

Exploring Content Creator's Digital Identity Formation via Social Media Platforms

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Abstract. This research explores the formation of digital identity among Filipino content creators on TikTok. The study involved 21 Filipino content creators, aged 20 to 46, who were interviewed via an online platform. Using a Grounded Theory approach, the research aims to generate insights into how content creators navigate digital spaces, shape their digital identities, and foster connections. The study identifies three main themes: Identity Construction, Embodiment of Online Persona, and Building Social Currency. These themes encompass various sub-themes, highlighting the strategic and dynamic nature of digital identity formation. Additionally, the research outlines five distinct phases in the digital identity formation of content creators on social media platforms: Exploration, Uncovering Niche, Targeted Audience, Publishing Content, and Integration of Digital Identity. This framework illustrates the progression from initial curiosity to the establishment of a digital identity.

Keywords: Digital Identity; Social Media; Content Creators; Tiktok

Abstrak. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi pembentukan identitas digital di kalangan pembuat konten Filipina di TikTok. Penelitian ini melibatkan 21 pembuat konten Filipina, berusia 20 hingga 46 tahun, yang diwawancarai melalui platform daring. Menggunakan pendekatan Grounded Theory, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menghasilkan wawasan mengenai bagaimana pembuat konten menavigasi ruang digital, membentuk identitas digital mereka, dan membangun koneksi. Penelitian ini mengidentifikasi tiga tema utama: Konstruksi Identitas, Perwujudan Persona Daring, dan Membangun Mata Uang Sosial. Tema-tema ini mencakup berbagai sub-tema yang menyoroti sifat strategis dan dinamis dari pembentukan identitas digital. Selain itu, penelitian ini menggambarkan lima fase berbeda dalam pembentukan identitas digital pembuat konten di platform media sosial: Eksplorasi, Menemukan Ceruk, Audiens Sasaran, Mempublikasikan Konten, dan Integrasi Identitas Digital. Kerangka ini menggambarkan kemajuan dari rasa ingin tahu awal hingga pembentukan identitas digital.

Kata Kunci: Identitas Digital; Media Sosial; Pembuat Konten; Tiktok

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Introduction

Life stories, perspectives, and even trivial information are now shared in social media platforms by our modern storytellers. According to Tafesse and Dayan (2023), Content creators generate and share content related to their passions, interests, and life encounters, utilizing digital platforms for dissemination and potential earnings. This content enriches digital consumption and reflects the multifaceted nature of human expression in the digital age.

Content creators shape their digital identities. Digital identity, as discussed by Majeed, Adisaputera, and Ridwan (2020), comprises the collection of attributes, implications, and symbols employed by individuals to establish their presence in the virtual realm. Thus, by curating their online personas, content creators showcase their interests and expertise, reveal aspects of their personality and values, and shape perceptions of their digital identity.

Digital identities become embedded in computer-coded systems through social media platforms, sensors, and technological devices (Buccafurri et al, 2017). Individual users add visual aspects, narratives, and personal experiences to their digital footprints, enhancing authenticity, credibility, and relatability. This management of their digital identity helps build trust and loyalty with audiences, influenced by beliefs about self-presentation, including self-efficacy, norms, and social involvement (Chou & Lu, 2022).

Social media has become an essential component of daily lives, facilitating interactions with family and friends, participation in public events, and engagement

within online communities (Zsila and Reyes, 2023). Since the early 2000s, social media platforms have broadened the horizons of communication, providing a new avenue for social experiences. Thus, platforms like Facebook, Youtube, WhatsApp, Instagram, WeChat, Telegram, Snapchat, and TikTok engage over 4.7 billion individuals, which accounts for approximately 60% of the global population (Kemp, 2023). Through the content they share, interactions they initiate, and communities they join, users contribute to the construction and negotiation of their digital identities, reflecting their personal attributes, interests, and social connections.

