Unveiling Cyber Identity: A Critical Examination of its Role and Impact on Society and Individuals

Akshaya Vardhini Ravi[1], Dr Bhargavi D Hemmige [2]

[1]*Research Scholar,*[2]*Head of the Department, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Jain University- Center for Management Studies, Bengaluru*

Abstract: Every person in cyberspace creates an online identity or an internet persona to communicate and perform various activities in cyberspace. Some users use their real name and identity to interact in the online environment while some use pseudonyms or remain anonymous. Some create a totally different identity which would be the polar opposite of their real personality, like an alter ego. In such a way, cyber identity has various dimensions in society. The prevalence of such aspects of cyber identity has its pros and cons. People assume cyber identity for various reasons such as participating in Discussions or movements in which they could not participate in the real world. Another prime reason is to voice their harsh and honest opinions without revealing their true identities. Even though it offers many good opportunities for people to take part in social causes or groups of their interest, it also provides a platform for people to assume an anonymous identity to stalk, con, harass or bully people in cyberspace. These sorts of cases are predominantly found in social media sites, cyber dating sites, matrimonial sites, and shopping sites (like eBay, quickr, and Olx). The GenZ users who are the major internet consumers are the ones who presume cyber identities for various purposes such as to condemn the authorities, for cyber aggression, bring about a change, interact without barriers, be free from the real world, voice out their opinions, for social causes and movements, etc. This cyber identity also has a considerable effect on the netizen's mental health and behaviors in real life. Strict cyber laws are the next step. Students should be educated about cyberspace right from a young age and they should be taught about the positive and negative impacts of cyber identity so that GENZ users will be able to make use of it cautiously and responsibly in the near future.

Keywords: Cyber Identity, cyberspace, anonymous, alter ego, social media, dating apps, cyberbullying, cyberstalking, con, and, social causes.

INTRODUCTION

The term cyber identity refers to the image or personality that a person projects in the virtual world.

In recent years, the internet has become an integral part of our daily lives, and people are increasingly using it to interact with others, conduct business transactions, and access information. However, as people spend more time online, their online identity becomes more important, and it has a significant impact on their personal and professional lives. Therefore, this study aims to critically analyze the concept of cyber identity and its role in society. Cyber identity is a complex and multifaceted concept that has a significant impact on individuals and society as a whole. It has evolved over the years, and it is shaped by technological advancements and changes in social and cultural norms. "People with a strong sense of cyber identity tend to be more politically engaged and tend to share more political content online," (Singh and Verma, 2020) [27]. Cyber identity provides people with a platform to express themselves and connect with others, but it also presents challenges such as privacy and security concerns. Cyber identity plays a crucial role in shaping the way people think and behave, and it can be used as a tool for social change or to spread hate speech and misinformation. The study looks into three main sections. The first section provides an overview of the concept of cyber identity and its evolution over the years. The second section discusses the impact of cyber identity on individuals, including issues such as privacy, security, and the formation of online communities. Finally, the third section examines the role of cyber identity in the broader social context, including its impact on society as a whole.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. The Relationship Between Young Adults' Beliefs About Anonymity and Subsequent Cyber Aggression.
   Year of Publication: July 2013.
   Author: Michelle F. Wright, DePaul University.

Although few studies have concentrated on the relationship between anonymity and the subsequent engagement in violence through the cyber setting, it is thought that anonymity is a crucial incentive for cyber aggressiveness. The current longitudinal study, which included 130 young individuals, used structural equation modeling to identify indirect relationships between two types of anonymity—namely, punishment from authorities and revenge from the target—and later cyber violence. The impact of ideas about avoiding detection and the permanence of online content was explored in relation to these interactions. After adjusting for gender and cyber aggression, the results showed that both types of anonymity were associated with cyber aggression six months later through two explanatory processes (i.e., confidence in not getting caught and belief that online content is not permanent.

