

The Impact of Online Identity Conflict on Self-perception and Social Anxiety

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Abstract:

Individuals present different identities on various online platforms, and when these identities conflict, it will cause online identity conflict. This conflict reduces the clarity of an individual's self-concept, thereby impairing self-perception and elevating social anxiety, with particularly notable impacts on adolescents, whose self-perception remains underdeveloped.. This paper summarizes research on the impact of online identity conflict on self-perception and social anxiety. This paper constructs a theoretical framework based on impression management theory and self-concept clarity theory, emphasizing that platforms' different functions, audience diversity, and cultural factors all influence online identity conflict. This paper also suggests that through the efforts of individuals, educators, and online platforms, more educational initiatives that promote authentic self-expression can be developed, and measures can be taken to reduce the pressure on platforms to express identity.

Keywords: Online Identity Conflict, Self-Perception, Social Anxiety, Self-Concept Clarity, Impression Management

1. Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving internet society, individuals maintain multiple accounts across various social media platforms, tailoring their online identities to the unique characteristics of each platform. For example, they might share carefully selected photos on Instagram, post their opinions on trending news on X, and project a professional image on LinkedIn. These distinct identity shifts, tailored to the platform's functionality and audience, can lead to online identity conflict, disrupting one's self-perception and triggering social anxiety.

This paper explores the impact of online identity conflict on self-perception and social anxiety. Existing research shows that using different identities across different online platforms (such as social media and forums) can lead to identity dislocation or self-confusion [1]. In addition, research shows that online identity conflict can weaken an individual's self-concept clarity, and individuals with low self-concept clarity are more likely to encounter mental health challenges [2]. Adolescents who engage in extensive online social interactions over a long period of time are more likely to experience mental health problems, especially anxiety and self-doubt [3].

Although existing research has examined the impacts of online identity conflict, most studies have focused solely on identity expression or emotional outcomes, with few studies examining how online identity conflict influences self-perception and social anxiety. To address this gap, this paper aims to investigate how online identity conflict influences self-perception and social anxiety and emphasizes the importance of understanding online identity conflict.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Impression Management Theory

Impression Management Theory, first proposed by Erving Goffman, posits that individuals consciously manage others' impressions of themselves in social interactions to regulate others' evaluations of them [4]. While individuals fulfill their intended roles in offline settings, they present diverse and complex personas online, and others' perceptions of them can vary depending on the platform. When these identities conflict or are simultaneously observed by overlapping audiences, identity conflict may emerge, leading to psychological stress, anxiety, or emotional discomfort [5]. Therefore, Impression Management Theory provides a foundational framework for understanding online identity conflict.

2.2 Self-Concept Clarity Theory

Self-concept clarity refers to the clarity, consistency, and stability of an individual's self-perception [6]. Specifically, it means that an individual's self-perception remains relatively consistent and stable across different situations, reducing internal conflict. In contrast, when self-concept is unclear, individuals are more likely to feel anxiety, stress, or low self-esteem. Individuals with high self-concept clarity have clear goals and values and are more resilient, while those with low self-concept clarity are more vulnerable to stress and external influences. The online environment is more likely to disrupt an individual's self-concept clarity. For example, Fullwood et al. observed that adolescents experimenting with different online identities can lead to confusion and reduced self-concept clarity [7]. This makes them more susceptible to emotional distress when managing conflicting online identities.

Impression Management Theory and Self-Concept Clarity Theory offer more comprehensive explanations of online identity conflict. Impression Management Theory emphasizes the motivations behind creating different online identities, while Self-Concept Clarity Theory emphasizes the psychological consequences of these online identi-

ty conflicts. This provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding the impact of multiple online identity conflicts.

