

Psychological Needs and Identity Development in the Creation of Virtual Self among Adolescents

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Abstract

The growing presence of digital technologies in the daily lives of adolescents has had a considerable impact on the changes in adolescent development, especially the building of identity in the virtual world. The current paper explores psychological needs behind the existence of a virtual self among adolescents and the implication of the same to identity development. As the adolescents are at an important developmental phase, they are busy on virtual platforms communicating, trying to validate them, and experimenting with various aspects of identity. The study used a descriptive research design. The sample was a sample of 30 adolescents between the age of 13 and 19 years, picked by the use of random sampling. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data in terms of psychological needs including autonomy, relatedness, competence, and validation. Data was interpreted through percentages analysis to determine the trends that prevail in the process of the virtual self-construction of adolescents. The results show that teenagers mostly form virtual personalities in order to satisfy the desire to be socialized and accepted. The necessity to be validated with likes and comments and be recognized by peers became one of the strong motivating elements. Furthermore, the findings also reveal that a significant proportion of adolescents are inclined to impress online which is a disproportion between their real and online identities. The paper is concluding that although virtual self-creation is a good platform to explore the identity and communicate the self to others, it is also a challenge to the process of developing an authentic and consistent self-concept. Hence, educational and psychological interventions that facilitate awareness of the digital, self-reflection, and moderate use of virtual space are required to ensure the healthy development of adolescents.

Keywords: Virtual Self; Self-Concept; Identity Development; Adolescents

1. Introduction

It is a well known fact that adolescence is a highly sensitive period of development and it is characterized by rapid psychological, social and emotional growth where identity formation becomes one of the developmental tasks. In the modern world, identity development has experienced a major change owing to the ubiquitous aspect of digital technologies and social media. Teenagers are no longer limited to development of their identities through physical space but they are fully involved in the digital space where they can create, alter and showcase identities to various audiences. In this respect, the issue of the virtual self has become the object of growing academic interest.

The virtual self can be defined as the identities of a person that have been created digitally through internet technology using online space like social media, computer games, and virtual communities. It involves the manner in which teenagers appear in digital environments in terms of profile, pictures,

status, avatars, and communications. The virtual self can be highly edited, selective and even idealized, unlike the offline one. Teenagers can highlight positive attributes, hide perceived flaws, and also test out alternative personalities in a manner that is not necessarily available when interacting in real life. Such an ability of selective self-presentation enables adolescents to explore their identities and at the same time, seek social acknowledgment and confirmation. This sort of creating a virtual self is not just a phenomenon in the technological field but it is deeply rooted in the psychological processes. In order to gain a comprehensive insight into this phenomenon, it is necessary to address it using the established theoretical frameworks. Among the most applicable theories is the humanistic one that was offered by Carl Rogers and offers the basic conception of the development of self-concept and identity.

The self according to the theory of Rogers is a dynamic and organized mechanism of perceptions that people place upon themselves and which is usually termed as the self-concept. This self-concept has three main elements including the real self (what the individual is), the ideal self (what the individual wishes to be), and the self-image (what the individual thinks about himself or herself). One of the main hypotheses of the theory by Rogers is that the degree of congruence between the real and the ideal self is the determinant of psychological well being. When people have a strong correspondence of these factors, they arrive at a state of genuineness and mental adaptation. On the other hand, incongruence dissimilarity between actual and ideal self- can cause anxiety, dissatisfaction and conflict of identity.

The virtual self in the digital era can also be perceived as a kind of an extension or a manifestation of the self concept of Rogers in the virtual space. Teenagers tend to create their online identities according to their preferred self and not the actual self. Social media platforms, especially, promote displaying an image of perfection with the help of a carefully edited post, filtered photos, and the selective release of information. This process can boost self-esteem in the case where positive feedback can be received; whereas it can also cause the gap between the ideal and the real self to become wider resulting in incongruence. Due to this fact, adolescents might suffer the internal conflict, the lack of clarity of the self-concept, and the difficulties of the identity integration. Moreover, Rogers laid stress on unconditional positive regard in formation of healthy self-concept. In conventional context, this respect is offered by people that are important like parents, teachers and friends. However, in virtual world, validation is usually contingent and measured in form of likes, comments and shares. This change of unconditional to conditional validation can have a profound effect that makes adolescents less self reliant and more reliant on external endorsement of their self esteem.