2. A Literature Review of Online Identity Resurrection
Year of publication: August 2021.
Authors: Jiao Huang, Sameer Kumar, and Chuan Hu.
People can present themselves freely thanks to the Internet's incredible progress. Some people may reconstruct their identities online in order to create an online persona that differs in some ways from their true selves in the offline world, if not entirely. It is crucial to assess the condition of the literature at this time because the research on online identity rebuilding is scattered. This essay undertook a review of the literature on online identity reconstruction. The preferences for theory and methodology in pertinent research were summarized in this study. Additionally, it described why and how people reconstruct their identities online. Discussions also included online identity reconstruction's predictions and impacts. An overview of the theme trends in previous research was given by the study's findings.

3. The Effects of Perception Toward Cyber Identity on Loyalty and Purchase Intention.
Author: Hyun-Seok Hwang, Hallym University, Department of Business Administration.
Year of Publication: January 2005.
In this article, they have examined the idea of a cyber-persona created in cyberspace and examined the influences of public perception on customer loyalty and willingness to buy. Cyber identity comprises five components and is divided into two categories:

personal and social cyber identity. Online games and avatars are examples of personal cyber identities, whereas instant messaging and online communities are examples of cyber social identities. Blog personalities are seen as having both social and emotional traits. They drew the conclusion from our poll that internet users seek to buy virtual goods to improve their online personas, such as avatars, virtual goods for online games, and wallpaper images. We use component analysis to derive five factors from the survey data that make up personal and social cyber identities. We next use structural equation modeling to examine the overall effects of cyber identity on customer loyalty and buy intent.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, a mixed method of data collection and analysis has been employed. In the qualitative method, data has been collected from in-depth interviews with netizens of various age, profession, and geographical location who are active social media users and have a cyber-identity on the internet. In the quantitative method, random sampling method has been employed, and around 220 responses have been collected from a survey to understand how netizens use their cyber identity for various purposes, the formation of it, the positives and negatives of it, and also to identify the future of this cyber force.

Sample:
For the quantitative method, an online survey was circulated in cyberspace with the aim of receiving a considerable amount of response from netizens who has access to cyberspace. Around 220 responses are gathered from netizens from various age, gender background, location, etc, with random sampling method with the aim of collecting data from diverse group of people and analyzing their i) Reasons for the formation a cyber-identity, ii) The positive and negative role of it in their respective individual lives, iii) Cyber identity and its effect on individual's self-esteem, mental health, behaviors, interaction and security concerns, iv) future projections of the cyber force. For the quantitative method, 10 in-depth interviews were conducted with netizens with a cyber-identity from various age groups, profession, location and background to collect scrutinized data, to further support and critically evaluate the data obtained from the quantitative method.

Procedure:

Online survey was circulated in cyberspace among people from different age groups, backgrounds, and professions to evaluate their understanding and relationship with cyber identity. People were given a choice in the beginning of the survey, they can either fill out the form in their real name or use their Initials (First letter of their first name and the first letter of their last time). The second option was given to see whether people prefer anonymity in cyberspace since the survey involves questions about their personal information related to their cyber activities. In the interviews, a standard procedure was followed where the interviewees were explained about the research project – "Unveiling Cyber Identity: A Critical Examination of its Role and Impact on Society and Individuals," and its objectives and everyone was asked to give elaborate answers for the affiliated interview questions.

Variables:

Independent variable: Cyber identity

Dependent variables:

