
Title: The Identity Crisis in the Context of Achieving Digital Citizenship

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Abstract

The identity crisis is one of the complex issues facing individuals and societies in the digital age, particularly in the context of digital citizenship. In this era, personal identity intertwines with virtual identity, leading to new challenges individuals face in defining themselves and understanding their place in society, which can result in both internal and external conflicts. Accordingly, this study aims to explore the effects of the identity crisis on individuals in the pursuit of digital citizenship and to present these effects in some detail. The study first addresses the definition of identity, followed by digital identity, highlighting its key aspects and dimensions. Next, it discusses the concept of citizenship in general, followed by digital citizenship and its dimensions. Finally, the study presents the key issues that constitute the identity crisis within the framework of digital citizenship.

Keywords: Identity, Digital Identity, Identity Crisis, Citizenship, Digital Citizenship.

Introduction

Identity is a complex concept that encompasses a range of elements that define an individual or group. It includes various dimensions such as personal identity, which pertains to individual traits; cultural identity, which reflects affiliation with a specific culture; social identity, which relates to the groups to which one belongs; and national identity, which expresses allegiance to a particular country. These dimensions intertwine to form a complete identity, which is not fixed but evolves over time and through life experiences, influencing how individuals interact with the world around them.

Identity is a fundamental issue at the heart of the human experience, as it reflects belonging, social and cultural interaction, and a sense of affiliation with a particular group. It also embodies the unique characteristics that distinguish individuals from one another. In today's world—marked by rapid technological advancement and the widespread use of the Internet and social media—digital identity has become an inseparable part of human identity. Digital identity refers to the image individuals present of themselves in the digital space, an image that intersects with their cultural and social identities, creating new challenges related to privacy, belonging, and interaction.

A study by Bayoussef (2014) showed that individuals in the sample preferred joining more than one virtual community, favoring those that combine Arab and global dimensions, as well as cultural and general characteristics. This reflects their openness to other communities—but in a virtual rather than

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real-world context. Their participation in these communities is driven by a desire for dialogue and exchange of opinions, highlighting a need for self-expression and the dissemination of personal ideas. For most individuals, virtual identity is a reflection of their real identity, and some believe they are more active, interactive, and engaged in virtual communities than in real-life ones. This is attributed to the nature of virtual spaces, which emphasize intellectual communication over appearances and first impressions, as seen in the physical world (Sahraoui & Rahmani, 2018/2019).

Furthermore, with the information revolution, we now live in a digital society characterized by the digital individual and digital citizenship. The latter represents a form of virtual citizenship within a vast electronic space. Ribble and Bailey (2007) defined digital citizenship as “the norms of appropriate and responsible behavior with regard to technology use” (Lyons, 2012), implying that individuals should adopt specific behaviors and practices when using technology and the Internet. This form of citizenship encompasses a set of values and ethical standards that promote responsible and safe use of technology.

Digital citizenship presents new challenges and opportunities for individuals in shaping their identity. It reshapes how people define themselves in the digital space through interaction on social media platforms and websites. Individuals create digital identities that reflect different aspects of their personalities. Moreover, digital citizenship fosters awareness of rights and responsibilities, encouraging individuals to manage their digital identities responsibly.

A study by Sadiku, Shadare, and Musa (2015) indicated that digital identity is the user's virtual identity on the Internet and has become the primary means of communication in the digital world. It has never been easier to identify individuals through basic data such as date of birth and gender. However, with increasing globalization and the complexity of digital identity systems, concerns are growing about the level of trust in these systems.

Another study by Talha (2020) concluded that despite the risks present in the digital environment, the opportunities offered by digitization will lead to the emergence of a new, more flexible concept of identity. It is no longer necessary to wage war on technology or think of resisting it. In the case of digital identity, this resistance equates to confronting the self. Instead, we should harness the capabilities of this technology to adapt and develop ways to coexist and thrive in the digital environment, just as we do in the real world.

