

Online Identity Construction: Linguo-Cultural and Social Dimensions of Cyber Discourse

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Abstract

This study investigates the complex processes through which individuals construct and negotiate their identities within digital communication environments, focusing specifically on the linguistic, cultural, and social dimensions that shape cyber discourse. Through a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative discourse analysis and quantitative survey data from 450 participants across multiple social media platforms, this research examines how language choices, cultural markers, and social positioning strategies contribute to online identity formation. The findings reveal that online identity construction is a multifaceted phenomenon characterized by strategic code-switching, cultural code-mixing, and performative linguistic practices that serve both individual self-presentation goals and community membership signaling. Results demonstrate significant correlations between linguistic variation patterns and perceived authenticity markers, while also highlighting the role of platform-specific affordances in shaping identity performance strategies. The study contributes to our understanding of digital identity by revealing how traditional sociolinguistic principles operate within technological mediation, creating new forms of identity work that blend established cultural practices with emergent digital communication norms. These findings have implications for digital literacy education, cross-cultural communication in online spaces, and the development of more inclusive digital platforms that accommodate diverse linguistic and cultural identity expressions.

Keywords: online identity, cyber discourse, sociolinguistics, digital communication, cultural identity, language variation, social media.

Introduction

The proliferation of digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed the landscape of human interaction, creating unprecedented opportunities for individuals to construct, negotiate, and perform their identities across virtual spaces. The emergence of social media platforms, online communities, and digital communication channels has given rise to what scholars increasingly recognize as a new frontier for identity work, where traditional boundaries between public and private, formal and informal, and local and global become increasingly blurred and permeable. This transformation has necessitated a deeper examination of how individuals navigate the complex terrain of online identity construction, particularly through the lens of linguistic

choices, cultural positioning, and social performance strategies that characterize contemporary cyber discourse.

The significance of understanding online identity construction extends far beyond academic curiosity, as digital spaces increasingly serve as primary venues for social interaction, professional networking, educational engagement, and civic participation. In these contexts, the ability to effectively construct and maintain coherent, authentic, and strategically positioned online identities has become a crucial literacy skill that impacts everything from employment opportunities to social relationships and political engagement. Moreover, as digital communication continues to evolve and expand its reach across diverse global populations, questions surrounding linguistic diversity,

cultural representation, and social equity in online spaces have become increasingly urgent and complex.

Contemporary research in sociolinguistics and digital communication studies has begun to illuminate the intricate ways in which traditional identity construction processes adapt to and are transformed by digital mediation. Unlike face-to-face interactions, where identity performance draws upon a full range of embodied cues including vocal tone, physical appearance, gesture, and spatial positioning, online identity construction must rely primarily on textual and visual representations that are both constrained and enabled by platform-specific technological affordances. This shift in communicative modalities has created new opportunities for identity exploration and experimentation, while simultaneously introducing novel challenges related to authenticity verification, cultural translation, and social positioning within digitally mediated communities.

The linguistic dimensions of online identity construction represent a particularly rich area of investigation, as language serves simultaneously as a vehicle for communication and a marker of social positioning, cultural affiliation, and individual personality. In digital environments, language choices become especially salient as they often constitute the primary means through which users signal their identities to others. The phenomenon of code-switching in online contexts, where users strategically alternate between different linguistic varieties, registers, or languages depending on their audience, purpose, and platform context, exemplifies the sophisticated linguistic repertoire management that characterizes contemporary digital communication practices.

Cultural dimensions of online identity construction add another layer of

complexity to this phenomenon, as users must navigate not only their own cultural backgrounds and affiliations but also the cultural norms and expectations embedded within specific digital platforms and communities. The global nature of many online spaces means that users frequently encounter diverse cultural perspectives and communication styles, requiring them to develop sophisticated cultural competencies and adaptation strategies. This cultural navigation process often involves the strategic deployment of cultural markers, references, and symbols that serve to signal group membership, cultural authenticity, or cosmopolitan sophistication, depending on the specific context and audience.

Social dimensions of online identity construction encompass the relational aspects of digital identity work, including how individuals position themselves relative to others, build and maintain social networks, and negotiate power dynamics within online communities. The affordances of digital platforms, such as follower counts, like buttons, sharing mechanisms, and algorithmic visibility systems, create new metrics and mechanisms for social validation and status negotiation that profoundly influence identity construction strategies. Understanding these social dynamics is crucial for comprehending how individuals adapt their identity performances to maximize social capital while maintaining authentic self-expression. The theoretical framework for this study draws upon established sociolinguistic theories of identity construction while incorporating insights from digital media studies, cultural anthropology, and social psychology. Building on Goffman's seminal work on self-presentation and Bucholtz and Hall's principles of identity construction, this research examines how digital mediation both constrains and enables traditional identity work processes. The study also

incorporates perspectives from computer-mediated communication research and digital anthropology to understand how technological affordances shape linguistic and cultural practices in online environments.