Individual behavior

1. Social interactions
2. Self-esteem and self-worth
3. Cultural and societal norms and values.
4. Mental Health concerns
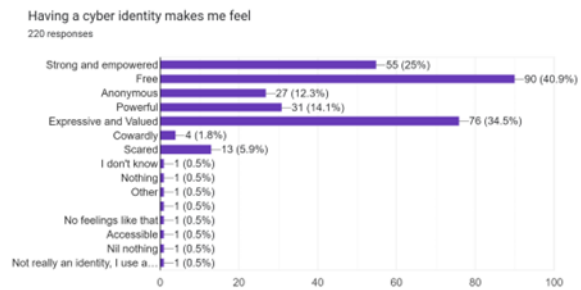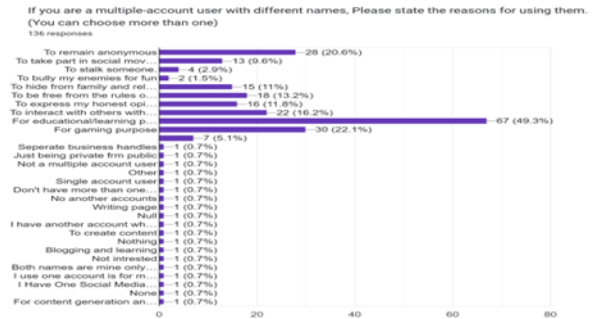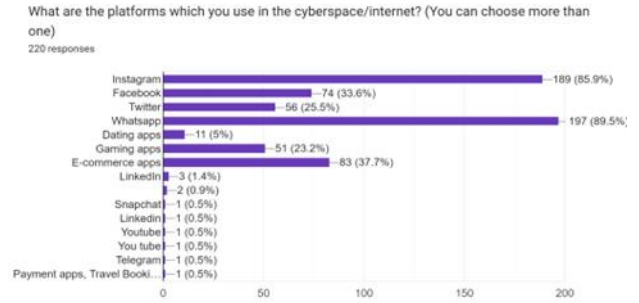5. Cybersecurity and online privacy concerns.

The study aims to analyze the relationship between cyber identity and its impact on the above mentioned dependent variables.

Population:

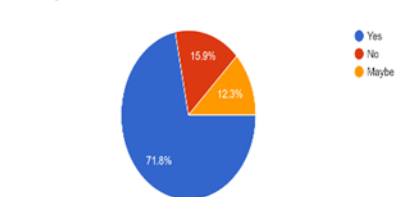| Age Group	N (Number of respondents)	Percentage
18-25	166	75.5%
26-30	24	10.9%
30-36	20	9.1%
36-40	8	3.6%
40 Above	2	0.9%

Gender	N (Number of respondents)	Percentage (%)
Male	88	40%
Female	132	60%

Findings:

What are the platforms which you use in the cyberspace/internet? (You can choose more than one)
220 responses

If you are a multiple-account user with different names, Please state the reasons for using them. (You can choose more than one)
136 responses



Having a cyber identity makes me feel
220 responses

Do you use your real name in your profiles in the cyber apps (social media/ E-commerce/dating/gaming apps)?
220 responses

| Hours spent on internet	N (Number of respondents)	Percentage
2-3 hours	105	47.7%
4-6 hours	75	34.1%
7-8 hours	30	13.6%
Above 8 hours	10	4.5%

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

I use my online profiles/cyber personality as an alter ego to my real personality
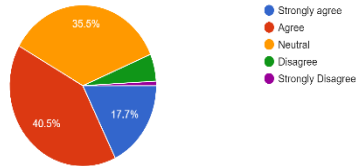220 responses
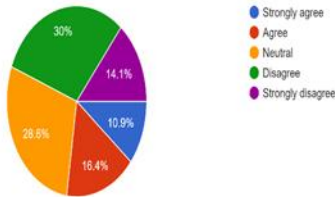
I feel like I can talk about anything I want or do anything in cyberspace (social media/dating apps, e-commerce apps, gaming apps)
220 responses
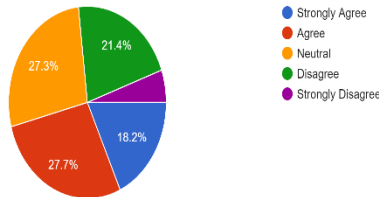
I have noticed that some of the people around me behave differently on social media and in contrast to their personalities in real life.
220 responses
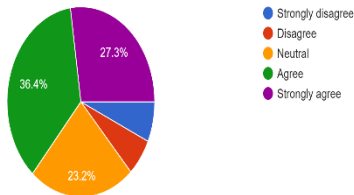
The anonymity that the cyber world offers has helped people be more expressive, communicative, socially active, opinionated, and progressive in the society
220 responses