In the age of digitalization, the perspective of identity formation has encountered a major transformation, especially with the increasing popularity of social media platforms like 'TikTok'. Empirical studies show that users may not realize their behavioral changes due to the platform's engagement strategies (Wang, 2022). According to Salasac and Lobo (2022), 'TikTok' has emerged as a notable social media platform in the Philippines and across the nations. Since its initial launch in 2016, specifically, within the Philippines, 'TikTok's advertising audience encompasses around 43.4 million adult users, constituting approximately 37.3 percent of the country's total population (Baclig, 2023). Thus the platform serves as a space for diverse content sharing, requiring awareness, and response to unique challenges in the Philippine setting. The algorithm-driven nature of 'TikTok' presents distinct opportunities and challenges for content creators in shaping their digital identities, emphasizing the need to understand these processes in the Filipino context.

Digital Identity Shaping Factors

Looking into the different aspects that play a role in an individual's online persona is crucial to understand the complex process of digital identity formation. Huang et al. (2021) revealed personality traits, physical attractiveness, psychological status, and demographics as predictors of online identity formation. In addition, research conducted by Yuxiang et al. (2022) on personality traits and online self-disclosure during the post-pandemic period found a strong link between extroverted

personality and both the perceived value of social media, as well as increased self-disclosure online.

Another factor in constructing digital identity is social media engagement. Filipinos living abroad subtly reshape their digital identities through online interactions or *pakikipagkapwa*, creating a new version of Filipino diasporic identities that may be more visible on Facebook (Aguila, 2014). This is rooted in the concept of *kapwa* (shared identity) which is at the core of Filipino social psychology, and which is at the heart of the structure of Filipino values (Enriquez, 1978, 1994; Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000). The interaction between individuals and digital platforms forms a new social space where personal identity is both influenced and challenged, leading to the creation of digital selves that transcend mere analog extensions (Zimmermann, 2020).

Self-Presentation on Social Media Platforms

Social media users choose how they want to appear to others. Zheng et al. (2020) shared that people tend to present an idealized version of themselves online by adjusting based on their audience and sharing self-enhancing content broadly but revealing vulnerabilities mainly to close friends. Content creators also tend to connect with brands that match their self-concept, which influences their engagement with ads or products. According to Hollenbaugh (2021), social media offer seemingly limitless opportunities for strategic self-presentation, with users more inclined to present their actual selves in less anonymous and more visible contexts. Furthermore, Michikyan (2020) found that emerging adults with a clear sense of self tend to present both their authentic and ideal selves, while those with identity confusion often present a more idealized, sometimes fabricated version which seeks social validation.

Online Selves and Alternative Personas

Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) highlighted how online identity facilitates persona adoption, allowing individuals to embody various personas or identities in

digital environments. On a similar note, Waggoner (2009) advocates for replacing the term "real world" with "non-virtual," arguing that virtual identities created and maintained by users can hold equal authenticity as their offline identities. The traditional distinction between the online and offline, emphasizing the significance and reality of digital identities. This perspective emphasizes complex interaction between online and offline identities, accentuating the challenges of forming identities in modern digital environments.

Sociological Implications of Social Media

In an increasingly digital world, identity construction largely occurs on social media, where users curate their ideal image and perform it (Batista, 2023). This constant exposure to curated images and posts leads to social comparison, where individuals often measure their lives, status, achievements against those of others, potentially resulting in feelings of insecurity and dissatisfaction (Weinstein, 2017). The tendency to compare to idealized online images can create a cycle of perpetual dissatisfaction.

Content creators produce and share material across various platforms, influencing how they and their audiences perceive digital identities (Hodl & Myrach, 2023). The research also focused on understanding both the ways 'TikTok' users engage with content and the detailed framework surrounding the digital identities of Filipino content creators. Understanding how 'TikTok' shapes the digital identities of Filipino Content Creators is essential, as it offers insights into effective content strategies and audience engagement specific to the Philippine context. Content Creators, unlike social media influencers, operate across diverse disciplines (Kemp, 2023), and there is noticeable gap in local studies on 'TikTok' usage and digital identity in the Philippines (Araujo, et al., 2022; Ngilangil, 2022; Salasac & Lobo, 2022). Additionally, despite extensive research on 'TikTok' usage, the study's research gap focused on individuals who consume 'TikTok' content rather than the content creators themselves.

