

DIGITAL BELONGING AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF YOUTH IDENTITY IN NETWORKED SOCIETIES

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Abstract

The use of digital platforms has altered young people's strategies for negotiating and defining personal identity in networked societies, their strategies for constructing relationship, and strategies for seeking recognition. The study analysed the relationship between digital belonging and youth self-expression, community attachment, peer recognition and youth's online and offline identity. It was selected because it is descriptive and exploratory in nature and structured questionnaires were designed to gather the data from the frequent users of the social media, messaging groups, gaming networks and online community ranging from age 18-29, a total of 200 respondents were used. The findings showed links between the frequency of digital participation and reconfiguration of identity; freedom of expression and confidence in expressing opinions. The majority of participants felt that online communities helped them to build their social connections and gain cultural awareness, while quite a few faced pressures in regard to keeping socially acceptable online profiles. The differences were greatest online compared with offline in the areas of communication style, political expression, self-confidence and interests. Digital belonging therefore was a social process that was supportive and challenging. The findings showed that digital literacy, privacy awareness, inclusive online communities, responsible online platform use (not judging, excluding, and comparing oneself to others), and opportunities for young people to participate, be recognized, and explore identity in other social and cultural contexts worldwide are important.

Keywords: Digital Belonging, Youth Identity, Networked Societies, Social Media, Self-Expression

1. Introduction

Digital communication has become an integral part of the daily life of young people, changing their ways of relating, their sense of community and their sense of identity. Belonging isn't only something that happens to people in their families, schools, neighbourhoods, local cultures, it's also something people make. Belonging happens to people in their families, schools, neighbourhoods, local cultures, but it can also be something people create using social media, discussion groups, gaming environments, online fandoms, and digital movements. These are the chances for youth to self-present, receive feedback, participate in a community and re-think their role with other people. Adolescence and early adulthood are embodied moments in which identities are being explored; and, consequently, digital spaces are significant social contexts for questioning and re-imagining commitments, values, affiliations and self-images (Branje et al., 2021).

Young people in this age group are highly susceptible to social judgments, peer acceptance and emotional reinforcement, a period that is crucial to the development of their online behavior (Crone & Konijn, 2018). Platform conditions like measurability of feedback, connectivity and persistence create environments in which youth communicate and interpret social acceptance (Moreno & Uhls, 2019). Likes and comments, followers and reposts, group participation, then, may serve as markers of recognition; omissions and exclusions, and negative reactions may diminish a sense of belonging. Audiences' reactions and personal expression are continuous and give rise to digital belonging.

The Internet can also help in the growth of identities that might otherwise not be possible to foster in the current offline environment. Youth might find themselves their community of

politics, their community of culture, their community of gender, their community of creativity or their community of profession, that speaks their language and recognises their identity. Twitter, for instance, has been a site of research on feminist participation, revealing how adolescents became committed and engaged in identity work via the online sphere (Gleason, 2018). Digital environments can also foster the closeness of friendship through communication that brings meaning to and extends offline friendship interaction and emotion (Pouwels et al., 2021).

Digital belonging is not necessarily supportive, though. Social media can increase the amount of comparison, pressure and judgement concerns, especially when young people feel they must have a 'good' profile on social media to be attractive, successful or socially accepted. There has been cross-sectional research that has related specific patterns of social media use to changes in appearance-related SE throughout childhood and adolescence (Steinsbekk et al., 2021). There are also broader studies that have found links between social media use and depression, anxiety and psychological distress, although this varies depending on the type of social media use and the individual (Keles et al., 2020). Adolescents have reported that online spaces can be beneficial for connecting with others, but also for harmful behaviours such as cyberbullying, comparison, and high rates of emotional dependence (O'Reilly et al., 2018).

This tension is an example of the "social media see-saw", a phenomenon in which the same platforms can lead to a sense of support and inspiration, and a sense of pressure and exclusion, depending on the user and context (Weinstein, 2018). Assumptions regarding media effects are therefore not adequate for understanding changes in well-being as adolescent

differences in well-being are significant (Beyens et al., 2020). There are also similar individual differences in how social media use relates to self-esteem, meaning that the exact same types of social media use can yield different results for different young people (Valkenburg et al., 2021). Balanced scholarship has therefore warned against the negative or positive implications of digital media without attending to social context, developmentalities and patterns of engagement (Odgers & Jensen, 2020).