How can Cyber crimes be controlled in the near future?
220 responses
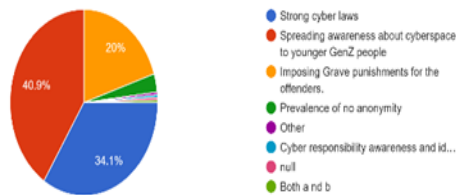
Most of the active users of various platforms in cyberspace are young adults falling in the age group of 18-25 followed by people above 26-30 specifically. From the data collected by mixed of method, it is also found that majority of the people use their real names in their online profiles and even if they do have multiple accounts with different names in various platforms it is mainly for the purpose of learning or accessing online courses, for gaming, to remain free and anonymous from the world are some of the top reasons and to interact with others without any barriers, to hide from family and to bully their friends and enemies for fun and for business purpose are some of the other reasons for it. We could also understand that people do use cyber identities as an alter ego to their real personality most of the time, because they say that in real life sometimes they are introverted and in cyberspace they are vocal most of the time or vice versa. To strengthen this behavior, the majority of the people also answered that they strongly agree that they could talk anything or do anything in cyberspace and the same set of people also strongly agreed that they especially feel easier and more comfortable to comment on controversial topics on the internet than in real life. The netizens also feel that having a cyber-identity in any of the internet platforms makes them feel expressed and valued, free and powerful. Cyber identity is found to be an important tool in boosting our self-esteem. It is also found that every individual thinks that most of the people around them behave very differently in cyberspace from their real life almost every time. From the data collected, it is understood that people use cyber identities for several reasons which includes both positive and negative reasons as per their convenience. To express themselves, for networking professionally, to connect with people, to enter a new world, to showcase their talents and groom it and also for seeking new opportunities are some of the positive roles of cyber identity in the society. On the other hand, people tend to get so lost in this cyber world they also resort to unethical activities like hacking, scamming, harassing, catfishing, bullying, spreading hatred and such on the internet. This makes around 1/4th of the people in the population prone to be the victims of such cybercrimes as stated by many. But an interesting thing is that even though some people tend to affect their mental health

due to the constant anxiety, stress, and pressure to keep up their appearance in cyberspace some people make a better use of their cyber identity and the anonymity to open up about their mental health concerns and develop positivity in life. Even though people believe that nowadays people use cyberspace to do more good such as using it as a platform to spread positivity, awareness, and education about various topics, cybercrimes are also increasing on the rise. Such offenders will always prevail among us, as we could find that a minor portion of the respondents said that they have bullied/stalked/harassed someone online in the survey. Strict and strong cyber laws, proper education about this unchartered world and bringing in authentication and identification procedures in cyberspace are what the people need and are expecting from the government at this point of time to make this place safer.

CONCLUSION

Cyberspace is a grey area. The intensity of positivity and negativity it brings to society keeps changing as the world changes. People find the cyber world to be as real as the physical world which we live in, they take up a cyber-personality and go on to lead their cyber life without any limitations. Though people use cyber personalities to do some unethical and immoral activities like stalking, bullying, hacking and such, people in the present era are more inclined towards the positive opportunities and experiences that cyberspace has to offer. Some people use it as a real means for improving themselves and leading a better life while some use it to pretend to be someone they are really not and when it fails, people tend to lose their identity in real life too. "The separation between different contexts, seemingly easy and almost natural, may become difficult to maintain" (Aresta, M., Pedro, L., Santos, C., & Moreira, A. 2015) [1]. People have become addicted to the freedom that cyberspace has to offer them which the real world cannot, as the majority of the masses are in the mindset that they are free to do anything or say/comment about anything without any repercussions on the internet. And at the same time, cyber identity offers a sense of validation, power and value to the netizens to boost their self-esteem. But despite everything, there are still some people who are being preyed upon in cyberspace. To improve the standard of cyberspace and make it a safe ecosystem for the netizens, stronger cyber laws and increased awareness among the Gen Z netizens are the need of the hour. Cyber world is now bigger than ever and will develop into a massive force in the near future. Thus, the world is yet to witness the full potential of netizens and their cyber identities in the near future with cyber identities playing a major role in both the cyber and real life of every individual in the society.