As a result, this study aimed to establish a theoretical understanding and framework of digital identity that is grounded and acceptable in the Philippine setting. The present study also aimed to identify phases that content creators undergo to develop their digital identity. Furthermore, the study will adopt Willig's theory as a qualitative research approach within a grounded theory framework. Willig's (2008) emphasis on narrative construction and sense-making processes aligns well with our study's focus on understanding how content creators in the Philippines construct and interpret their digital identities.

Significance of the Study

This research holds significant implications for both academic and practical applications within the context of Digital Identity formation across different social media platforms in the Philippines. By addressing the scarcity of local studies focusing on 'TikTok' usage and Digital Identity in the Philippines, this research intends to contribute to creating a theoretical understanding and framework of Digital Identity grounded in the Philippine setting. Insights garnered from this research can inform content creators about the challenges, opportunities, and risks associated with digital identity formation on the platform, thereby empowering them to make informed decisions regarding their online presence.

Methods

Design

The study sought to implement a Grounded theory approach to generate a theory based on the process of collecting and analyzing qualitative data (Delve & Limpaecher, 2021). Among the various revisions of the theory, the researchers used Willig's (2008) interpretation to better explain the study's nature, which is the process of grouping characteristics that share similar themes into meaningful labels, keeping

a record of the progression of collecting and comparing data until a new theory is achieved.

Sampling Technique

The researchers used purposive sampling technique, selecting participants based on Whateley's (2023) criteria for becoming an eligible Tiktok's creator fund, which were that they must be at least 18 years old, have a minimum of 10,000 followers, and their videos must have garnered at least 100,000 views in the last 30 days. These criteria are in line with existing literature suggesting that the maximum period of acceleration for identity formation occurs from late adolescence through young adulthood and continues to develop through mid and late adulthood years (Kroger, 2015). Participants who are also engaged on other social media platforms other than Tiktok are also eligible to participate noting that they are mainly active on Tiktok. Moreover, the exclusion criteria included those who have reached the minimum requirement, but are now inactive and have not uploaded a video in the last 30 days.

Participants

The demographic profile of the 21 participants in this study reveals a diverse representation primarily consisting of young adults, predominantly females, with ages ranging from 20 to 46 years old. Most participants reside in the National Capital Region (NCR), with other participants residing from various regions such as Cavite, Laguna, Baguio, Bataan, Negros Occidental, Davao, and Cebu.

Research Instrument

The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews to explore the formation of digital identity through 'TikTok'. The interview questions were validated by registered psychometricians, advocates, and a licensed professional teacher. The interview protocol is designed to systematically explore participants' experiences, attitudes, and as content creators on the platform. The following questions were formulated and validated by experts in understanding the self and social media.

Data Analysis

Guba and Lincoln's (1985) guidelines for developing credible qualitative research emphasize its trustworthiness. It is essential to evaluate the research's credibility by examining the relevance of the findings in other studies, the consistency of the results, and the extent to which the findings are free from the researcher's bias, motivation, or personal interest (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). To support the study's grounded theory approach, the researchers employed inductive coding to analyze the data gathered from verbatim transcriptions of the participants' responses during the recorded interviews.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to a Code of Ethics designed to safeguard the physical and psychological well-being of participants. Prior to data collection, the protocol code CLAC-Ethics 0064 was reviewed by the DLSU-D Review Committee, and adequate measures were taken to protect the rights and welfare of participants. The researchers are also committed to protecting participants' privacy and adhering to all HIPAA regulations. All interviews were recorded on a HIPAA-compliant platform, Microsoft teams, solely for research purposes by the researchers and will not be used for any other reason. Before ending the interview, debriefing was implemented, which was crucial in informing participants and mitigating any potential concerns that may have arisen during the interview. Lastly, as a token of appreciation the participants received a gift certificate after the interview.