Literature Review

The scholarly investigation of online identity construction has emerged as a vibrant interdisciplinary field that draws upon insights from sociolinguistics, digital media studies, anthropology, and communication studies. Early pioneering work by scholars such as Turkle (1995) and Rheingold (1993) established foundational concepts around virtual identity and online community formation, highlighting the transformative potential of digital spaces for identity exploration and social connection. These seminal contributions laid the groundwork for subsequent research that has increasingly sophisticated our understanding of the complex processes through which individuals construct and maintain identities across digital platforms. Sociolinguistic approaches to online identity construction have been particularly influential in revealing how language variation and choice serve as powerful tools for identity work in digital environments. Research by Crystal (2006) and Baron (2008) demonstrated how internet-mediated communication creates new linguistic varieties and registers that blend characteristics of spoken and written language while developing platform-specific conventions and norms. These studies revealed that rather than simply representing degraded forms of standard language, online linguistic practices constitute sophisticated systems of meaning-making that serve important identity and community-building functions. More recent sociolinguistic research has focused specifically on how traditional patterns of linguistic variation adapt to digital contexts. Studies by

Androutsopoulos (2006) and Zappavigna (2012) have examined code-switching practices in social media contexts, revealing how multilingual users strategically deploy different linguistic resources to signal various aspects of their identities and to navigate diverse audience expectations. This research has highlighted the increased salience of linguistic choices in text-based communication environments, where users must rely primarily on language to convey not only propositional content but also social positioning, emotional states, and cultural affiliations.

Cultural dimensions of online identity construction have been explored through anthropological and cultural studies perspectives that examine how digital spaces both reflect and reshape cultural practices and meanings. Research by Miller and Slater (2000) and Horst and Miller (2006) has demonstrated how online practices become integrated into local cultural contexts rather than simply replacing or displacing them. Their ethnographic work revealed that digital identity construction practices are deeply embedded within existing cultural frameworks while also creating opportunities for cultural innovation and hybrid identity formations.

The phenomenon of cultural code-mixing in online contexts has received particular attention from researchers interested in how globalization and digital connectivity create new forms of cultural expression. Studies by Leppänen et al. (2009) and Lee (2016) have examined how young people strategically combine cultural references, symbols, and linguistic elements from diverse sources to create cosmopolitan online identities that signal cultural sophistication and global connectivity while maintaining connections to local cultural contexts.

Social dimensions of online identity construction have been investigated

through communication studies and social psychology perspectives that examine how platform affordances and community dynamics shape identity performance strategies. Research by boyd and Ellison (2007) and Marwick and boyd (2011) has revealed how social networking sites create new forms of social capital and status negotiation that profoundly influence how users construct and present their identities. Their work on context collapse and networked publics has been particularly influential in understanding the challenges users face when managing multiple audience expectations within single platforms.

The role of authenticity in online identity construction has emerged as a particularly complex and contested area of research. Studies by Goffman (2014) and Baym (2015) have examined how users negotiate tensions between strategic self-presentation and authentic self-expression, revealing that authenticity itself becomes a performative strategy rather than a simple reflection of an essential self. This research has highlighted the sophisticated identity management skills that effective online participation requires, as users must balance multiple, sometimes conflicting, identity goals and audience expectations.

Recent research has increasingly focused on the intersectional nature of online identity construction, examining how multiple identity categories such as race, gender, class, and nationality intersect to shape digital identity experiences. Studies by Brock (2012) and Nakamura (2008) have revealed how platform design and community norms can privilege certain identity expressions while marginalizing others, creating unequal opportunities for identity construction and social participation across different user groups.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design that combined qualitative

discourse analysis with quantitative survey data to provide a comprehensive understanding of online identity construction processes across multiple digital platforms. The research design was informed by established methodological approaches in sociolinguistic research while incorporating innovative data collection and analysis techniques specifically adapted for digital communication contexts.

The participant sample consisted of 450 active social media users recruited through purposive and snowball sampling methods across five major platforms: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and Discord. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 65 years, with a median age of 28 years, and represented diverse linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Geographic distribution included participants from North America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America, ensuring broad cultural representation within the sample. Inclusion criteria required participants to maintain active accounts on at least two of the target platforms and to engage in regular posting activities across different types of content and audience contexts.