REFERENCE

1. Aresta, M., Pedro, L., Santos, C., & Moreira, A. (2015). Portraying the self in online contexts: context-driven and user-driven online identity profiles. *Contemporary Social Science*, *10*(1), 70–85. https://doi.org/10.1080/21582041.2014.980840
2. Berki, E., & Jäkälä, M. (2009). Cyber-Identities and Social Life in Cyberspace. *Handbook of Research on Social Software and Developing Community Ontologies*, 27–39. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-60566-208-4.ch003
3. Boulianne, S. (2015). Cyber identity and its role in political behavior. Social media use and participation: A meta-analysis of current research. Information, Communication & Society, 18(5), 524-538.
4. Cover, R. (2012). Performing and undoing identity online: Social networking, identity theories and the incompatibility of online profiles and friendship regimes. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, *18*(2), 177–193. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856511433684
5. Davis, K. (2013). Young people's digital lives: The impact of interpersonal relationships and digital media use on adolescents' sense of identity. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *29*(6), 2281–2293. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2013.05.022
6. Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C. (2007). The benefits of Facebook "friends:" Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 12(4), 1143-1168.
7. Gálik, S. (2019). On Human Identity in Cyberspace of Digital Media. European Journal of Transformation Studies, 7(2), 33–44. Retrieved from

https://czasopisma.bg.ug.edu.pl/index.php/journal-transformation/article/view/5007.

8. Huang, J., Kumar, S., & Hu, C. (2021). A Literature Review of Online Identity Reconstruction. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *12*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.696552

9. Huang, Y. Y., & Chou, C. (2010). An analysis of multiple factors of cyberbullying among junior high school students in Taiwan. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *26*(6), 1581–1590. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2010.06.005

10. Israelashvili, M., Kim, T., & Bukobza, G. (2011). Adolescents' over-use of the cyber world – Internet addiction or identity exploration? *Journal of Adolescence*, *35*(2), 417–424. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2011.07.015

11. Joinson, A. N. (2008). Cyber identity and its influence on social behavior. Looking at, looking up or keeping up with people? Motives and use of Facebook. In CHI'08 Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems (pp. 1027-1036).

12. Kavakci, E., & Kraeplin, C. R. (2016). Religious beings in fashionable bodies: the online identity construction ofhijabisocial media personalities. *Media, Culture & Society*, *39*(6), 850–868. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443716679031

13. Kendall, L. (1998). Meaning and Identity in "Cyberspace": The Performance of Gender, Class, and Race Online. *Symbolic Interaction*, *21*(2), 129–153. https://doi.org/10.1525/si.1998.21.2.129

14. Kim, S. Y., & Hwang, H. S. (2005). The effects of perception toward cyber identity on loyalty and purchase intention. *The Journal of Society for e-Business Studies*, *10*(4), 83-100.