Results

Table 2
Selective Codes Influencing Digital Identity Formation

Selective Codes	Axial Codes
Identity Construction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Curiosity about the platform's novelty● Passion for content creation● Experiencing the complexity of creating content

Embodiment of Online Persona	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Embracing Authenticity● Fostering Personal Growth● Establishing credibility
Building Social Currency	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Brand or Sponsorship Benefits● Expanding connections● Extending their reach through cross-posting

The table above explains the selective codes influencing digital identity formation. Based on the findings, the researchers identified three main selective codes: Identity Construction, Embodiment of Online Persona, and Building Social Currency, each with their own corresponding axial codes.

Identity Construction. Constructing one's identity requires time and preparation to create an impression presentable to their viewers. Participants have stated that before becoming well-known content creators, the quality of their videos slowly progressed as they became more invested in producing more content. Based on Participant 21, "...it makes you more responsible with the things coming out of your mouth and the quality of the contents you are about to upload." This explained the responsibilities of what it means to be a content creator and how that would affect the quality of their content.

Embodiment of Online Persona. Embodying an online persona consists of the content creator embracing their authenticity, not separating their offline and online selves, but not to the point where they become too vulnerable to their audience. As Participant 5 shared, "I think *ang* important thing *doon* is your offline self should not be too far from your online self." Similarly, Participant 15 also mentioned, "...I want to be as genuine as possible, so when it comes to separating my identity...*hindi siya malayo* from my true self." Based on their statements, there is no way for both their offline and online selves to be completely separate, but rather, is a complex interaction resulting in their desire to be unique and relatable at the same time.

Building Social Currency. Social currency is a phenomenon that allows the user to utilize their tangible and intangible resources to other social connections.

According to Participant 20, "I started reaching more people outside my current network which is nice, no?" This explains that content creation is also a career option by gaining opportunities for sponsorships and partnerships with brands seeking collaboration. In addition, Participant 13 shared, "...it's not always about the counts, it's about, like, people, those agents na *pumipili sa amin*, they find something *sa amin na*, can resonate well with their brands, like, campaigns." The statements above from participants made them realize they had achieved a significant milestone in their career by being part of events or movements that also include established personalities.

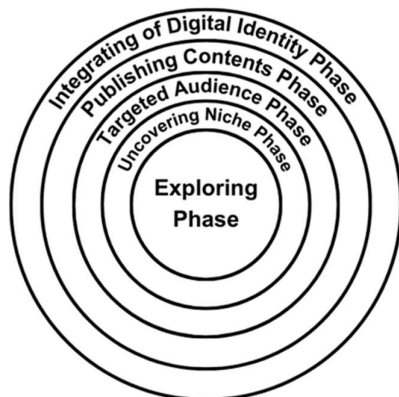


Figure 1.
Theory of Filipino Content Creator's Digital Identity Formation

Note: The figure exhibits the five different phases of the digital identity formation of Filipino Content Creators.

As a result, a newly developed Theory of Filipino Content Creator's Digital Identity Formation has identified five (5) different phases that includes exploration phase, uncovering niche phase, targeted audience phase, publishing contents phase, and integrating of digital identity phase. The concentric circles represent the gradual development of digital identity, with each phase symbolizing a distinct stage in the process.

Discussion

The study explores the formation of digital identity, identifying three selective codes from semi-structured interviews: Identity Construction, Embodiment of Online Persona, and Building Social Currency. The concept of Identity Construction aligns with Goffman's views on the pressures content creators face (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). It is characterized by participants' efforts to project a positive, professional image while balancing personal creativity with audience expectations. Moving from identity construction, the Embodiment of Online Persona focuses on how participants present both authentic and idealized versions of themselves. Michikyan (2020) supports this notion, highlighting that individuals with a strong sense of self often reflect both their genuine and aspirational selves on social media platforms. The concept of Building Social Currency comes into play, emphasizing the benefits of brand development, networking, and cross-posting. These practices motivate participants to expand their connections and leverage their credibility as content creators. As noted by Khan, Tao, and Alam (2021), social currency involves gathering and sharing digital resources, which in turn shapes one's identity.