The applicability of the theory of Rogers to the concept of virtual self construction is in its focus on authenticity, self-acceptance, and integration of various self elements. Although digital platforms offer adolescents a platform to express themselves and explore, they also present a challenge to congruence and authenticity. Teenagers are unable to align the self in online identity with the real world identities, which causes fragmented self. Considering all these, the analysis of the concept of virtual self is critical to comprehending the modern adolescent development. This study aims to investigate the ways in which the psychological needs encourage adolescents to form virtual identities and the effects of the virtual identities in the overall identity formation process by contextualizing the virtual self-construction in the theoretical framework put out by Rogers. This kind of understanding is necessary to come up with interventions that facilitate healthy self-concept development and psychological well-being in the digital age.

2. Review of Literature

The research article by **Kumari and Sharmila (2022)** is called Aspect of Identity Crisis Faced by Adolescents: A Comparative Study of Rudrapur and Lucknow; the researchers aimed to uncover the significant dimensions of identity crisis in adolescents. The sample of 160 adolescents (88 boys and 72 girls) aged between 10 and 19 years was used to conduct the study. To evaluate Identity (ID) in four dimensions, i.e. personal, relational, social, and collective identity, the researchers used Identity Questionnaire of Cheek and Briggs. It was found that most of the adolescents had stronger orientations on personal, relational and collective identity. The paper has highlighted that identity crisis is a psychosocial struggle that is characterized by confusion surrounding self and social identities and is very pertinent in describing the development of virtual self in adolescents.

Khan and Alam (2015) studied the correlation between academic stress and self-concept among the government and private high school students of Aligarh in relation to self-concept and factors influencing it. The aim of the study was to establish the effect of academic stress on self-concept. The research study based on the comparative research design revealed that there is a significant negative correlation between academic stress and self-concept. Moreover, the students of the private schools had better moral and temperamental self-concepts. The results of this research indicate that environmental and institutional issues are instrumental in the development of self-perception among adolescents that might be transferred to their online self-presentation.

Kaur and Singh (2014) performed a research in order to study the self concept in school students concerning gender, type of school and location. This was intended to determine the variation in self-concept and how this varies with emotional intelligence. The research used a survey approach and found out that there is no gender and school-type difference but among students, rural students showed more self-esteem than urban students. In addition, those students who had a higher self concept showed higher emotional intelligence. This paper also points out the interdependence of self-concept and emotional functioning that is instrumental in grasping how teenagers mediate and shape their identities in online space.

Jain (2012) examined the effects of self concept on academic performance among students. This was aimed at comparing self-concepts at various levels of academic performance. The comparative approach to the study revealed that there was no significant difference between high and low achievers on different dimensions of self-concept. But, high achievers expressed more positive school attitude, better teacher attitude and extracurricular activities. This paper showed that academic performance and self-concept are significant predictors of overall development, and hence the significance of self-perception in real identity and virtual identity construction.

Ghazvini (2011) investigated the correlation between academic self-concept and academic performance with the aim of establishing the impact of the self-concept in the achievement. The experiment used the correlational analysis and it has established significant positive correlation between academic self-concept and performance indicators. The results stressed the importance of educators concentrating on the development of the self-concept of students as one of the aspects of the educational process, which can also be applied to healthy virtual self-representation.

The research paper of **Bharathi and Pettugani (2013)** is known as the Self-Concept Among Adolescents study that aimed to measure a number of dimensions of the self-concept by the Self-Concept Scale of Saraswat (1984). This was a sample of 40 adolescents of Hyderabad. The findings

showed that most of the adolescents had above average self-concept in temperamental, intellectual, physical and social aspects. Also over fifty percent of the respondents had a positive moral self concept. These results indicate that adolescents have a more positive self-image on average, which can determine the manner in which they form virtual identities and portray them.

