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The Digital Self and Real Self Among Social Media Users

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Abstract

The use of online social networks has increased in recent years, in addition to other electronic media that individuals mainly use to provide some information about themselves and communicate with others. The current study aimed to identify the level of the digital self and the real self among social media users. The study targeted individuals aged between 19-27 years old. The study data was collected using the Real Self Scale (prepared by the researchers) and the digital self scale (prepared by Mohammed,2019). The results showed that social media users have a high level of digital and real self, and there were no significant differences according to gender in the digital self, while were significant differences in the real self towards males. The study results also showed differences between the mean scores of the younger age group (23-26 years old) and the older age group (27 and above) on the real self scale towards the older age group, while the differences on the digital self scale were towards the younger age group (23-26 years old).

Keywords: *digital self, real self, social media.*

Introduction

Over the past years, the use of social networks on the Internet went viral, in addition to other electronic/digital means, used by individuals, to provide some information about themselves and communicate with others. Social networks (Media) constitute an open field for the expression of several types of acceptable and unacceptable behavior. It also provides an opportunity to present oneself in several ways, and Turkle (1997) indicated that virtual environments provide individuals with the option to create multiple representations of themselves and explore new aspects, where individuals can change their identity by changing their age, personality, physical appearance, and even gender, or hiding personal information or even falsify it when presenting themselves in the virtual world, which makes it difficult for service providers and other users to verify the validity of this information (Hu, Zhao & Huang, 2015).

Individuals are likely to present an identity via cyberspace that is different from their real identity or to present themselves based on the ideal self as much as they can, especially

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on some anonymous platforms, especially when they feel that their behavior in the virtual world cannot be linked to their real identity (Hu et al., 2015).

Some studies examined the relationship between true self-expression and the use of social networking platforms. Those who enjoy the freedom to express their true selves are more self-motivated to post, and these posts reveal more of the personal and emotional content of these users (Seidman, 2014). Moreover, individuals with a prominent level of authentic self-expression use Facebook more frequently for the purpose of creating new relationships (Tosun, 2012). Bessière, Seay & Kiesler (2007) found that gamers tend to create favorable game personalities that resemble their ideal selves. As a result, the virtual self (avatar) that an individual presents online may be better than the actual self in the real world, and individuals often create online selves to alter social reality, to add features to their real self or just to represent it in a certain way. This is supported by the finding that individuals have an identity that undergoes a healthy change over time, known as qualitative (rather than numerical) identity (Kolswijk, 2007).

While Lee, et al. (2014) found that anonymity was positively associated with virtual self-contradiction, the concept of virtual self-contradiction refers to the degree to which virtual identity deviates from an individual's actual identity in the real world (Jin, 2012).

Studies that have investigated self-contradictions between individuals' actual self (in the physical world) and their virtual avatar found that in an avatar-based virtual environment (such as massively multiplayer online role-playing games), offline personalities are associated with actual virtual self-contrasts and ratings of the virtual self (Mancini & Sibilla, 2017) and the less the contradiction between the real self and the virtual self, the greater the extent to which people experience the virtual identity as if it were their actual identity (Jin, 2012) In addition, it greatly affects the psychological state of people, and in turn affects the quantity and quality of their participation in virtual communities.

The Self-Discrepancy Theory proposes three domains of the self: the actual self, the ideal self, and the duty one, where the actual self represents the characteristics that one or others believe the individual possesses. They reflect the current state of the individual. Whereas the ideal self represents the characteristics that an individual or others ideally would like to possess. They reflect the hopes and aspirations of the individual. The Ought Self represents the characteristics that one or others believe an individual should or ought to have. It reflects the individual's sense of duties, responsibilities, and obligations (Higgins, 1987, 1989).

According to self-contradictory theory, several types of self-contradictions will lead to several types of psychological distress, including feelings associated with depression (such as disappointment, dissatisfaction, and shame) and feelings associated with arousal (such as fear, guilt, and self-contempt. The individual's behavior is directed to align his self-concept with self-evidence to avoid those negative feelings (Higgins, 1987). When experiencing negative feelings resulting from self-contradictions, some individuals may engage in deviant behavior and try to overcome these psychological discomforts by reducing self-contradiction. By contrast, some may engage in deviant behavior and try to temporarily escape these annoyances by ignoring their self-contradiction.

Objective:

The aim of this study was to identify the level of the digital self and the real self among social media users, in addition to the differences in the digital self and the real self according to descriptive variables: (gender, age).

Material and Methods

Study design and participants

Across-sectional descriptive study among social media users in Riyadh city. Individuals were eligible to take part in the study if they were at least 19 years of age, able to understand the Arabic language, willing to participate in the study.