The study's visual representation of phases as concentric circles illustrates a flexible and evolving journey in digital identity formation. This framework encompasses several phases: Exploration, Uncovering the Niche, Targeting Audiences, Publishing Content, and Integration of Digital Identity. In the Exploration Phase, participants embark on their social media journey with curiosity and experimentation. This phase involves testing different features and content formats, fostering creativity, and establishing a foundation for future content creation. It reflects the initial openness and trial-and-error approach essential for navigating new platforms. As participants progress to the Uncovering the Niche Phase, they refine their content focus based on initial experiments. This phase is crucial for distinguishing oneself in the vast digital landscape and honing in on specific themes

or topics that resonate with both the creator and their audience. Discovering a niche helps content creators stand out and build a dedicated following.

Following the identification of a niche, the Targeting Audiences Phase emphasizes the importance of fostering meaningful interactions with viewers. Participants expand their networks by connecting with other creators and brands, thereby enhancing both their credibility and reach. The role of TikTok's algorithm in boosting content visibility and engagement is also crucial in this phase, highlighting the evolving dynamics of audience interaction. In the Publishing Content Phase, participants transition from passive media consumption to proactive content creation. Strategies such as cross-posting across multiple platforms are employed to maximize visibility and engagement. Finally, the Integration of Digital Identity Phase represents the culmination of the content creators' journey. This phase involves merging external experiences with internal growth to form a unified digital persona. According to Mitchell et al. (2021), identity integration fosters a cohesive and authentic sense of self, enhancing confidence and self-awareness. It underscores that digital identity serves as an extension of one's true self, enabling creators to navigate their online presence with greater authenticity and purpose. These phases illustrate the journey of content creators; however, they are not rigidly linear. Creators may skip phases or move forward and backward between them as their digital self continuously evolves.

Conclusion

In summary, the research provides valuable insights into the journey of content creators on TikTok, highlighting the process of digital identity formation. The results showed the following main themes are Identity Construction, Embodiment of Online Persona, and Building Social Currency and determined phases: the Exploring Phase, Uncovering Niche Phase, Targeted Audience Phase, Publishing Contents Phase, and integrating the digital identity phase. Furthermore, the research elucidates the broader significance of digital identity integration for content creators,

emphasizing its role in fostering continuity, fulfillment, and genuine self-expression. By acknowledging digital identity as an extension of oneself and embracing a mindset of exploration and experimentation, content creators can confidently navigate the digital realm with purpose and mindfulness. Ultimately, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of digital identity formation on social media platforms, offering valuable insights for content creators seeking to establish a meaningful and impactful online presence.

Suggestion

The study's theory-building was limited to the data gathered from the selected sample using inductive coding. The participants' characteristics also limited this research: they were 19 and above, but not over 40, and residing in the Philippines. As the research study progresses, the researchers suggest to future researchers the inclusion of specific criteria to enhance the depth and focus of the grounded theory, such as narrowing down to these particular types of content: Lifestyle, POVs (Points of view), or skits, or educational content. By focusing more on a particular kind of content, the study will allow for a more refined understanding of the processes and dynamics of the grounded theory. In addition, it is recommended to consider including specific generations of the participants to explore different viewpoints on digital identity which is shaped by their life experiences, technological exposure, and socio-cultural background.

Authors' Contributions

KSB, RTM, ECY, AVE, and SNP wrote the research and interviewed the participants. JND is the research adviser, editor, and proofreader of the study. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Competing Interest

The authors do not declare any competing interest.

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