Nonetheless, challenges related to privacy and security persist, as individuals may feel a loss of control over their identity due to data collection. Social pressures also push individuals to present an idealized version of themselves, resulting in a disconnect between real and digital identities. This situation places traditional identity in a predicament—an issue that the present study seeks to clarify and emphasize. Based on this, the research problem is defined by the following questions:

- What is the definition of identity and national identity? What are their manifestations and dimensions?
- What is citizenship and what is digital citizenship? What are its dimensions?
- How is the identity crisis manifested in the context of digital citizenship?

1. Definition of Identity and Digital Identity

1.1 Definition of Identity

Linguistically, identity refers to the self. The *Concise Dictionary* defines identity as the essence of the self, while *Webster's Dictionary* describes it as the sameness of fundamental genetic traits across different instances or the objective reality that defines a specific entity. In French (*Identité*), identity is understood as a personality that aligns with a group while retaining uniqueness.

Terminologically, the German sociologist Max Weber defined identity as “a group's sense of common origin, expressed through shared external elements such as symbols, melodies, and customs” (Ali, 2014, p. 443). These elements distinguish one identity from others and help preserve its vitality through myths, values, and cultural heritage.

Mahmoud Al-Alam emphasized identity's central role in shaping both individual and social personality (Al-Alam, 1996, p. 19). Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri further elaborated that cultural identity can only become complete and globally relevant when it embodies three elements:

- the homeland (geography and history),
- the state (the legal embodiment of national unity), and
- the nation (the spiritual thread created by shared culture) (Al-Jabri, 1998, p. 14).

He also argued that cultural identity, as the foundation of nationhood, results from long-term historical accumulation. Thus, cultural unity cannot be achieved by political decree alone (Al-Jabri, 1995, p. 12).

Cultural and civilizational identity represents the essential and enduring traits that distinguish one nation from others. These traits include memories, values, symbols, and aspirations that define a people's cultural uniqueness. Identity is not static; it evolves through collective experiences, whether victories or struggles, and through contact with other cultures. Yet its defining feature remains continuity. Like a tree, identity may shed leaves or grow new branches, but its essence remains (Eish & Hubbi, 2018, p. 9).

1.2 Definition of Digital Identity

Digital identity can be categorized into two types:

- Offline digital identity, and
- Online digital identity.

Offline digital identity refers to information stored and managed by governments or institutions, such as national ID numbers, driver's licenses, passports, bank account numbers, and tax records. This form of identity remains within the traditional scope of citizenship, even if data is exchanged digitally. However, in response to globalization, initiatives like the Digital Wallet have been proposed to serve as a secure, universally recognized digital identity. The Digital Wallet aggregates all personal digital identities and enables safe authentication across platforms and countries (Sadiku, Shadare, & Musa, 2015, pp. 44–46).

According to *Webopedia*, virtual identity is the online persona that users construct, which bridges the gap between real individuals and their digital representations. This identity consists of the characteristics individuals share with others online and involves a triadic relationship between the user, their virtual identity, and others in the digital space (Talha, 2020, p. 136).

In the context of digital citizenship, online digital identity reflects a person's interactions and presence in cyberspace. Here, individuals transcend national, cultural, linguistic, religious, and historical boundaries, adopting a flexible identity that may diverge from their original one (Carrasco-Sáez et al., 2017, p. 2258).

Identity, at its core, expresses the self and the sense of belonging to a system that grants individuals unique characteristics. It involves linguistic, cultural, and social dimensions. As noted by Max Weber, identity emerges from a shared sense of origin and plays a foundational role in shaping both individual and collective identity.

Digital identity, on the other hand, includes both official data (offline digital identity) and user-generated personas (online digital identity). It reflects how individuals interact in digital environments that blur traditional identity boundaries. As digital interactions grow, digital identity evolves in tandem, challenging individuals to redefine how they perceive and present themselves in an increasingly globalized and interconnected digital world.