Measures:

Using a convenience sample (n = 329), the data were collected through a self-administrated online survey, which consisted of three sections:

a) Individual characteristics demographic basics (gender, age).

b) Digital-self scale: is a 25-item self-report scale designed to assess Digital-self in adults (Mohammed, 2019) statements all are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree". In the original study, The Arabic (DSS) has been shown to have 4-factor structure: inward orientation, spontaneous narrative, separability, and multiplicity The split-half coefficient was calculated using Spearman's equation (0.88), suggesting good internal consistency reliability. In this study the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.82.

c) Real -self scale: The researchers prepared a scale of actual self for the purposes of the current study, which consists of (19) statements which correspond to a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 to 4 points. The total score ranges from 19 to76. The scale has shown acceptable psychometric properties and high internal consistency reliability with a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.91.

Statistical analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistics (means, standard deviations, one-sample t-test and One-way ANOVA) were used to analyze the data. The internal consistency reliability of scales was analyzed with Cronbach's alpha The statistics of the data were processed with SPSS v. 22.0 software.

Results

Participants characteristics

Three hundred and twenty-nine Individuals participated in this study. Overall, the majority of the Participants were in the age range of 22 to 19 years (58.2%) Regarding their gender, the majority was females (52.1%), males (47.6).The detailed demographic characteristics are illustrated in table(1)

Table 1. Basic characteristic of participants(N=329)

Characteristics	Categories	n	%
Age(Years)	19-22	192	58.2
	26-23	67	20.3
	27-above	70	21.5
	total	329	100
Gender	Female	172	52.1
	Male	157	47.6
	total	329	100

Table 2. Differences between the average of the study sample and the hypothetical average for the digital and real self-scale (N=329):

Variables	Hypothetical Mean	Mean	SD	T.value
Digital self				
Head inward	18	15.96	3.928	-9.40
Separability	18	15.34	4.135	-11.63
Automatic narration	18	14.18	4.105	-16.85
Pluralism	10	7.671	3.356	-12.58
Total	62.5	53.16	12.90	-13.11
real self	47.5	60.34	10.018	22.86

It is clear in Table (2) that there are statistically significant differences between the average scores of participants on digital self, and the hypothetical average of the dimensions, and total score of the scale, p.value was statistically significant at (0.01). and there were also statistically significant differences between the average scores of participants on the Real Self scale and the hypothetical average of the scale, as all p.value was statistically significant at (0.01).

Table 3. gender differences the digital and real self-scale (N=329):

Variable	Females		Males		T.value
Digital self	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Head inward	15.976	3.630	15.949	4.242	-0.064
Separability	14.895	3.887	15.840	4.350	2.081
Automatic narration	6.866	3.299	8.554	3.201	4.700*
Pluralism	13.755	3.912	14.656	4.269	1.966
Total	51.494	12.083	55.000	13.548	2.481
real self	58.0640	9.76936	62.8408	10.07590	4.363*

In Table (3), it is evident that there are no significant differences between the average scores of (male and female) on all scale dimensions, except (Automatic narration) dimension. In this dimension, the significant differences between (male and female) average scores towards males. The differences between (male and female) in the average scores of the real self scale are significant in the male direction.

Table 4. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) for the digital and real self scale according to age(N=329)

Variable	Degrees of Freedom	Sum of Square	Mean Square	F
Digital self				
Head inward	2	288.948	144.474	9.868
	326	4772.614	14.640	
	328	5061.562		
	2	223.773	111.886	

Separability	326	5386.726	16.524	6.771
	328	5610.498		
Automatic narration	2	123.751	61.875	5.649
	326	3570.796	10.953	
	328	3694.547		
Pluralism	2	191.141	95.571	5.838
	326	5336.549	16.875	
	328	5527.690		
Total	2	3026.983	95.571	9.565
	326	51584.823	16.370	
	328	5611.805		
Real self	2	1064.355	532.177	5.261
	326	32977.834	101.159	
	328	34042.188		

Table (4) shows significant differences between the average scores of the participants on the digital and real self scales based on age (19-22, 23-26, 27 and above). The researchers used the LSD Test as one of the post tests to determine the direction of the differences in the both scales between the subgroups (19-22, 23-26, 27 and above), and the results are presented in the following table:

Table 5. LSD test Post hoc comparison between subgroups on the digital and real self scale (N=329):

Digital Self	Age(years)	19-22	23-26	27-above
	19-22			9.00933*
	23-26	3.61557*		
	27 -above		-9.00933*	
Real Self	Age(years)	19-22	23-26	27-above
	19-22			-3.96834*
	23-26	3.61557*		
	27 -above		0.35278	

Table (5) shows that there are no significant differences between the average scores of the group (19-22 years) and (27 and above) and the group (23-26 years) and (19-22 years) on the digital self scale. Additionally. However, there are significant differences between the average scores of the group (23-26 years) and (27 and above) on the digital self scale in toward the group (23-26 years).

significant differences between the average scores of the group (19-22 years) and (27 and above) and the average scores of the group (23-26 years) and (27 and above) on the real self scale toward the group (27 and above). However, there were no significant differences between the average scores of the group (19-22 years) and (23-26 years).