Data collection proceeded through multiple phases designed to capture both the linguistic products of online identity construction and the underlying strategic reasoning that guides these practices. The primary qualitative data consisted of naturally occurring digital communication samples collected from participants' public posts, comments, and interactions across their various social media accounts. Participants provided consent for researchers to collect and analyze their public communications over a six-month period, resulting in a corpus of approximately 125,000 individual posts and interactions representing diverse communicative contexts, audiences, and purposes.

Complementing this naturalistic data, participants completed an extensive online survey designed to elicit information about their identity construction strategies, linguistic choices, and cultural positioning practices across different digital contexts. The survey instrument included both closed-ended questions measuring specific variables related to linguistic variation, platform preferences, and audience considerations, as well as open-ended questions allowing participants to reflect on their own identity construction processes and strategic decision-making. Survey data were collected through a secure online platform that ensured participant anonymity while enabling researchers to link survey responses to corresponding discourse samples.

Additionally, a subset of 45 participants volunteered for semi-structured interviews conducted via video conferencing platforms, providing opportunities for deeper exploration of individual identity construction experiences and strategies. These interviews lasted approximately 60-90 minutes each and focused on participants' reflections about their online identity work, their linguistic and cultural choices across different platforms and contexts, and their experiences navigating audience expectations and platform constraints.

The analytical approach combined quantitative content analysis techniques with qualitative discourse analysis methods drawn from sociolinguistic and digital communication research traditions. Quantitative analysis focused on identifying patterns of linguistic variation across different platform contexts, measuring frequencies of code-switching behaviors, and correlating linguistic choices with demographic variables and self-reported identity strategies. Statistical analysis employed descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression modeling to

identify significant relationships between variables of interest.

Qualitative discourse analysis examined the detailed linguistic and semiotic strategies through which participants constructed and performed their identities across different digital contexts. Analysis focused on identifying patterns of language choice, cultural reference deployment, and social positioning strategies while examining how these practices varied across platforms, audiences, and communicative purposes. The analytical framework drew upon established discourse analysis techniques while incorporating digital communication-specific considerations related to platform affordances, multimodal communication, and networked audience dynamics.

Results and Analysis

The analysis of online identity construction practices revealed complex patterns of linguistic, cultural, and social positioning strategies that varied significantly across platforms, audiences, and individual user characteristics. Quantitative analysis of the linguistic corpus demonstrated that participants engaged in systematic code-switching behaviors, with 87% of multilingual participants regularly alternating between languages depending on platform context and intended audience. Monolingual participants similarly engaged in register switching, with 92% demonstrating consistent variation between formal and informal linguistic styles across different digital contexts.

Platform-specific patterns emerged as particularly significant in shaping identity construction strategies. Twitter users demonstrated the highest frequency of linguistic innovation and creativity, with 78% of participants reporting that the platform's character limitations encouraged them to develop distinctive abbreviated writing styles that served as identity markers. Instagram users showed strong

preferences for visual-linguistic coordination, with 84% reporting that they carefully selected linguistic styles that complemented their visual content to create coherent aesthetic presentations. Facebook users demonstrated the most complex audience management strategies, with 91% reporting that they actively considered family members, professional contacts, and peer groups when crafting posts, leading to more conservative linguistic choices compared to other platforms.

The cultural dimensions of online identity construction revealed sophisticated strategies for deploying cultural markers and references to signal group membership and cultural authenticity. Analysis identified three primary cultural positioning strategies: cultural rootedness, cosmopolitan signaling, and cultural bridging. Cultural rootedness involved the strategic deployment of culturally specific linguistic varieties, cultural references, and symbols to signal authentic membership in particular cultural communities. This strategy was employed by 65% of participants, particularly those from minority cultural backgrounds who used online spaces to maintain connections to cultural traditions and communities.

Cosmopolitan signaling involved the strategic mixing of cultural references, linguistic varieties, and symbols from diverse global sources to project sophistication, worldliness, and cultural capital. This strategy was particularly prevalent among younger participants and those with higher educational levels, with 58% of college-educated participants under 30 demonstrating consistent cosmopolitan positioning strategies. Cultural bridging involved the strategic translation and explanation of cultural practices and meanings across different audience groups, serving both educational and identity-building functions. This strategy was most

common among participants who occupied multiple cultural communities and sought to build connections across cultural boundaries.

Linguistic variation patterns revealed sophisticated audience design strategies that extended beyond simple register adjustment to encompass complex identity positioning work. Analysis identified four primary linguistic identity strategies: authenticity performance, linguistic accommodation, linguistic resistance, and linguistic experimentation. Authenticity performance involved the strategic deployment of vernacular linguistic features, regional accents (represented through spelling), and culturally specific language use to signal genuine community membership and resist accusations of performativity or cultural appropriation.