In this context, the present study explored the phenomenon of digital belonging, and the reconfiguration of youth identity in networked society. It emphasized personal engagement, peer recognition, community identity, experimentation with identity, self/other negotiation, and online/offline self. The purpose of the study was to identify how the digital communities helped and encouraged young people to feel included and to identify how repeated participation in the digital communities impacted the presentation, modification, and understanding of young people's identities. The research combined the enabling aspect of the digital life of the present with the constraining aspect of belonging with the reconfiguration of identity. The major objectives of this study are:

1. To assess the relationship between digital belonging and youth identity formation.
2. To examine how online participation influences self-expression and online–offline identity negotiation.
3. To identify the positive and negative effects of digital communities on youth belonging and identity.

2.3 Data Collection

The data obtained was obtained by using a structured questionnaire as well as a series of open-ended questions in the interview. Information was collected through the questionnaire about the demographics, frequency of digital participation, perceived online acceptance, peer interaction, self-presentation and changes in identity expression. Participants were asked about their experiences of inclusion/exclusion, recognition, anonymity and attachment to community in digital spaces in the open-ended questions. The responses were gathered at a predetermined period and the respondents were provided with ample time to take care in filling up each item. The questions were checked prior to administration for clarity, relevance and adherence to the study objectives.

2.4 Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations

The collected responses were organised, compared, and interpreted according to the main The gathered responses were structured, analysed and synthesised around the themes of youth identity and digital belonging. Frequencies, percentages, and simple comparisons were used to present quantitative responses, while categories of qualitative responses were grouped to make sense of the data, with categories emerging as reoccurring themes in the responses: self-expression, peer validation, community membership, identity experimentation, and online–offline negotiation. Where appropriate, patterns across demographic groups were also analysed. Ethical guidelines were adhered to throughout the study. Consent was voluntary, identities were not disclosed and respondents were free to withdraw at any time during the process. The findings have been presented in an aggregated way to ensure anonymity and minimise the risk of identifying individuals.

3. Results

3.1 Digital Participation and Sense of Belonging

A total of 200 participants aged 18–29 completed the study. Most respondents used digital platforms daily, and 72.0% reported participating in at least one online community. As shown in Table 1, social-media groups were the most common spaces of interaction, followed by messaging, gaming, and discussion communities. Digital belonging was generally high, with 68.5% of participants reporting that online groups made them feel recognised and socially connected. Participants who engaged online several times a day reported stronger belonging than occasional users. Figure 1 illustrated that peer recognition received the highest mean score among the measured dimensions.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

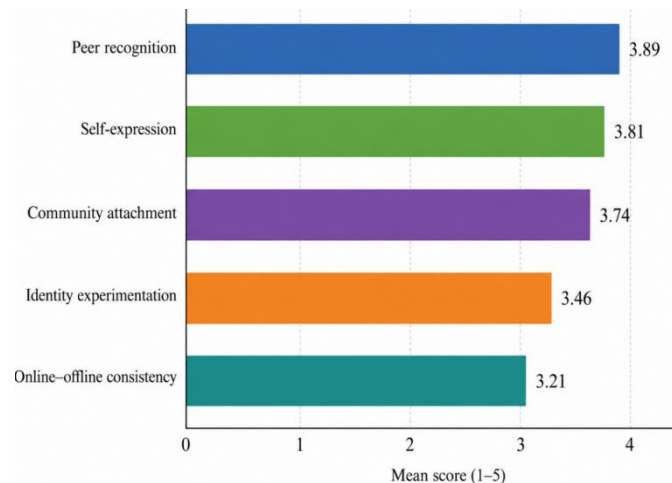
The study used descriptive and exploratory research design to explore the reconfiguration of youth identity in networked societies with the involvement of digital belonging. The method used was a mixed method to record measurable patterns and personal experiences. To identify relationships between online participation, peer recognition, community attachment and community identity expression, quantitative data was analysed while to understand how they negotiated their online and offline identities, qualitative data was analysed. The design allowed for the social, emotional, and cultural aspects of digital belonging to be explored in today's youth settings and environments.

2.2 Population and Sampling

The study was conducted with young people ages 18-29, who were actively involved in social media, online communities, gaming networks, or digital discussion spaces. The subjects were selected using purposive sampling as their regular engagement with the digital platforms was vital to the research objectives. An attempt was made to have respondents from different educational, social and residential experiences in order to have a broad range of experiences of digital belonging. A simple screening process based on age, frequency of Internet use, and involvement in Internet groups was used to determine eligibility. Informed consent was given by all participants and only those participants who gave informed consent were included in the final sample.

