Psychological Impacts Virtual and Real-Life Disconnection

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Abstract— The purpose of this research is to understand the relationships between virtual environments, the self, and mental health, with particular focus on the integration of the self in real life and cyberspace. Qualitative interviews and surveys were conducted with subjects from various communities to explore how users manage their virtual selves on social networking sites, gaming consoles, and in cyberspace. The interviews revealed that while virtual environments allow individuals to express themselves and connect with others more freely, they can also lead to a splintering of the self, increased anxiety, and alienation from the real world. The study identifies online activities related to social media triangulation and idealized virtual self-pressures as some of the determinants of mental wellbeing. Additionally, it examines the stress, insecurity, and low self-esteem caused by non-convergence of virtual and real self. The overall conclusion is that heavy engagement in cyberspace is problematic; therefore, self-presentation in online should be approached with caution due to the potential for psychological harm. These findings can guide mental health professionals in developing interventions aimed at reducing the negative impact of an individual's online visibility on the mental health of people.

I. INTRODUCTION

Virtual environments refer to digital platforms and technologies that simulate real-life experiences, enabling users to engage in activities such as social interaction, work, and entertainment through online or augmented reality systems. Reality, on the other hand, encompasses the tangible, physical world where individuals interact directly with their surroundings.

Over recent decades, the rise of the internet and technological advancements has reshaped human experiences. Virtual spaces—such as social media, online gaming, and digital workplaces—have provided opportunities for connectivity and convenience, transforming how individuals perceive and engage with their mental well-being.

According to research, virtual environments can both enhance and challenge mental well-being. Positive aspects include accessibility to resources like therapy apps, virtual support groups, and mindfulness tools. However, the dependence on virtual spaces also raises concerns about overstimulation, isolation, and reduced social interaction.

This study analyzes the psychological and emotional impacts caused by the disconnection between virtual and real identities, aiming to develop health-centric approaches. Additionally, providing insights regarding participants' personal experiences in virtual settings.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature Review: Virtual vs. Reality in Mental Well-Being

The interplay between virtual and real-world experiences has been a subject of growing interest, particularly in its influence on identity formation and mental well-being. A review of 35 studies highlights critical themes, such as the adoption of virtual tools, perceived value in mental health support, and barriers to engagement. However, a notable gap exists in exploring supplementary aspects, such as personalized features, incentives, and community dynamics, which significantly impact user engagement and mental well-being in virtual environments.

Themes in Virtual vs. Reality Research
1. Adoption and Perceived Value
Several studies examine factors influencing the adoption of virtual platforms for mental health support:
Perceived Utility and Trust:
Research by Smith et al. (2020) explored the perceived value of online therapy platforms, emphasizing the

importance of trust and user-centric design. Barriers such as fear of data misuse and lack of familiarity were significant deterrents.

Ease of Access:

Similar to digital banking studies (e.g., Kumbhar, 2020), accessibility and perceived utility drive adoption. Virtual tools offering flexibility and anonymity were highly valued.

2. Service Quality and User Satisfaction

Quality of service plays a crucial role in shaping user satisfaction in virtual mental health platforms:

Reliability and Efficiency:

Like the SERVQUAL framework used in digital banking research, service reliability, responsiveness, and efficiency are key determinants of user trust in virtual mental health platforms (Johnson et al., 2019).

Exclusion of Supplementary Features:

Existing studies often neglect auxiliary aspects, such as gamified rewards or interactive tools, that could enhance engagement and satisfaction.

3. Geographical and Contextual Variations

Virtual mental health tools demonstrate varied impacts across geographical and cultural contexts:

Regional Accessibility:

Studies, such as those by Lee et al. (2020), emphasize the role of regional internet infrastructure and cultural attitudes toward mental health in shaping adoption. Similar to Kaur et al. (2020) in digital banking, this research highlights the importance of tailoring virtual tools to specific contexts.

Rural vs. Urban Dynamics:

Rural populations often face barriers to virtual tool adoption due to limited access to technology and digital literacy, reflecting challenges similar to those seen in digital banking for underserved populations.

4. Research Gaps and Emerging Opportunities

While the core functionalities of virtual mental health platforms, such as therapy and self-help resources, are well-researched, gaps remain in understanding supplementary features that enhance engagement:

Gamification and Incentives:

Features like rewards, badges, or discounts for completing therapeutic exercises are rarely explored, despite their potential to increase motivation and adherence to mental health programs.

Community Building:

Virtual communities can foster a sense of belonging and social support, but their impact on long-term mental well-being is underexplored.

Integration with Real-World Support:

The hybrid model of combining virtual tools with real-world therapy offers significant potential but remains an emerging area of study.