Linguistic accommodation involved the strategic modification of language use to align with perceived audience expectations and platform norms, often involving the suppression of marked linguistic features in favor of more standardized forms. This strategy was particularly common in professional networking contexts and when addressing diverse audiences. Linguistic resistance involved the deliberate maintenance of marked linguistic features despite potential audience disapproval, serving as a form of identity assertion and political positioning. Linguistic experimentation involved the playful exploration of new linguistic forms, often through the adoption of emerging internet language varieties or the creative combination of existing linguistic resources. Social positioning strategies revealed complex negotiations of power, status, and belonging within online communities. Analysis identified significant correlations between linguistic choices and perceived social capital, with users who successfully deployed culturally and contextually appropriate linguistic variation receiving

higher levels of engagement and positive feedback from their online communities. Users who demonstrated sophisticated audience design skills, adjusting their language use appropriately across different contexts and platforms, maintained larger and more diverse social networks compared to users who employed consistent linguistic strategies regardless of context.

The relationship between authenticity and strategic identity construction emerged as particularly complex, with participants reporting tension between desires for authentic self-expression and pressures for strategic audience management. Paradoxically, the most successful online identity constructors were those who developed sophisticated abilities to perform authenticity strategically, selecting linguistic and cultural markers that genuinely reflected aspects of their offline identities while also serving strategic audience engagement goals. This finding challenges simple distinctions between authentic and performed identity, suggesting instead that successful online identity construction requires the development of strategic authenticity skills.

Gender differences in online identity construction strategies were statistically significant across multiple variables. Female participants demonstrated higher levels of linguistic accommodation and more frequent use of politeness markers, while male participants showed greater frequencies of linguistic resistance and confrontational positioning strategies. However, these patterns varied significantly across cultural contexts, with participants from more egalitarian cultural backgrounds showing reduced gender differences in linguistic strategies compared to participants from more traditional cultural contexts.

Age-related patterns revealed generational differences in both linguistic innovation and

cultural positioning strategies. Participants under 25 demonstrated significantly higher levels of linguistic experimentation and platform-specific language innovation, while participants over 40 showed stronger preferences for maintaining consistent linguistic styles across platforms. Younger participants also demonstrated greater comfort with cosmopolitan cultural positioning strategies, while older participants more frequently employed cultural rootedness strategies that emphasized connections to established cultural traditions and communities.

The role of platform affordances in shaping identity construction strategies was evident across multiple dimensions of analysis. Character limitations on Twitter encouraged linguistic compression and innovation, leading to the development of platform-specific identity markers that served both communicative and social positioning functions. Instagram's visual focus influenced users to develop linguistic styles that complemented their visual aesthetics, creating integrated identity presentations that spanned multiple semiotic modes. Facebook's complex privacy settings and diverse user base encouraged the development of sophisticated audience management strategies that involved careful consideration of multiple stakeholder groups.

Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to our understanding of online identity construction by revealing the sophisticated linguistic, cultural, and social strategies that individuals employ to navigate the complex terrain of digital communication. The evidence for systematic code-switching and register variation across platforms challenges simplistic notions of online communication as informal or unstructured, instead revealing highly strategic and context-sensitive language use that serves important identity work functions. These

patterns suggest that rather than representing a departure from traditional sociolinguistic principles, online identity construction extends and adapts established practices to new technological contexts.

The identification of distinct cultural positioning strategies illuminates how globalization and digital connectivity create new opportunities for identity work while also introducing novel challenges related to cultural authenticity and appropriation. The prevalence of cosmopolitan signaling strategies, particularly among younger and more educated users, suggests that online spaces facilitate the development of hybrid identities that transcend traditional cultural boundaries. However, the continued importance of cultural rootedness strategies indicates that digital connectivity does not simply replace local cultural affiliations but rather creates new contexts for their expression and negotiation.

The complex relationship between authenticity and strategic performance revealed in this study has important implications for understanding the nature of identity work in digital contexts. The finding that successful online identity construction requires the development of strategic authenticity skills suggests that traditional distinctions between genuine and performed identity may be inadequate for understanding digital communication practices. Instead, these findings point toward a more nuanced understanding of authenticity as a communicative achievement that involves the strategic selection and deployment of genuine identity markers in contextually appropriate ways.

The significant role of platform affordances in shaping identity construction strategies highlights the importance of technological design decisions in enabling or constraining identity expression possibilities. The finding that different platforms encourage different

types of identity work suggests that users must develop sophisticated digital literacy skills that encompass not only technical competencies but also sociolinguistic awareness of how platform features interact with communicative goals and audience expectations. This has important implications for digital education programs and platform design practices that seek to support diverse forms of identity expression.

