership in particular groups (Tajfel et al., 2001). In the digital realm, these groups may be formed around a wide array of factors, such as shared political ideologies (e.g., #BlackLivesMatter), fandoms (e.g., gaming communities), or even lifestyle choices (e.g., veganism). While these online communities offer a sense of belonging, they also reinforce in-group/out-group dynamics that can lead to the exclusion of those who do not share the same views or experiences (Firat et al., 2018). The creation of such echo chambers limits cross-group interaction and fosters social fragmentation, a point that is particularly relevant in the context of current social issues, where social media often amplifies conflict rather than fostering dialogue.

From my perspective, while social media offers significant potential for the construction and negotiation of identities in a fluid, globalized environment, it also necessitates critical engagement with its implications for social cohesion and division. The ability to curate one's identity in digital spaces has undoubtedly opened new avenues for self-expression, but it also comes with the responsibility of addressing the exclusionary practices that emerge within virtual communities. Social media platforms, by design, are both spaces of empowerment and exclusion, and a balance must be struck between the positive aspects of digital identity formation and the need for inclusive, constructive digital environments. As social media continues to evolve, future research should consider how these platforms can be redesigned or regulated to mitigate the risks of polarization while enhancing their potential for promoting inclusive, cross-cultural, and cross-ideological dialogue.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this literature review highlight the significant role social media plays in the formation of social identities within virtual community groups. Social media platforms have revolutionized how individuals express, construct, and negotiate their identities, providing a unique space for self-presentation and group affiliation. These platforms

allow individuals to forge connections based on shared interests, ideologies, and experiences, often transcending geographical and social boundaries. However, while social media offers opportunities for empowerment and inclusivity, it also presents challenges, particularly in fostering exclusivity and reinforcing social divisions. The creation of filter bubbles and echo chambers, as well as the reinforcement of in-group/out-group dynamics, complicates the digital landscape of identity formation. As social media continues to evolve, it is essential to critically examine the impact of these platforms on social cohesion and fragmentation, especially in the context of increasing political polarization and social division.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should explore the long-term effects of digital identity formation on offline social behavior and real-world interactions. A deeper investigation into how virtual communities influence individuals' perceptions of their offline identity and sense of belonging could provide valuable insights. Additionally, research should focus on the role of emerging technologies, such as virtual reality and artificial intelligence, in shaping new forms of social identity and community building. Future studies could also examine the ethical implications of digital self-curation and its potential impact on mental health, particularly for vulnerable populations such as adolescents. Finally, research into the design and regulation of social media platforms could offer practical solutions to mitigate the risks of digital polarization, ensuring that these platforms continue to serve as spaces for inclusive and constructive social engagement.

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