2. Manifestations and Dimensions of Digital Identity

Digital identity plays a crucial role in the success of virtual interactions on social networking platforms. Researchers have analyzed this identity through a set of indicators that users choose to either display or hide—such as gender, age, religion, city of residence, and other personal characteristics. Users adopt various strategies to present themselves to others online, including the choice of profile pictures, what aspects of their private lives to reveal, and what to conceal. Social media platforms, therefore, provide

fertile ground for the construction of self-identity through the interplay between real and digital personas (Sahraoui & Rahmani, 2018/2019, p. 89).

One of the most prominent manifestations of the new digital identity among youth is their detachment from their real-life identity in favor of constructing a virtual identity through social media networks. This phenomenon has been described by some as the stripping away of real-world privacy and responsibilities associated with one's authentic identity.

According to researcher Rihane Belouti, there are several indicators that signify the acquisition of a digital identity:

- Detachment from the homeland, as the digital space is a borderless realm where national boundaries become irrelevant.
- Disengagement from national symbols, which are the shared cultural memory of a society in real life.
- Disconnection from religious and historical symbols, reflecting a break from traditional identity markers.
- Transformation of language, including the use of hybrid expressions, non-standard greetings, and symbols. Some scholars refer to this emerging mode of communication as a “barbarized language” due to its violation of linguistic norms by blending multiple languages and disrupting syntactic and semantic structures.

These characteristics make digital identity a fluid and evolving construct. It can exist within global contexts or closed digital communities. In such settings, digital identity is characterized by several features:

- The freedom to select identity traits based on available technological tools;
- The ability to modify identity at any moment through user choices on social networks;
- And the influence of external actors, such as online personas or cyberattacks, leading to transient and unstable identities (Sahraoui & Rahmani, 2018/2019, pp. 89-91).

Digital identity represents a complex embodiment of the individual in cyberspace. It consists of personal data, official records, and online behavior, reflecting interactions in the digital world. This identity encapsulates various facets of the self, including values, culture, and social affiliations.

With increasing reliance on technology, digital identity becomes more dynamic and mutable, influenced by shifts in the digital environment and the content individuals engage with. It is crucial to recognize the need to protect digital identity, as it affects one's reputation and rights. This necessitates raising awareness around privacy and digital security. It digital identity is not merely a collection of data—it is a fundamental part of how individuals define themselves in the information age.

3. Citizenship and Digital Citizenship

3.1 Citizenship

The concept of citizenship is relatively modern, having emerged following the French Revolution in 1789. Nevertheless, the core meaning of citizenship has long been discussed by philosophers since the era of Greek thought. Despite its philosophical depth, citizenship remains a contested and sensitive concept. Its interpretations—often linked to nationality—differ significantly across societies and historical periods, particularly in contexts involving minorities, multiculturalism, immigration, and varying political conditions. Moreover, the fact that an individual is born in a particular location is not a matter of choice but rather a matter of imposed necessity.

At its simplest, citizenship can be defined as “the individual's relationship with the state—as a geographical and political entity—defined by its constitution and laws, and encompassing both rights and duties.” From a psychological perspective, it represents “a sense of belonging and loyalty to the

homeland, acting as a source for fulfilling essential needs and safeguarding one's identity against existential threats."

It is worth noting that in some societies, citizenship is often conflated with allegiance or submission, even in the absence of citizenship's essential elements. This reflects a form of tribal mentality, the dominance of tradition, and the supremacy of emotion over rational thought, where the principles of equality and justice are overshadowed by blind loyalty that neglects individual agency.

According to Iija (2011), the essential components of citizenship include:

- The civil component, which emphasizes individual liberty, freedom of expression and belief, and the right to own property;
- The political component, which involves the right to political participation and the expression of dissenting opinions without harming the state;
- The social component, which ensures the right to education, healthcare, and other public services within the homeland (Othman, 2019, pp. 2-3).