Table 1. Participation in Different Digital Communities

Digital community or activity	Frequency	Percentage
Social-media groups	128	64.0%
Messaging communities	112	56.0%
Gaming networks	78	39.0%
Online discussion forums	70	35.0%
Digital activism or fandom groups	58	29.0%
At least one online community	144	72.0%

**Figure 1. Mean Scores for Major Dimensions of Digital Belonging**

3.2 Digital Self-Presentation and Identity Expression

The results revealed that digital participation had resulted in a new paradigm for the respondents' self-presentation and self-perception. Almost two-thirds stated that they changed their language, appearance, opinion or interests when communicating online. As shown in Table 2, 61.5% had more freedom of self-expression in digital environments and 54.0% had tried something that they did not do in a physical environment that was related to their identity. Participants also said that online profiles were representations of oneself that were “managed.” But 38.5% reported that they were under pressure to look good or socially acceptable. These patterns indicated that digital identity has become the amalgamation of personal exploration and peer and platform cultures' expectations.

Table 2. Reported Effects of Digital Participation on Identity

Identity-related experience	Frequency	Percentage
Felt recognised and socially connected	137	68.5%
Experienced greater freedom of self-expression	123	61.5%
Modified language, appearance, opinions, or interests	126	63.0%
Experimented with identity online	108	54.0%
Carefully managed online self-presentation	119	59.5%
Felt pressure to maintain an acceptable image	77	38.5%

3.3 Negotiation of Online and Offline Identities

Issues of negotiation between online and offline selves were common amongst participants. As shown in Table 3, 57.0% said that their online identity was somewhat different from their real-life identity, while 26.5% said that their online identity is quite similar to their real-life identity. Confidence, political expression, cultural interests and communication style were most different. Those who felt more at home in the digital world were more likely to be confident when expressing their views online. As can be seen in Figure 2, the more often participants were online, the higher their level of identity reconfiguration. However, multiple interactions had slowly shifted online trust to offline relationships, education, and community involvement, several participants explained.

Table 3. Relationship Between Online and Offline Identities

Online-offline identity relationship	Frequency	Percentage
Largely consistent	53	26.5%
Partly different	114	57.0%
Substantially different	33	16.5%

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Total	200	100.0%
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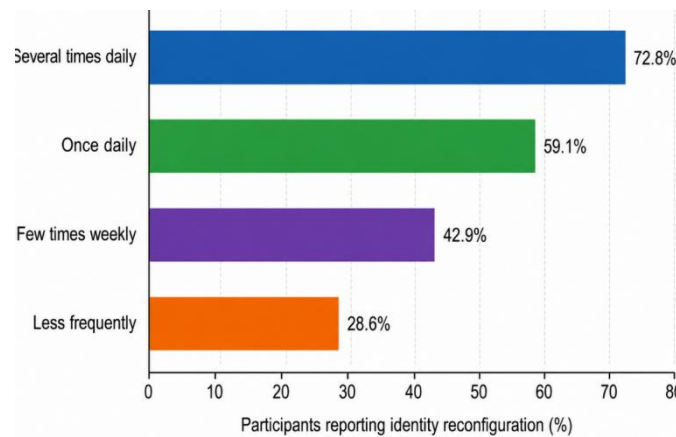


Figure 2. Identity Reconfiguration by Frequency of Digital Participation

3.4 Inclusion, Exclusion and Group Differences

Experiences of digital belonging were not uniformly positive. Although 64.0% reported receiving emotional or informational support online, 31.0% had experienced exclusion, ridicule, or negative comparison. Women and participants from rural backgrounds reported slightly greater concern about judgement and privacy, while urban participants reported broader access to diverse digital communities. Younger respondents aged 18–22 showed higher levels of identity experimentation than those aged 23–29. Despite these differences, most participants believed that networked interaction had expanded their social connections and cultural awareness. Overall, the results indicated that digital belonging supported identity development while also exposing young people to pressure and exclusion.

Table 4. Positive and Negative Experiences in Digital Communities

Digital experience	Frequency	Percentage
Received emotional or informational support	128	64.0%
Expanded social connections	142	71.0%
Increased awareness of other cultures	136	68.0%
Experienced exclusion or ridicule	62	31.0%
Experienced negative social comparison	81	40.5%
Expressed concern about privacy or judgement	88	44.0%

4. Discussion

The results demonstrated that digital belonging was an important dimension in structuring the sense of young people, their presentation and negotiation of identity. Peer recognition, self-expression and community attachment were high, indicating that digital space has emerged as meaningful places for social validation and identity formation. Those who interacted with these online multiple times a day also reported the highest identity reconfiguration scores, suggesting that the more they interacted with these online, the more impactful they felt digital communities were on their identity. Additionally, the results indicated that the majority of the participants adjusted their language, thinking, look or interests when online, which suggests a flexible and performative nature of identity in networked environments. Meanwhile, the distinction between online and offline selves indicated that online identity was not always the same as the offline identity, and thus that digital identity did not necessarily reflect routine identity. Instead, online environments provided for experimentation of alternative modes of expression, confidence and recognition, as well as reacting to the expectations of the audience and norms in the platforms.