3. Status of online identity conflict.

3.1 Definition and core characteristics of online identity conflict

Online identity conflict can be defined as individuals performing different identities on different online social platforms. These identity inconsistencies create tension and discomfort for individuals. Individuals maintain fixed roles in offline environments, such as being a good child at home and a student at school. In online virtual environments, however, individuals have autonomy in defining their roles—which can lead to identity conflict across different online platforms. Research has shown that emerging adults experiencing identity confusion and high levels of social anxiety are more likely to present a false self-online. Difficulty managing conflicting identities online can exacerbate emotional distress [8].

The core characteristics of online identity conflict include the multiple identities that exist at the same time, but they are inconsistent and conflicting. Individuals present different identities on different online platforms—for example, maintaining a professional profile on LinkedIn and sharing personal life moments on Instagram. However, when these identities are inconsistent or contradictory, they can cause conflict and become difficult to unify. Michikyan [8] emphasized that online identity conflict arises when individuals experience a discrepancy between a coherent self-presentation and a chaotic self-presentation. Such conflicts often lead to anxiety, depression, and stress.

3.2 Causes and contexts of online identity conflict

Online identity conflict is driven by multiple factors, including the different functions of the platforms, diverse audience demographics, and contemporary cultural contexts.

Different social platforms have various functions and styles. For example, LinkedIn serves as a professional platform, where users typically present a professional image; Instagram functions as a social sharing platform, where users tend to share highlights of their daily lives. Individuals often adjust the content they share based on a platform's style. Marwick and Boyd noted that adolescents often present different identities on different social platforms to adapt to the social norms and expectations of each platform [5]. This management of multiple identities

can lead to identity conflict, which in turn causes psychological stress and emotional distress.

Each platform attracts different audiences. For example, uploading humorous videos on TikTok attracts users with similar interests to like and share, while uploading exquisite photos on Instagram will attract more like-minded people, and each like represents appreciation and envy. Previous research by Yang et al. found that social media provides young people with an ideal opportunity to carefully curate their self-presentations through photos and videos, aiming to maximize views and likes [9]. However, when different self-presentations are exposed, the likelihood of identity conflict increases. For example, if a humorous video uploaded on TikTok is seen by colleagues on LinkedIn, it can cause stress for the individual and make them feel embarrassed.

Furthermore, people from different cultural backgrounds, such as international students studying abroad, may find it difficult to balance the online environments of different countries. For example, Chinese students studying in the United States and being exposed to social apps like X may experience significant social differences. This makes it difficult to align with the identity expectations of both cultural contexts, further exacerbating online identity conflict [7].

4. The psychological impact of online identity conflict

In today's digital age, with more people immersed on the internet, online identity conflict has become a pressing psychological issue. It impacts not only individuals' self-perception and emotions but also their interpersonal interactions. This article primarily explores two aspects: the impact of online identity conflict on self-perception. According to research by Fadhillah and Listiara, self-concept clarity significantly influences self-disclosure and conflict management patterns, suggesting that unstable identities can make it more difficult for individuals to express their authentic selves [10]. The second aspect is the impact of online identity conflict on social anxiety. Individuals fear negative evaluation, and some studies have found that those with high social anxiety may be more prone to loneliness due to pressure from online identity management or evaluation anxiety [11]. Based on these findings, this section focuses on how online identity conflict impacts individuals' psychology, particularly self-perception and social anxiety.

4.1 Impact on self-perception

Self-perception is an individual's awareness and under-

standing of their own characteristics, emotions, motivations, and behaviors. It includes both cognitive dimensions (e.g., "Who am I?") and affective dimensions (e.g., "How do I feel about myself?") [12]. When people manage different identities across different online platforms, inconsistencies between these identities can lead to doubts about their true self-perception. According to Davidson and Joinson, users often engage in "shaping" the deliberate creation of different self-presentations (e.g., presenting a professional image on LinkedIn and a casual image on Instagram) [13]. This action can increase social anxiety, fatigue, and psychological stress.