3.2 Digital Citizenship

The concept of citizenship has faced numerous challenges due to globalization and the information and communication revolution, which have impacted traditional notions of sovereignty and introduced the idea of the global citizen. Within this context, the term digital citizenship has gained prominence. It not only concerns awareness of the risks associated with technology but also focuses on building safe communities and understanding how to manage personal information. This concept aims to foster an ethical and secure digital world, encouraging others to follow suit (International Telecommunication Union, 2009, p. 19).

Digital citizenship is a contemporary concept that emerged alongside the rise of social networking platforms. It is influenced by various factors, particularly in educational settings, where students must develop key digital competencies. These include technical security awareness, intellectual resilience, basic digital skills, dialogue techniques, tolerance, rumor avoidance, cybercrime prevention, and rejection of extremist ideologies (Al-Qahtani & Youssef, 2018, p. 86).

Elsayed (2021) defines digital citizenship as the individual's interaction with others through digital tools and resources such as computers and the internet as a means of communication via email, blogs, websites, and various social media platforms (p. 233).

Al-Mallah (2017) offers another definition, describing digital citizenship as a set of standards, skills, and behavioral rules that individuals need when using technology in ways that respect both themselves and others, enabling learning, communication, and digital safety (p. 26).

Similarly, Lyons (2012) characterizes digital citizenship as a type of civic engagement aimed at promoting safe technology use and enhancing digital responsibility among citizens (p. 40).

Thus, digital citizenship involves appropriate and responsible behavior when using technology. It encompasses digital literacy, ethical conduct, online etiquette, internet safety, regulatory norms, rights and responsibilities, and best practices for modern technology usage (Ibrahim, 2018, p. 291).

Zerqawi (2018) further defines digital citizenship as preparing students to use computer technology effectively and appropriately, through developing knowledge in word processing, communication software, and fostering correct digital citizenship practices (p. 120).

So, it is a modern and evolving concept shaped by globalization and technological advancements. It goes beyond mere awareness of technological risks by promoting the development of safe communities, personal data management, and ethical digital interaction. Key elements include digital engagement, essential knowledge and skills, ethical behavior, and digital responsibility. Educational institutions play a crucial role in fostering these competencies among students, equipping them to use technology safely and effectively.

Ultimately, digital citizenship represents a qualitative transformation in the way individuals interact with digital tools. It requires both awareness and responsibility to ensure a secure and productive digital future. As proposed by researchers, it is best understood as a collection of standards, skills, and behaviors needed for responsible and respectful digital interactions. These include using email, blogs, and social media in ways that promote digital safety, protect privacy, fight misinformation, and encourage tolerance. Therefore, digital citizenship is essential for creating a secure and ethical digital society.

4. Dimensions of Digital Citizenship

Digital citizenship encompasses nine key dimensions, as defined by Ribble (2011). These dimensions focus on contemporary issues related to the use of digital technology and have the capacity to adapt to future technological developments. The dimensions are as follows:

- **Digital Access:** Refers to ensuring full access to digital technology for all members of society, regardless of gender, race, or age. This requires efforts from schools and policymakers to facilitate equitable access.
- **Digital Commerce:** Involves online buying and selling. It emphasizes the importance of protecting consumer information and educating learners on how to handle sensitive data securely and responsibly.
- **Digital Communication:** Concerns the electronic exchange of information. Learners should be taught to use communication technologies safely and ethically, while being aware of risks such as cyberbullying and data breaches.
- **Digital Literacy:** Includes the ability to use technology to access, evaluate, and apply information. This requires both technical and cognitive skills to navigate the digital environment effectively.
- **Digital Etiquette:** Refers to acceptable and appropriate behavior in digital spaces. It is essential to teach students the norms of respectful and responsible technology use.
- **Digital Law:** Pertains to the legal rights and restrictions surrounding the use of digital technology. Learners need to understand what constitutes legal and illegal actions in the digital world.
- **Digital Rights and Responsibilities:** Emphasizes a balanced understanding of freedoms and obligations in the digital environment, including respect for intellectual property and privacy.
- **Digital Health and Wellness:** Focuses on the physical and psychological well-being of individuals when using digital tools. Students must be made aware of the risks associated with improper or excessive technology use.
- **Digital Security (Self-Protection):** Involves taking the necessary precautions to protect personal and sensitive information. This includes using security software, strong passwords, and awareness of online threats. (Sharaf El-Din, 2019, pp. 283–286)

