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Index

Sr. No.	Topic of Research Paper / Name of Authors	Page No.
1.	Navigating Global Uncertainty: An Analysis of India's Growth, Inflation, Trade and Labour Market Resilience in Q1 FY2026-27 by <i>Sreehari A S</i>	1-14
2.	How Families Shape Student Moral Values by <i>Ligy PK & Dr Rakhi</i>	15-23
3.	Digital Culture and Identity: A Conceptual Review of Self-Presentation, Algorithmic Mediation, and Cultural Hybridity in Networked Publics by <i>Maneesha. C</i>	24-32
4.	Integrating Climate Literacy into Indian School Curricula through Open, Distance, and Digital Education: An Illustrative Multiple-Case Analysis by <i>Amitabha Datta</i>	33-49
5	F A Decade of GST: A Theoretical Evaluation of Its Successes and Challenges in Commerce by <i>Sajeeshlal P P</i>	50-60
6	Impact of Microplastic Pollution on Marine Fauna of the Malabar Coast: A Review of Current Evidence, Ecological Risks, and Research Directions by <i>Shahina Showkath</i>	61-71
7	Psychological Well-being, Mindfulness and Character Building in Education by <i>Manisha Yadav & Dr Archana Yadav</i>	72-82
8	From Cascading Taxes to 'One Nation, One Tax': A Theoretical Review of GST in India by <i>SINI. S & Limija Simon</i>	83-92
9	The Role of Emerging Technologies in Empowering Women and Youth for Inclusive Development by <i>Jasleen Kaur Kohli & Dr. Amita</i>	93-106



Digital Culture and Identity: A Conceptual Review of Self-Presentation, Algorithmic Mediation, and Cultural Hybridity in Networked Publics

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Abstract

Digital platforms have become primary sites where identity is constructed, negotiated, and displayed. This paper offers a conceptual review of digital culture and identity, synthesising theoretical and empirical scholarship on self-presentation, algorithmic mediation, and cultural hybridity in networked publics. Drawing on Goffman's dramaturgical theory, symbolic interactionism, and social identity theory, the review examines how individuals perform curated versions of the self-online while platform architectures simultaneously shape, filter, and commercialise those performances. The paper further discusses how digital technologies accelerate cultural hybridisation, allowing local and global cultural forms to intermix, while also raising concerns about digital exclusion, algorithmic surveillance, and psychological strain associated with continuous self-monitoring. Based on an integrative review of recent peer-reviewed literature (2013-2026), the paper proposes a working framework in which digital identity is understood as a triadic negotiation between the individual, the audience, and the platform. The review concludes that digital culture does not simply extend offline identity into new spaces but actively reconstitutes the conditions under which identity is formed, contested, and commodified, with implications for media literacy, platform governance, and future empirical research.

Keywords: Digital culture; digital identity; self-presentation; algorithmic mediation; cultural hybridity; networked publics

Introduction

The digital explosion of the past two decades has radically changed the conditions under which individuals construct, articulate and negotiate their sense of self. Identity used to be primarily forged in face-to-face interactions, kinship, locality, and institutional belonging, but it is now also constructed through profiles, posts, avatars, algorithmic suggestions, and the digital traces that platforms store and reuse. This shift has created a distinct field of inquiry, often



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referred to as “digital culture and identity,” which is located at the intersection of media studies, sociology, psychology and cultural studies.

Digital identity is not a neutral extension of offline identity into another medium. Increasingly, scholars argue that platforms are not neutral hosts but actively shape the identities they claim to host, through interface design, algorithmic curation and commercial incentives that reward certain forms of self-disclosure over others. At the same time, digital culture has accelerated processes of cultural hybridisation, allowing local cultural practices, languages and aesthetics to travel around the world and mix with other traditions at a speed and scope never seen before.

This paper is an integrative conceptual review of recent scholarship on digital culture and identity with three goals. It starts with a synthesis of the main theoretical perspectives employed for understanding identity formation in digital spaces, mainly dramaturgical, symbolic-interactionist, and social identity approaches. Second, it synthesizes empirical findings on the interplay of self-presentation, algorithmic mediation and cultural hybridity in constructing digital identity across various populations and cultural contexts. Third, it points to gaps in the literature and directions for future empirical work. This review is intended to provide a basis for future empirical work and a benchmark for scholars, educators and policy makers interested in digital literacy and platform governance.

Theoretical Framework

Goffman's Dramaturgical Perspective and Its Digital Extensions

Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory, which sees social interaction as a performance for an audience, continues to be the dominant theoretical lens for analyzing online identity. Goffman's original formulation had people “managing impressions” through a controlled “front stage” and a more authentic “backstage” for private moments. Researchers who employ this social media perspective argue that social media sites are almost entirely front stage, bringing together multiple audiences, family, co-workers, and strangers into one visible feed, which they refer to as context collapse. This compression forces users into a strategic, generalized self-presentation rather than an audience-specific performance.