It is more recent and pertinent to virtual self-construction, **Mathew and K.S (2018)** carried out an experiment on the topic of Effect of Virtual Reality on Self-Esteem and Presence of Adolescents and attempted to study the dissimilarity between self-esteem in the real world and virtual one. The research adopted an experiment design with teenagers as the sample population and aged between 13 and 19 years, and were allocated to control and experimental groups. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and Slater-Usuh-Steed Questionnaire were standardized. The results indicated that there was a substantial increase in the self esteem of the adolescents who participated in the real and the virtual activities. It means that virtual environments can have a positive effect on the self-perception, thus helping in the formation of the virtual self.

Likewise, **Burke (2017)** reviewed the relationships between Self-Esteem in Adolescence to Avatar Creation of Actual and Idealized Selves and her aim was to determine the relationship between self-esteem and virtual self-representation. This was done by studying adolescent girls aged between 14 and 17 years and conducting correlational as well as regression analysis. The results showed that teenagers who had low self-esteem had a higher tendency of making idealized avatars which were vastly different to their real ones. This virtual self-discrepancy concept emphasizes the difference between the real and ideal self, which is very similar to the identity development theories.

Duraku and Hoxha (2018) explored the topic of the Effect of Test Anxiety and Academic Achievement on Self-Esteem, Self-Concept, and Psychological Factors among the students. The study concluded that the better the level of self-esteem was based on validated psychological scales, the higher the academic performance and the better the self-concept. The paper also emphasized that psychological distress and coping styles do change the perception of self that may spill over to teenagers in their participation in virtual identity formation.

The critical analysis study conducted by **Antony (2017)** has a sample of secondary school students (N=800). The research conducted a descriptive survey and discovered that self-concept plays an important role in achievement motivation and total growth. The results provided the relevance of self-concept improvement in intervention which is especially important in advising adolescents on healthy virtual self- creation.

All these studies point to the fact that self-concept, psychological needs and environmental factors are instrumental in identity formation in adolescents. The recent studies also prove that virtual worlds offer new platforms to express oneself and experiment with identity. Nevertheless, inconsistencies between real and virtual selves, and self-esteem and validation needs play a big role in the creation of the virtual self. Therefore, the literature reviewed provides sufficient background on analyzing the psychological motives behind virtual self-creation and its connection to identity development in adolescents.

3. Methodology

Research Design

The current research followed a quantitative descriptive research design to explore the issue of psychological requirements that led to the formation of virtual self among adolescents and the connection between it and identity development.

Population of the Study

The study population was the adolescents in the age range of 13-19 years.

Sample and Sample Size

The sample used in the study was comprised of 30 adolescents.

Sampling Technique

The participants were selected using the simple random sampling method.

Tool for Data Collection

A structured questionnaire that was created by the investigator was used to collect the data. The tool was divided into two parts:

- The first section involved psychological needs (autonomy, relatedness, competence, and validation) in relation to virtual self-creation.
- The second part measured the identity development dimensions which included identity exploration, identity commitment and self concept clarity.

Data Collection

The questionnaire was given to the chosen participants themselves. Informed consent was taken, and the participants were promised anonymity and confidentiality before the administration. The right instructions were given to allow truthful and unbiased answers.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the collected data was done through the percentage analysis method. The responses were classified and tabulated into percentages to analyze the distribution of the participants within the various response categories. This approach resulted in the possibility to interpret the data in a concise and easy way, and identify trends associated with the development of psychological needs and identity of adolescents.

4. Findings and Discussion

The results of the current research are determined by the data analysis with the help of the percentage tool and the emphasis on the psychological needs as the basis of virtual self-creation and its connection with identity development in adolescents aged between 13 and 19 years.

It was found that most adolescents were highly inclined towards having a sense of independence in virtual worlds. Majority of the participants have reported that digital platforms enable them to communicate their thoughts, opinions and identities without outside limitations. This implies that the necessity of being free is an important aspect influencing the intention of creating a virtual self.

When it comes to relatedness, a very high percentage of adolescents stated that they use virtual spaces to communicate with other adolescents, to preserve friendships, and to feel belongingness. In the percentage distribution, it was revealed that the social interaction and peer acceptance plays a very significant role in influencing the virtual identity of adolescents.

As per the necessity of being competent, a lot of participants stated that they use virtual platforms to demonstrate their abilities, talents, and achievements. The results show that the positive feedback in the form of likes, comments, and shares leads to a feeling of competence and self-efficacy in adolescents.