To sum up, digital citizenship includes nine core dimensions, as outlined by Ribble (2011), each reflecting essential aspects of responsible and ethical digital technology use. These dimensions highlight the importance of universal access, safe and informed digital commerce, and responsible digital communication. They also emphasize understanding digital laws, respecting rights and responsibilities, and promoting acceptable online behavior.

Additionally, these dimensions stress the critical importance of digital health and safety, raising awareness of potential physical and mental risks. The focus on digital security further ensures that individuals can navigate the digital world safely. Together, these elements contribute to building an inclusive, ethical, and secure digital society, capable of adapting to ongoing technological changes and challenges.

5. Digital Citizenship and the Identity Crisis

The identity crisis in the context of digital citizenship reflects the challenges individuals face in defining their identities within a digitally connected world. As reliance on technology and digital spaces increases,

cultural and social identities intersect with digital ones, leading to both internal and external conflicts. The crisis manifests in several ways:

- If identity is traditionally understood as continuity, then the rapid transformations characterizing the Information and Technology Revolution have eroded the foundations upon which people used to establish their identities. For instance, if the Arabic language was once a stable marker of Arab identity, its role has partially diminished among younger generations due to the increasing use of computers and the Internet. This has given rise to what is known as “Franco Arab”—a digitally-emergent, grammatically undefined language written in Latin characters and numerals but pronounced in Arabic.
- While previous generations engaged in identity formation through real-life experiences, current generations increasingly construct their identities virtually. Social bonds, once forged through authentic emotional connections, are now reduced to digital expressions likes, love, laughter, sadness, and so forth. Within this virtual reality, individuals long for the natural world, only to find themselves trapped in an expansive digital universe that transcends time and space but lacks the tangible essence of life no earth, no sky, no water or air, no sun or moon or stars. It is a world of silent, sterile words that strip emotions and ideas of their spontaneity and context.
- Identity formation has moved beyond the family and community sphere, where it was once guided and monitored. This shift has coincided with rising rates of depression, suicide, atheism, and extremism particularly among adolescents and youth.
- We now face a generation of dual identity: fragile and immature in real life due to societal corruption, lack of justice, and outdated educational systems (especially in developing countries), yet adaptive and curious in the digital world, quickly adjusting to cultural diversity and transcending barriers of language, religion, and history. (Othman, 2019, pp. 12-13)
- In the digital age, we witness the emergence of what may be called “stateless individuals”—citizens without a national identity—living in a world where no one can truly claim geographical or historical belonging. Every digital citizen carries within them a stranger or an unknown persona.
- We are all becoming mere numbers—added to or deleted from databases—with no symbolic value attached. In the realm of digital identity, numbers are not mourned, not even with a moment’s reflection.
- Every internet session becomes a metaphorical ticket to travel further from one’s identity, gradually eroding self-awareness and the capacity to anchor the “self” in a world devoid of true identities. Each keystroke becomes a lottery ticket whose outcome is uncertain.
- A 2012 study conducted at the University of Georgia, titled “*Narcissism and Social Networking Websites*,” found a positive correlation between narcissism and Facebook use. It revealed that individuals with high levels of narcissism and low self-esteem spend over an hour daily on Facebook. The study concluded that frequent social media use is associated with reduced academic performance, but conversely, it raises self-esteem and fosters a sense of belonging albeit within a virtual community.
- Another study by Sherry Grasmuck, Jason Martin, and Shanyang Zhao (2008), titled “*Identity Construction on Facebook*,” showed that the selves we present on Facebook are socially desirable identities we aspire to have but they are not real. Rather, they are fabricated personas.
- Finally, the lack of digital citizenship education—both at school and university levels—contributes significantly to the crisis and obstructs effective integration of local communities into the global digital society. This gap hinders the safe and productive fusion between cultural and digital identities. Thus, it is imperative that governments assume responsibility primarily through educational reform, and additionally through media, social, cultural, and political engagement. (Othman, 2019, pp. 13-15)