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Later scholarship has adapted Goffman's original schema to the particularities of networked environments. Digital performances are intentional choices made by users in creating posts, and digital artifacts are the tracks and metadata produced about users by platforms regardless of intent. This distinction matters because it separates the identity that a person consciously performs from the identity that a platform algorithmically infers and displays on their behalf, a distinction that has direct bearing on questions of user autonomy.

Symbolic Interactionism and the Networked Self

Symbolic interactionism is based on the work of George Herbert Mead and considers the self to be formed through social interaction and the internalisation of the "generalised other". In the digital world, this generalised other is increasingly made up of quantified feedback – likes, shares, comments and follower counts. Recent research applying symbolic interactionism in the context of influencer culture describe how recognition becomes a measurable indicator of performance, resulting in image management and emotional labour practices, thus turning identity performance into an economic resource governed by platform logics .

Social Identity Theory in Digital Contexts

Social identity theory offers a complementary lens, emphasising how individuals derive part of their self-concept from membership in social groups, including digital in-groups formed around interests, subcultures, or ideological affiliations. Recent theoretical extensions argue that digital identity should be understood not simply as an individual performance but as a socially structured process in which platform-based group memberships, algorithmic sorting, and intergroup dynamics jointly shape how individuals see themselves and are seen by others online.

Literature Review

Digital Identity as a Contested Concept

Despite extensive scholarly attention, digital identity remains a contested and unevenly defined concept. Research synthesising user perspectives finds that ordinary users understand digital identity in ways that diverge from academic definitions, often foregrounding practical concerns such as data security and platform trust rather than performative self-expression. This



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gap between lay and scholarly conceptions suggests that digital identity operates simultaneously as a lived experience, a technical infrastructure, and an object of governance, each of which merits separate but connected analysis.

3.2 Self-Presentation and Impression Management Online

A substantial body of research documents how users engage in deliberate impression management on social networking sites. Studies using Goffman's framework identify recurring identity styles, such as the curated "public diary," the aspirational "influencer," and the professionally oriented profile, each associated with distinct norms of disclosure and audience management. Comparative research across cultural contexts shows that self-presentation strategies are shaped by local gender norms and social expectations; for example, studies of young women's social media use in conservative cultural settings find that users consciously calibrate their online personas to align with cultural expectations while still asserting individual agency, particularly when family members are part of the visible audience. Cross-cultural comparisons within multilingual and diasporic communities further show that self-presentation is not merely individual but also linguistic and cultural: users draw on language choice and multimodal cues such as images and hashtags, and platform-specific conventions to signal cultural affiliation and social belonging, indicating that digital self-presentation is best understood as a socially mediated and technologically conditioned practice rather than a purely psychological one.

3.3 Algorithmic Mediation and Corporatised Identities

A growing strand of literature critiques the assumption that digital identity is authored solely by users. Scholars argue that platforms produce what has been termed "corporatised identities": algorithmically filtered profiles optimised for commercial classification rather than authentic self-expression. This process is described as fundamentally different from user-authored performance because it is continuous, largely invisible to the user, and driven by economic rather than expressive motivations. Where dramaturgical theory assumes a self-directed performer, algorithmic mediation introduces a co-author, the platform itself, whose objectives may not align with the user's interests, raising concerns about autonomy and digital well-being. Related work on digital identity as platform-mediated surveillance extends this critique, framing identity verification and categorisation systems as mechanisms of governance that extend well beyond individual self-expression into questions of access, inclusion, and control, particularly for populations whose identities are already subject to institutional scrutiny.

3.4 Cultural Hybridity and Globalisation in Digital Spaces

Digital culture research consistently identifies hybridisation as a defining feature of contemporary identity formation. Cultural



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hybridity, understood as the blending of cultural elements from different origins into new mixed forms, is not a new phenomenon, but digital technologies have expanded its scale, speed, and visibility considerably. Studies of digital music, fashion, language, and visual culture show hybrid forms travelling across borders and being creatively reworked by new audiences, reflecting simultaneous continuity with tradition and openness to global influence. Research on cross-cultural digital media use similarly finds that digital platforms function as spaces of cultural exchange in which individuals negotiate their sense of self across multiple cultural reference points rather than adhering to a single fixed cultural identity. This globalisation of cultural forms is, however, uneven. Scholars caution against viewing globalisation through digital media as a simple one-directional flow from dominant to peripheral cultures, arguing instead for attention to the complex, uneven interaction between global structures and local appropriation, in which local communities do not merely receive global culture but actively reinterpret and localise it.

3.5 Digital Identity Across Populations and Contexts The experience of constructing identity in digital culture varies considerably across demographic and cultural groups. Research on older adults finds that digital participation offers an alternative avenue for social interaction and identity affirmation, but also highlights persistent barriers to inclusion related to digital literacy and access, underscoring that digital identity construction is not equally available to all age groups. Studies of transnational and diasporic users similarly show that digital identity can serve as a bridge between ethnic and national affiliations, allowing users to position themselves strategically between different cultural communities rather than assimilating fully into any one of them.