15. Lam, C. (2013). Online Identities: National and Cultural Expression Online, an Australian Perspective. *Studies in Media and Communication*, *1*(1). https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v1i1.29

16. Li, Y., & Liu, Q. (2021). A comprehensive review study of cyber-attacks and cyber security; Emerging trends and recent developments. *Energy Reports*, *7*, 8176–8186. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.egyr.2021.08.126

17. Marriott, T. C., & Buchanan, T. (2014). The true self online: Personality correlates of preference for self-expression online, and observer ratings of personality online and offline. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *32*, 171–177. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2013.11.014

18. Metzler, A., & Scheithauer, H. (2017). The Long-Term Benefits of Positive Self-Presentation via Profile Pictures, Number of Friends and the Initiation of Relationships on Facebook for Adolescents' Self-Esteem and the Initiation of Offline Relationships. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *8*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01981

19. Michikyan, M., Dennis, J., & Subrahmanyam, K. (2014). Can You Guess Who I Am? Real, Ideal, and False Self-Presentation on Facebook Among Emerging Adults. *Emerging Adulthood*, *3*(1), 55–64. https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696814532442

20. Moore, M. J., Nakano, T., Enomoto, A., & Suda, T. (2012). Anonymity and roles associated with aggressive posts in an online forum. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *28*(3), 861–867. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2011.12.005

21. Pantic, I. (2014). Online social networking and mental health. Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 17(10), 652-657.

22. Pini, B., Brown, K., & Previte, J. (2004). Politics and Identity in Cyberspace. *Information, Communication & Society*, *7*(2), 167–184. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118042000232639

23. Quinn, S. (2018). Positive Aspects of Social Media. *The Oxford Handbook of Cyberpsychology*, 412–431. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198812746.013.23

24. Roberts, L. D., Indermaur, D., & Spiranovic, C. (2013). Fear of Cyber-Identity Theft and Related Fraudulent Activity. *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, *20*(3), 315–328. https://doi.org/10.1080/13218719.2012.672275

25. Sahib, P. R., Koning, R. H., & van Witteloostuijn, A. (2006). Putting your Best Cyber Identity Forward. *International Sociology*, *21*(1), 61–82. https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580906059291

26. Sahoo, S., & Das, D. K. (2020). Cyber identity and its impact on academic behavior. Influence of Cyber-Identity on Academic Behaviour among Higher Secondary Students of Bhubaneswar, Odisha. Indian Journal of Positive Psychology, 11(1), 94-99.

27. Singh, D., & Verma, A. (2020) Role of Social Media on Youth Political Participation in India. Journal of Creative Communications, 15(3), 321-336.

28. Srivastava, S. (2018). Impact of social networking sites on the mental health of youth in India. Global Journal for Research Analysis, 7(2), 136-138.

29. Stuart, J., Scott, R., O'Donnell, K., & Jose, P. E. (2022). The Impact of Ease of Online Self-Expression During Adolescence on Identity in Young Adulthood. *Social Media and Technology Across the Lifespan*, 43–59. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-99049-7_4

30. Tahir, M. (2021, July 9). Identity Theft: Trends, Detection and Prevention. Retrieved from https://hal.science/hal-03281803

31. Valkenburg, P. M., & Peter, J. (2011). Online Communication Among Adolescents: An Integrated Model of Its Attraction, Opportunities, and Risks. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *48*(2), 121–127. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2010.08.020

32. Wright, M. F. (2013). The Relationship Between Young Adults' Beliefs About Anonymity and Subsequent Cyber Aggression. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, *16*(12), 858–862. https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2013.0009

33. Wängqvist, M., & Frisén, A. (2016). Who am I online? Understanding the meaning of online contexts for identity development. Adolescent Research Review, 1(2), 139–151. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40894-016-0025-0

34. Wang, W., & Lu, Z. (2013). Cyber security in the Smart Grid: Survey and challenges. *Computer Networks*, *57*(5), 1344–1371. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.comnet.2012.12.017

35. Yang, C. C., & Bradford Brown, B. (2015). Online Self-Presentation on Facebook and Self Development During the College Transition. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *45*(2), 402–416. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-015-0385-y

36. Li, Y., & Liu, Q. (2021). A comprehensive review study of cyber-attacks and cyber security; Emerging trends and recent developments. *Energy Reports*, *7*, 8176–8186. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.egyr.2021.08.126