The identity crisis in the era of digital citizenship presents significant challenges for individuals in defining themselves within a highly connected digital world. Traditional markers of identity, such as language, are weakened by rapid technological changes, paving the way for new linguistic forms like

“Franco Arab.” The shift from real to virtual identity has contributed to the superficiality of social interactions, increasing feelings of isolation and nostalgia for authentic human experience.

Furthermore, identity formation outside family and societal frameworks has led to growing psychological and social issues among youth, producing a generation torn between harsh realities and virtual flexibility. The absence of educational programs that address digital citizenship further exacerbates the problem, preventing the proper integration of cultural and digital identities.

Addressing this crisis requires a comprehensive governmental response—primarily educational to equip individuals with the awareness and tools necessary for healthy interaction with their digital identities, thereby achieving a balance between cultural heritage and digital presence.

Conclusion

The identity crisis in the context of digital citizenship emerges as a complex phenomenon that reflects the challenges individuals face in defining themselves within a digitally connected world. Identity whether cultural or digital reveals multiple facets of the human self, rooted in belonging and social interaction. While technology has enhanced communication opportunities, it has simultaneously complicated the issue of identity by blurring the boundaries between cultural, social, and digital identities, thereby generating both internal and external conflicts.

Research indicates that the rapid transformations of the information age have weakened traditional foundations of identity, such as language, leading to the emergence of hybrid forms like “Franco Arab.” The shift from real to virtual identity contributes to the superficiality of social interactions, leaving individuals feeling isolated and nostalgic for authentic human experiences.

Moreover, the lack of educational programs that address digital citizenship remains a major barrier to the effective integration of cultural and digital identities. This reality necessitates a comprehensive response from both governments and communities to raise awareness of digital identity and citizenship through education and public engagement, ensuring a balance between diverse identities and fostering a positive sense of belonging in this ever-changing digital world.

Ultimately, digital identity presents a new challenge that compels us to rethink how we define ourselves and interact within the electronic sphere. It calls for the reinforcement of human and cultural values in the age of information.

Recommendations and Suggestions

Addressing the identity crisis in the age of digital citizenship requires a comprehensive societal response encompassing education, research, and policy. The following recommendations aim to strengthen cultural identity and establish a balance between digital and real-world identities:

1. **Enhancing Educational Programs:** Incorporate concepts of digital citizenship and digital identity into educational curricula, emphasizing the development of critical thinking and responsible online behavior.
2. **Community Awareness:** Launch awareness campaigns to educate individuals about the importance of digital identity and digital citizenship, focusing on protecting personal information and enhancing privacy.
3. **Developing Government Policies:** Governments should formulate policies that promote the safe and responsible use of technology while establishing legal frameworks that protect individuals' rights in the digital space.
4. **Encouraging Scientific Research:** Support studies and research initiatives that explore the impact of technology on identity and citizenship, particularly among youth and adolescents.
5. **Promoting Real-World Social Interaction:** Encourage cultural and social activities that foster genuine human interaction, strengthening social bonds and reducing feelings of isolation.
6. **Developing Secure Digital Tools:** Invest in the development of safe and privacy-respecting digital platforms, thereby boosting trust in technology usage.

7. **Fostering Intercultural Dialogue:** Organize events and workshops that promote dialogue between different cultures, enhancing mutual understanding and reinforcing cultural identities.
8. **Monitoring and Securing Digital Spaces:** Implement effective mechanisms to detect and combat cybercrime, while providing support for affected individuals.
9. **Encouraging Identity Exploration:** Motivate individuals to explore their cultural and social identities, thereby enhancing their sense of belonging and pride in their heritage.

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