Methodology

This paper adopts an integrative, narrative review methodology rather than a systematic review or primary empirical design, consistent with its aim of synthesising theoretical perspectives and identifying conceptual patterns across a heterogeneous literature. Sources were identified through targeted searches of peer-reviewed journal databases and publisher platforms using combinations of the terms "digital identity," "digital culture," "self-presentation," "algorithmic identity," and "cultural hybridity," restricted primarily to literature published between 2013 and 2026 to capture both foundational theoretical contributions and recent empirical developments. Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters from established publishers. Sources were screened for relevance to the intersection of



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digital media use and identity or cultural construction, and thematically organised according to the theoretical framework outlined in Section 2. As with any narrative review, the selection and synthesis of sources involves interpretive judgement; the review does not claim database-level systematic completeness but aims for representative coverage of major theoretical and empirical strands in the field.

Thematic Discussion

The Performative Self: From Front Stage to Feed

A recurring theme in the reviewed literature is the growth and intensification of performative identity work in digital environments. Offline performance is limited by physical co-presence and situational cues, while digital performance is asynchronous, persistent and searchable, so that a single post can be revisited, screenshotted and recontextualised long after its original performative moment has passed. This persistence seems to enhance the strategic quality of self-presentation found in the studies discussed, as users anticipate their immediate audience, and future unknown viewers.

Platform Architecture as a Latent Co-Author of Identity

A second theme concerns the declining plausibility of treating digital identity as a purely user-authored performance. Literature on algorithmic filtering and corporatised identities suggests that platform architecture is involved in identity construction through the ways in which it amplifies, suppresses or monetises self-presentations. This has ethical implications: if platforms reward some performances of identity (e.g., those that are highly engaging or have advertising value) and not others, then the range of identities that are visible and socially validated online may be systematically narrower than the range of identities that users would otherwise choose to perform.

Local-Global Tension and Cultural Hybridity

The reviewed literature on cultural hybridity indicates that digital culture does not obliterate local or regional identity, but reconfigures its relation to global culture. Local cultural markers like language, dress, music, and ritual are increasingly expressed in global circulating digital formats, forging hybrid cultural expressions that are not wholly local or wholly global.



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For locally rooted communities, this means that digital platforms can be used as tools of cultural preservation and visibility as much as tools of homogenisation, provided that local actors retain meaningful control over the production and circulation of their cultural content.

Digital Identity, Inclusion and the Access Question

A recurring concern throughout the literature on older adults, diasporic communities and marginalised groups is that access to digital identity formation is not evenly distributed. Digital literacy, infrastructure access, language compatibility and platform design choices all mediate who can participate fully in digital culture and on what terms. This indicates that research on digital identity cannot be divorced from larger questions of digital inclusion and socio-economic access, an area of obvious importance to researchers working in the context of regional development and livelihoods.

Ethical and Psychological Dilemmas

Finally, the literature points to ethical and psychological issues related to continuous self-presentation and algorithmic visibility, such as social comparison effects associated with viewing curated profiles of others, and the erosion of user autonomy under conditions of algorithmic surveillance. These concerns point to a need for digital literacy interventions that help users to understand not only how to present themselves online, but how platform systems interpret, categorise and act upon those presentations.

Implications

There are implications of the review for a range of stakeholders. The findings point to the importance of including critical digital literacy in curricula, beyond technical skills, to consider how algorithmic systems influence visibility and self-perception for educators and policymakers. The literature on platform-mediated surveillance and corporatised identities suggests a need for platform designers and regulators to provide greater transparency about the ways user data is used to build inferred identities, and stronger safeguards for user autonomy. The review also points to the value for researchers of cross-cultural and cross-generational comparative studies which investigate how digital identity construction differs across regional, linguistic and socio-economic contexts, rather than assuming a global user who is uniform.



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Limitations and Perspectives of Future Research

This paper is a conceptual and narrative review and, as such, does not present new primary data and has limited ability to test causal claims about digital identity formation. The synthesis is also limited by the language and availability of accessible peer-reviewed sources, which may under-represent scholarship published outside of major international databases. Further research would be well-advised to employ mixed-methods empirical studies combining platform-level data on algorithmic curation and qualitative accounts of user experience, especially in under-researched regional and linguistic contexts. Longitudinal studies following individual digital identities as they move between platforms and life stages would also help clarify the durability and adaptability of the theoretical patterns identified in this review.

Conclusion

Digital culture has fundamentally changed the conditions of identity construction, performance and understanding. This review has argued that digital identity is best understood as a triadic negotiation between individual self-presentation, audience interpretation and algorithmic mediation, rather than a simple digital extension of offline selfhood. Cultural hybridity, uneven access and algorithmic governance also complicate this picture, generating digital identities that are both more expressive and more constrained than their offline counterparts. As digital platforms evolve, sustained interdisciplinary attention to the interplay between human agency and platform architecture will remain essential for understanding, and responsibly shaping, the future of digital culture and identity.

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