Despite significant advances in understanding the adoption and service quality of virtual mental health tools, critical gaps remain in exploring supplementary features like gamification, community-building incentives, and personalized engagement strategies. These features, analogous to cashback and rewards in digital banking, could significantly enhance user satisfaction and adherence, fostering deeper connections between virtual and real-world support systems. Future research should address these gaps to create more holistic mental well-being solutions.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The primary objective of this study is to explore the psychological impacts of the disconnect between individuals' how they present themselves online and their real-life identities.

1. To understand why individuals, create virtual identities that differ from their real selves and motivation behind it.
2. To identify psychological effects.
3. To Analyze Social Implications, explore how this disconnects influences offline behavior, relationships, and self-perception.
4. To Bridge the Knowledge Gap: Provide new insights into how this identity disconnects may create emotional challenges and suggest strategies to mitigate negative impacts.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study explores the interplay between virtual and real identities and its implications for mental well-being. A qualitative approach was adopted to understand graduate students' perspectives, focusing on the gaps between their virtual and real-life connections.

Research Design

A descriptive survey design was utilized to gather qualitative data from respondents. This design was

chosen to enable an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perceptions related to the research topic.

Participants

The study targeted graduate students aged 18–22 who actively navigate both virtual and real-life interactions. 65 participants are involved in this survey. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling, leveraging personal networks for accessibility.

Data Collection Tools

Primarily, used the google forms for data collection where 20 questions were designed. The survey included Likert-scale questions focusing on three key areas:

- Virtual connections,
- Real identity connections, and
- The perceived gap between the two.

Procedure

The survey link was distributed via social media platforms, including WhatsApp, email, and Telegram. Participants were informed about the study's objectives and assured of confidentiality. The survey remained open for nine days, during which responses were collected.
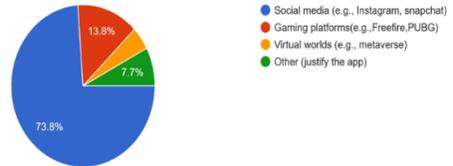
V. DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected through the Likert-scale questions was analyzed qualitatively to identify trends and insights reflecting participants' perspectives. Patterns and recurring themes across the responses were highlighted to provide a nuanced understanding of the identity dynamics and mental well-being considerations. Some key data:

6. Does your online persona affect your self-esteem? (Self-esteem is your opinion of yourself)
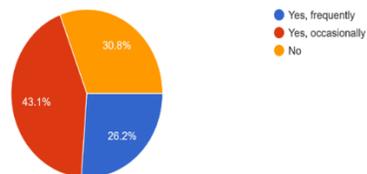65 responses

- Yes, in a good way
- Yes, in a bad way
- No, not at all

47.7%
13.8%
38.5%
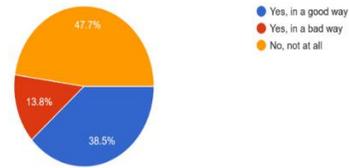
11. Which platforms increase the gap between your online and real-life self?
65 responses

- Social media (e.g., Instagram, snapchat)
- Gaming platforms(e.g.,Freefire,PUBG)
- Virtual worlds (e.g., metaverse)
- Other (justify the app)

73.8%
13.8%
7.7%

13. Do social media trends influence the way you look or behave? (Such as adopting the fashion style of your favorite influencers.)
65 responses

- Yes, often
- Yes, sometimes
- No, never

27.7%
53.8%
18.5%
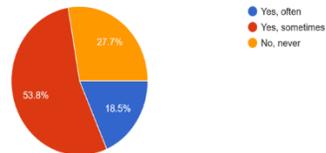
17. Have you ever felt the need to take a break from your online persona due to stress or exhaustion?
65 responses

- Yes, frequently
- Yes, occasionally
- No

30.8%
43.1%
26.2%

18. Do you feel closer to people you interact with online than those you meet in real life?
65 responses

- Yes, often
- Yes, sometimes
- No

38.5%
49.2%
12.3%
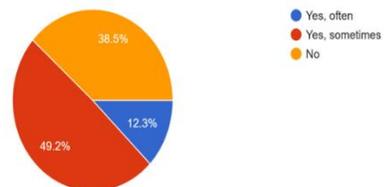
VI. FINDINGS

The survey was conducted to analyze the psychological effects and social implications that may have arisen from the creation of virtual identities

among the 67 participants. Our survey reveals the level of disconnection and the emotional and social consequences faced in daily life.

Demographics:
The participants are primarily aged between 18 and 22, with a few participants older than 26.
57% identified as female and 43% as male.