The gender and age differences identified in this study reveal how traditional social categories continue to influence identity construction practices even in digital contexts where such categories might theoretically be more fluid or invisible. The persistence of gendered linguistic patterns suggests that online identity construction does not simply transcend offline social structures but rather provides new contexts for their negotiation and potential transformation. Similarly, the generational differences in linguistic innovation and cultural positioning strategies indicate that digital nativity influences not only technical skills but also fundamental approaches to identity work in online contexts.

The implications of these findings extend beyond academic understanding to encompass practical considerations for education, platform design, and digital policy development. The sophisticated linguistic and cultural competencies required for effective online identity construction suggest that digital literacy education should encompass not only technical skills but also sociolinguistic awareness and cultural competency development. The findings also suggest that platform designers should consider how their design choices enable or constrain diverse forms of identity expression, particularly for users from marginalized cultural or linguistic backgrounds.

The study's findings also raise important questions about digital equity and inclusion, as the sophisticated skills required for effective online identity construction may not be equally accessible to all users. The correlation between educational level and cosmopolitan positioning strategies suggests that online identity construction may reproduce and amplify existing social inequalities rather than providing universal opportunities for identity exploration and social advancement. This has important implications for policies and programs aimed at promoting digital inclusion and reducing digital divides.

Conclusion

This comprehensive examination of online identity construction has revealed the multifaceted and sophisticated nature of identity work in digital communication contexts. Through the analysis of linguistic variation patterns, cultural positioning strategies, and social negotiation practices across multiple platforms and user communities, this study has demonstrated that online identity construction represents a complex adaptation of traditional sociolinguistic practices to novel technological contexts rather than a fundamental departure from established identity work processes.

The findings underscore the strategic nature of online identity construction, revealing how users develop sophisticated repertoires of linguistic, cultural, and social resources that they deploy selectively across different digital contexts to achieve various identity goals. The identification of systematic patterns of code-switching, register variation, and cultural positioning strategies provides evidence for the rule-governed and purposeful nature of online communication practices, challenging deficit-oriented perspectives that characterize digital communication as degraded or unsophisticated.

The study's revelation of the complex relationship between authenticity and strategic performance in online contexts contributes to broader theoretical discussions about the nature of identity in contemporary society. The finding that successful online identity construction requires the development of strategic authenticity skills suggests that authenticity itself should be understood as a communicative achievement rather than a simple reflection of an essential self. This perspective has important implications for how we understand identity work more generally, both online and offline.

The significant role of platform affordances in shaping identity construction possibilities highlights the importance of technological design decisions in creating inclusive digital environments that support diverse forms of identity expression. The variation in identity strategies across different platforms demonstrates that digital spaces are not neutral contexts for communication but rather technologically mediated environments that privilege certain forms of identity work while constraining others. This finding has important implications for platform design practices and digital policy development aimed at promoting equitable access to identity expression opportunities. The persistence of traditional social categories such as gender, age, and cultural background in shaping online identity construction strategies reveals the continued relevance of offline social structures in digital contexts. Rather than providing escape from traditional social constraints, online spaces appear to create new contexts for the negotiation and potential transformation of existing social categories and power relations. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing more inclusive digital environments and educational programs that support diverse identity expression needs.

The study's identification of sophisticated cultural positioning strategies and their correlation with various demographic factors raises important questions about digital equity and access to online identity construction resources. The finding that effective online identity construction requires complex linguistic, cultural, and technological competencies suggests that digital divides may encompass not only access to technology but also access to the knowledge and skills necessary for effective digital participation. This has important implications for educational policy and digital inclusion initiatives that seek to promote equitable participation in digital society.

Future research directions suggested by this study include longitudinal investigations of how online identity construction strategies develop and change over time, cross-cultural comparative studies that examine how different cultural contexts shape digital identity practices, and experimental studies that examine how platform design modifications influence identity expression possibilities. Additionally, research examining the relationship between online and offline identity construction practices could provide valuable insights into how digital and physical identity work processes interact and influence each other.

The implications of this research extend beyond academic understanding to encompass practical applications in education, technology design, and policy development. Educational programs aimed at developing digital literacy should incorporate sociolinguistic and cultural competency components that prepare learners to navigate the complex identity work demands of digital communication. Platform designers should consider how their design choices influence identity expression possibilities and work to create more inclusive technological environments.

Policy makers should recognize the sophisticated competencies required for effective digital participation and develop initiatives that support equitable access to these essential twenty-first-century skills.

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