The findings were similar to the previous studies that found that the quality and nature of social media participation had a greater impact on identity development than the amount of time spent on social media (Avci et al., 2025). The exhibited link between repeated digital participation and identity

reconfiguration reinforced the concept that algorithmically curated environments reconfigures the users' sense of self, through repeated exposure to curated content, communities, and behaviours (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). The participants' exploration of identity also suggested that digital engagement presented opportunities for development in ways other than just in terms of screen time (Granic et al., 2020). They strategically managed their profiles, in line with existing research that identified 3 strategic decisions for online self-presentation: authenticity, visibility and audience response (Hollenbaugh, 2021). Further evidence was found of how social media affected the immediacy, intensity and public nature of youth relationships, building on the salience of peer recognition and community attachment. The salience of peer recognition and community attachment further supported evidence of transformation of the immediacy, intensity and public nature of youth relationships with social media (Nesi et al., 2018). The need to keep up a desired image, or a 'good image' (as found on filters, peer approval and digitally mediated subjectivity among younger users (Pescott, 2020)), was comparable. Judgement and context collapse experiences were similar to previous findings that found youth identities were influenced by overlapping audiences that had different expectations (Wijesinghe et al., 2022). Lastly, the need to manage an attractive online profile, in line with research on the self-presentation norms on Facebook and Instagram (Yau & Reich, 2019).

The results were of great social, educational and policy significance. Digital belonging is not equivalent to online

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participation as it contributed to increased confidence, cultural awareness, social connectedness and ability to express identity. Therefore, digital identity, self-presentation, online peer pressure and privacy awareness might be part of digital-literacy programmes in educational institutions. These activities might enable young people to identify how they were influenced by algorithms, audience responses, and community norms in their decisions. The outcomes also indicated that online communities might be employed to reinforce inclusion, particularly for youth that experienced isolation within offline communities. But platforms should also deal with the issue of exclusion, ridicule, negative comparison and pressure on maintaining idealised identities, as should youth organisations. These risks could be mitigated through safer reporting systems, transparency with respect to privacy controls, and community moderation. Focus must also be on the young people of rural and socially disadvantaged areas where access to a wide range of digital communities might still be restricted, despite increased connectivity.

There are a few factors to bear in mind when interpreting the results. The study was self-reported; selective memory, social desirability, and understanding of how digital belonging and identity change may have impacted the responses. Findings were not generalisable to all young people in the purposeful sampling approach used. The cross-sectional design also only allowed for the collection of data at one point in time, making it impossible to determine if reconfiguration of identity was brought about by digital participation or if young people who were already involved in identity exploration were more active in the digital realm. Although various social-media platforms, gaming communities, messaging groups and discussion forums can influence an individual's identity in different ways, these differences were not explored in depth. This study also lumped together the definition of youth, but age, sex, class, geography and culture may have an impact on their digital experiences in various ways. Larger and more diverse samples, comparison of specific platforms, and longitudinal research of participants following them over time to explore changes in digital belonging and identity at different developmental stages could all be considered for future research.

5. Conclusion

Digital belonging proved to be a key element in the process of building and reconfiguring youth identity in networked societies. Online communities provided a place for young people to be recognised, to express themselves and to be a part of something other than what they have within their offline community, to experiment and to connect with others. The more often respondents were using digital platforms, the higher their levels of identity reconfiguration were, especially language, interests, opinion, appearance and confidence. Participants' understanding and representation of themselves in various social contexts was also shaped by peer feedback and community belonging.

Meanwhile, digital participation engendered a lot of tensions. Many young people were able to present multiple versions of themselves both online and offline and concerns of judgement, exclusion, privacy and negative comparison impacted on their security. This analysis identified the potential for digital environments to help shape identity and for them to be a source of pressure to conform to platform norms and expectations of audience members.

The results highlighted the need to improve digital literacy, to make the online community safer, and to build social and emotional awareness of networked engagement. Educators, parents, youth groups and platforms shall promote responsible expression, privacy, and inclusiveness. Digital belonging should be understood as a context for development rather than as a single social act, which should be discussed, analyzed and promoted.

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