Another high percentage also emerged in the analysis of the adolescents who had a strong need of validation. The respondents indicated that external validation of self-concept by means of digital interactions plays a significant role in shaping self-concept among the respondents. This means that one of the major psychological needs that influence virtual self-construction is validation.

Regarding the identity development, the results showed that most of the adolescents use virtual platforms to undertake identity exploration. They test their personality, interests, and social roles in online environment. This is indicative of the virtual environments as a place of potential selves exploration.

Nevertheless, the findings also showed that the percentage of adolescents who face identity incongruence or confusion because of the discrepancies between their real and virtual identity is also significant. Part of the participants have claimed to show a perfect version of themselves on the internet and this can cause self-concept discrepancy.

Moreover, the results indicate that virtual self-creation is helpful in the expression of identity and experimentation, but too heavy dependence on virtual verification can have a detrimental effect on the clarity of self-concept. Dependence on external feedback at a significant level revealed relatively low stability in the sense of self by adolescents.

The researchers end with the conclusion that psychological needs that include autonomy, relatedness, competence, and validation play a significant role in the development of a virtual self among adolescents. Also, virtual self-construction has a two-fold impact in identity formation by helping to explore and being also challenged by the aspects of the self-concept coherence and genuineness.

5. Educational Implications

- Digital literacy integration: Schools must integrate formal digital literacy programmes in order to make adolescents aware of the idea of virtual self, dangers of idealized self-representation, and the social media and identity formation effects.
- Self-knowledge: Teachers ought to create assignments like reflective writings, group discussions, and self-assessment activities to enhance the self-concept of the students and make them understand themselves in an authentic manner.

- Meeting psychological needs: Autonomy It is recommended that the classroom environment should support autonomy by providing independent tasks, relatedness by engaging in collaborative learning, competence by participating in skill-based activities, and validation by receiving positive feedback.
- Introducing SEL programmes: Socio-emotional learning activities are to be implemented to build emotional intelligence, self-regulation, and coping mechanisms of handling social comparison and identity related stress.
- Counseling and guidance: The schools are supposed to offer counseling services to overcome problems related to low self-esteem, confusion of identity and over reliance on virtual approval among the adolescents.
- Promoting parental participation: The role of parents should be instructed on how to supervise the use of digital technologies and be purely supportive, which would lead to the creation of a balance between real and virtual self-formation.
- Policy formulation: Education policy makers must format guidelines that would facilitate safe, ethical, and balanced usage of digital platform to facilitate healthy identity formation.

6. Conclusion

The given paper has discussed the psychological motives behind the development of a virtual self in adolescents and its effect on identity development. The results indicate that construction of virtual self is strongly embedded in some of the most basic psychological needs that include autonomy, relatedness, competence and need to get social validation. Adolescents use digital platforms as the place of self-expression, socializing, and testing various elements of identity that facilitates their developmental task of forming an identity. The virtual world provides the flexibility and allows the adolescents to show their real and ideal self, thereby helping them to explore and boost their confidence by getting peer feedback. Nevertheless, the paper also singles out serious issues related to this phenomenon. Another outstanding problem is that discrepancy between the real and the idealized virtual self that tend to result in incongruence, identity confusion as well as dependence on external validation. This dependency might undermine personal self-esteem and cause variation in self esteem especially when teenagers align their own self esteem to the reactions of the internet. Moreover, overuse of virtual spaces might interfere with the formation of a stable and consistent self concept, as adolescents subjected to continuous comparison and social pressure can be exposed to this through excessive use of virtual spaces. Nevertheless, the paper recognizes that virtual self-creation may be used positively in the context of adolescents when they are coached into healthy and conscious use of the digital space. It has the potential to improve creativity, communicative abilities as well as social connectedness in case it is combined with real life activities. Thus, the paper finds that the virtual self constitutes a significant part of the modern adolescent identity, which is the result of the evolving socio-digital environment. Educators, parents, and practitioners need to create enabling conditions, enhance digital literacy, and foster true self-expression to make sure that adolescents can successfully combine their real and virtual selves, thus enabling them to grow holistically and experience mental health.

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