A key factor in shaping self-perception is self-concept clarity. According to self-perception theory, individuals infer their attitudes and internal states by observing their own behavior and the context in which they are perceived [12]. Research suggests that low self-concept clarity can exacerbate fear of negative evaluation and reduce self-disclosure, thereby undermining accurate self-perception. [14]. For example, encountering overlapping audiences across different platforms can induce feelings of awkwardness, which may reduce self-confidence and foster a fragile, unstable self-perception.

Online identity conflict poses a significant challenge to self-perception. When individuals manage multiple online identities simultaneously, the inconsistency of switching between these identities can reduce self-concept clarity and induce self-doubt.

4.2 Impact on social anxiety

Social anxiety is defined as the tension, uneasiness, and apprehension caused by the fear of being negatively evaluated in social interactions [15]. Engagement with online environments can amplify social anxiety. Michikyan found that emerging adults with high levels of confusion of overall identity (indicating low self-concept clarity) presented a false self on Facebook, suggesting a conflict between the real self and the ideal self [8]. The discrepancy between online identities and internal self-perception arises in individuals' anxiety.

Social anxiety includes not only avoidance of social situations but also excessive self-focus and sensitivity to potential criticism [16]. In online environments, conflicting identities across multiple platforms can exacerbate social anxiety. Individuals may worry about inconsistent self-presentation, negative feedback from different audiences, or the embarrassment and difficulty of facing overlapping audiences who see different facets of themselves. Abdelaziz and Hussein's study of 420 Generation Z Facebook users in Egypt found that they experienced significantly higher levels of social anxiety if they managed

multiple different identities on Facebook at the same time. [17].

Online identity conflict can create a disconnect between online and offline identity recognition. This leads individuals to experience fear and confusion regarding others' judgments, impairs their social skills, and ultimately induces social anxiety.

5. Implications

Research on the impact of online identity conflict on self-perception and social anxiety is crucial. Identity presentation on online platforms can be a form of social interaction, but it can also be a source of stress. Interventions aimed at enhancing self-concept clarity may help mitigate the negative psychological impacts associated with managing multiple conflicting online identities [18]. Future research should focus on the long-term impact of online identity conflict on self-perception and social anxiety.

At the same time, from an educational perspective, online identity conflict is particularly common among adolescents. Adolescents and college students, immersed in the online world for extended periods, are still "in the process of shaping their self-concept and are more susceptible to the pressure of switching between different online identities. Educators should increase mental health interventions to help adolescents cultivate a clearer self-perception and organize more social activities to encourage them to express their authentic selves and reduce social anxiety. Online social media platforms also bear responsibility for mitigating online identity conflict. Social media platforms can promote user well-being and reduce anxiety by designing environments that reduce identity-related stress and social comparison.

6. Conclusion

This paper explores the impact of online identity conflict on self-perception and social anxiety. Impression Management Theory and Self-Concept Clarity Theory together provide a comprehensive theoretical framework for how online identity conflict impacts individual psychology.

Based on existing research, online identity conflict has a significant impact on self-perception. Managing identities across multiple platforms can lead to inconsistencies between online and offline identities, which can reduce self-concept clarity. Furthermore, online identity conflict can increase social anxiety. Individuals face the pressure of maintaining multiple identities within overlapping online audiences, and they worry about negative evaluation, embarrassment, or judgment from others.

This study has several limitations.. First, the findings of

this paper are based on existing research, most of which is cross-sectional and typically focuses on adolescents and young adults, while research on other age groups is insufficient. Second, there is a lack of research examining online identities across different cultural contexts. Third, the timeframe of the referenced studies is relatively short.. Future research could include longitudinal studies, expanding the sample size, and study online identity conflict across cultural contexts. Experimental duration could also be increased to examine how online identity conflict affects self-perception and social anxiety over time. Research could also develop interventions to explore how online identity conflict specifically impacts self-perception and social anxiety.

In conclusion, reducing online identity conflict requires multifaceted efforts. Individuals, educators, online platforms, and other stakeholders must work together to promote authentic self-perception and expression and ultimately reduce social anxiety.

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