Identity Disconnect:
Reportedly, only 20% of the respondents' online personas are similar to their real-life selves, indicating that many participants experience a disconnection between their real and virtual selves.
49% indicated that they sometimes they feel more comfortable online than in real life. Additionally, 38% of the respondents have never felt "FAKE" due to the disconnection between their online and real selves. Due to identity differences 15.4% felt anxious about transitioning from online to in-person interactions, while 36.9% felt this anxiety sometimes, and 47.7% have never experienced it.

Emotional and Psychological Impact:
The survey results indicate that 32.3% feel anxious and stress about keeping up with their online persona, while 30.8% have never faced such feelings. Additionally, 26.2% and 43.1% reported needing to take breaks frequently and occasionally, respectfully, from their online persona due to stress and exhaustion. Primarily, 47.7% state that their online persona have never affected their self-esteem, and 43.1% have never experienced feelings of sadness or inadequacy due to the gap between their online and real identities.

Social and Behavioral Impact:
The results show 51.5% experience no change in how they interact due to their online persona, while 39.4% experience a positive change. Additionally, 49.2% have never avoided real-life events because of their online persona, while the rest have avoided them sometimes.
The online persona has shown no impact to 56.9% and a positive impact to 27.7%. Virtual connections have helped develop friendships for 47.7%, while 27.7% have not such interactions. Online interactions made 49.2% feel closer to people sometimes compared to real-life.

Influence of Social Media and Comparison:
Social media platforms like Instagram and snap chat have created a gap between online and real selves, according to 73.8% of respondents, while others mentioned gaming platforms and virtual worlds like metaverse.

The analysis reveals that 53.8% are influenced by media trends sometimes, such as adopting fashion style, while 32.3% compare their online profiles with those of their followers and friends sometimes.

Coping Strategies:
The coping strategies used by the respondents include 43.1% sharing less personal information online, 33.8% taking breaks from social media, and 18.5% talking to friends or family about their feelings.

VII.   DISCUSSIONS

This study aims to identify the impacts and implications caused by the virtual identities, exploring their psychological effects, coping strategies, and influences in creating these identities.

The survey indicates that participants perceive similarities between their virtual identities and their real selves. Interestingly there's no participant who has dissimilar identity in relation with their real self. 49.2% pf participants reported that they engage in online interactions sometimes than in real life sometimes. On a positive note, majority of them do not feel "FAKE" due to the identity differences in online and offline.

Feelings of anxiety and nervousness were discovered while trying to keep up with the online persona in real life. The motivation for adopting virtual identities include influences from favorite social media influencers and friends. Apparently, there is no change in the way pay interact in real life due to the virtual space. 40% respondents try to avoid real-life events sometimes because of their online persona.

The results can guide professionals in creating more realistic online features that maintain consistency between real and virtual identities, additionally helping individuals understand the importance maintaining similarity, to avoid problems in real life.

The limitations to this research include participants may not accurately report their feelings which leads to self-reported bias. The small sample size (62) may not have reached different set of individuals to apply the results to entire population. The survey primarily included female so there can be a gap in understanding perspectives or experiences of different genders. Participants may have rushed through responses due to many questions (20).

The Future research could explore more gender-based perspectives and analyze whether disconnection leads to negative physical symptoms.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the relationship between virtual and real-life identities and their impact on mental well-being. The findings underscore the growing significance of virtual environments in shaping identity, self-perception, and overall mental health.

The research revealed that younger individuals, particularly those aged 18–24, are most engaged in virtual platforms. While these environments offer opportunities for self-expression and social connection, they do not always translate to improved mental well-being. Engagement with virtual identities, satisfaction with online interactions, and the perceived authenticity of virtual experiences significantly influence self-esteem and mental health outcomes.

Positive aspects of virtual identities, such as opportunities for creativity and community-building, were highly valued by participants. However, barriers such as the pressure to conform, fear of judgment, and the gap between virtual and real-life identities often lead to stress and anxiety. Notably, even individuals who found virtual interactions fulfilling indicated a desire to disconnect or switch platforms if their mental well-being was compromised, reflecting the delicate balance between the benefits and challenges of virtual engagement.

Despite its contributions, this study faced limitations, including a small and demographically skewed sample, geographic restrictions, and reliance on self-reported data. Future research should address these gaps by examining a larger, more diverse population, investigating long-term effects of virtual identity engagement, and incorporating qualitative approaches for richer insights.

In conclusion, virtual environments play a pivotal role in shaping identity and mental well-being. To ensure a positive impact, platforms must focus on fostering authenticity, reducing social pressures, and providing tools to support users' mental health. By addressing these challenges and tailoring experiences to diverse user needs, virtual platforms can evolve into safe spaces that nurture both identity exploration and mental wellness.

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