Discussion:

The results of the current study showed that the participants have a high level of digital and real self and that the virtual space was used to share the self that is similar to the self

in the real world. This result is consistent with the findings of Boye (2014), where the participants indicated that there is not a big difference between their selves and virtual models, that is, between the real self and the virtual self. This result is also consistent with the findings of other researchers, such as Growe (2010), who found that the virtual self is an extended form of their self within the virtual field, and Lawson's (2000) study that the virtual self is the realistic self and is somewhat ideal in form, as found by Bessière et al. (2007).

Individuals who show good psychological adjustment in the virtual world tend to model their virtual self according to the characteristics of their real self, and Georgieva's (2011) study showed that people present themselves in a more open, social, realistic, and positive way. This is confirmed by the tendency to create a virtual self that represents a similar representation of the same person in real life.

Previous research conducted on groups of social media users indicates that in some cases, the representations that people present about themselves online are an amalgamation of their actual and ideal selves. In other words, the virtual self is an actual, more or less ideal self (Bessière et al., 2007), as found by Hu et al. (2017). They argue that people are also willing to act out their true selves in an anonymous online world, and individuals may reconstruct their identity in order to express more of their true self (especially the negative true self) in an anonymous online environment.

It has been suggested that individuals' true self is more likely to be active in the virtual environment than in the real world, as most people consider the virtual setting to be an anonymous, free, and open environment, providing a better platform for representing the true self and expressing it with a reconstructed virtual identity in a virtual world.

Through the Internet, individuals are able to reduce the contradiction between their identity and self-guide (Higgins, 1987). In light of the literature and research results, the virtual self is defined as a psychological phenomenon within the framework of the "self-concept" as a psychological presence within the digital virtual world as the individual perceives it, governed by processes of interaction, dynamic closeness and distance with the real, ideal, and obligatory self.

The meaning of the virtual self may differ from one individual to another, just as the individual perceives themselves in their psychological presence in the virtual environment they frequent and interact with. Some may perceive their virtual self as an extension of their self in the real world, while others may see it as a completely different identity that is like their life but more and better (Growe, 2010).

The results of the study showed that there are no differences between males and females in the digital self, although males and females do not interact, engage in the same way (Quazi, Hasan,Abayomi-Alli & Hardaker, 2022). Gender is an evolving, embodied social and cultural construct that shapes how individuals move and interact with the world (Kriger & Keyser-Verreault, 2022: 24). Although this progress is gradually leading us to overcome the dualism that has dominated the world for many centuries, its presence in the social imagination remains dominant to this day, and there are works that defend the gender gap in access, use, and consumption of digital technologies (Vannucci, Simpson, Gagnon & Ohannessian, 2020). Males usually tend to consider themselves more competent and skilled than females when it comes to navigating cyberspace (Cai, Fan & Du, 2017). However, some research has shown that this fact stems more from self-perception than a difference in actual ability and competence (Siddiq & Scherer, 2019). However, this self-perception is still somewhat fundamental as it ultimately determines the type of internet use and consumption for each gender, as well as the type of applications and digital content that end up demanding or attracting the aforementioned to a greater or lesser group according to gender (Rambaree & Knez, 2017). Serrate - González et al. (2023) study found that males and females make very different decisions when it comes to their online presence and how they present themselves and their

behavior to others. It seems that females feel obligated to be transparent online and that they are forced, in the belief of freedom, to share personal information and their daily lives online. They present a vision of themselves and the world around them that closely resembles their daily reality, which today is completely permeated by their online lives, and they use their images to a greater extent than males. Studies such as those by García et al. (2021) also indicate that social networks maintain traditional gender gaps.

The results of the study also showed that there was a difference between the average scores of the younger age group (23-26 years) and the older age group (27 and over) on the realistic self-scale in the direction of the older age group, while the difference on the digital self-scale was in the direction of the younger age group (23-26 years). Perhaps this is since participants in the younger age stage are in the stage of developing an integrated view of the self by absorbing the expectations of important others in the form of self-guides compared to adults, and thus the virtual world becomes an effective new tool for upbringing and self-formation (Harter, 1999).

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