

University Youth and the Contestations of Identity and Positioning Between Cyberspace and the Real World: An Empirical Study



Halla DOGHMANE *
SKIKDA University
h.doghmane@univ-skikda.dz
Wafa LARIT
SKIKDA University
w.larit@univ-skikda.dz

Date of submission: 06/09/2025 Date of acceptance: 22/11/2025 Date of publication: 16/12/2025

Abstract:

This paper explores how university students construct their identity in the virtual world compared to the real world, paying special attention to the contradictions, tensions and differences that shape this dual experience. The study adopted a survey-based approach and the collected data were analyzed using the statistical package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21.

The findings indicate that Facebook functions as a major virtual space that allows individuals to communicate and form social relationships with a wide range of users, often without using their real identity. As such, interactions on the platform mainly revolve around communication through identities that may be authentic, fabricated or deliberately reconstructed in a virtual form.

key words: University youth; virtual identity; cyberspace; social networking sites; Facebook.

Introduction:

More than twenty years after the emergence of social networking platforms—beginning with Facebook, founded by Mark Zuckerberg—the debates and research on their role and impact are still ongoing. Scholars and specialists continue to explore how these platforms influence users' identities, and whether those identities remain consistent between the virtual and real worlds.

This paper specifically addresses the question of whether university students' identities in cyberspace align with their real-life identities.

THE FIRST TOPIC

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework serves as the cornerstone of this study, outlining its objectives, significance, research problem and the conceptual definitions of key terms.

First requirement: Objectives of the study

To identify the reasons why university students, use virtual identities on social media platforms.

To examine the extent to which virtual identity matches real identity among university students.

To explore the main motives for using social networking sites, particularly Facebook.

To provide a theoretical framework that clarifies key concepts such as virtual identity and cyberspace.

second requirement: Significance and rationale of the study

The issue of virtual identity versus real identity among young people has long sparked debates and controversies. A central concern lies in whether young people are fully aware of their real identity and why many resorts to fabricated or false identities, which may even contradict their real-life persona. For example, some male youth adopt female identities online and vice versa.

This study attempts to enter this virtual world and explore to what extent real identity overlaps -or diverges- from virtual identity among university students.

third requirement: Research problem

discussions about the impact of social networking sites on youth are no longer superficial but rather essential in academic debate. One of the most significant issues is the use of virtual or false identities, a phenomenon that has been studied from multiple perspectives in order to understand the underlying motives.

In this context, the central research question guiding this study is:

To what extent does the identity of university youth in cyberspace align with their real identity in the real world?

This question was investigated through an empirical study conducted on a sample of Algerian university students at the University of Skikda.

Fourth requirement: conceptual definitions

First section: University youth

Refers of individuals typically between the age 17 and 30 enrolled in university. This stage of life is characterized by energy, creativity, openness to new ideas and the search for future orientation, but also by a lack of experience and the need for guidance.¹

Second section: Virtual identity

Defined as the set of personal information that constructs an online persona-such as name, age, gender, marital status and other details – shared by users on platforms like Facebook. This information may be real or fabricated.²

Third section: Cyberspace

According to the International Telecommunication Union, cyberspace is a physical and non-physical domain made up of computers, networks, software, data and their users. It allows interaction and communication across a global network.³

Fourth section: Social networking sites

Virtual communities on the Internet that enable individuals to interact based on shared interests, affiliations or hobbies. They allow fast and precise communication globally.⁴

Fifth section: Facebook

A social networking site where individuals can form friendships, exchange information and create personal profiles. These profiles may reflect either real or virtual identities and the platform is generally perceived as easier and more flexible than real-life communities.⁵

THE SECOND TOPIC

Socio-Historical Context of Social Networking Sites-Facebook as a case study

Before addressing the rise of social media, it is useful to begin with the emergence of cyberspace itself. The term cyberspace first appeared in 1982, coined by the American science fiction writer William Gibson, who imagined it as a collective hallucination shared daily by millions of users around the globe.⁶

He combined the word cybernetics (the science of control systems) with space, thus introducing the concept of cyberspace.⁷

With the rapid expansion of the Internet, cyberspace moved from imagination to reality. Today, it is regarded as a “new homeland” – one without borders, memory or heritage – constructed through global communication networks. Increasingly, critical infrastructures in the military, banking, government and business sectors, as well as everyday social interactions, are managed within this digital space.⁸

First requirement: The rise of social networking sites

1994: Geocities was created in the United States, often considered the first social networking sites.

1995: Theglobe.com was launched, followed by classmate.com, designed for reconnecting with school friends.

1997: SixDegrees.com emerged, introducing user profiles and private messaging and emphasizing direct links between individuals.⁹

2002-2004: A new appeared with platforms like Friendster, MySpace and eventually Facebook, which quickly outpaced its predecessors.¹⁰

By 2005, platforms such as YouTube introduced new forms of online interaction, focused on sharing videos, images and entertainment content. These sites brought together friends, relative and colleagues, offering opportunities for new connections and discussions around shared interests.¹¹

Second requirement: Facebook: From campus project to global platform

Facebook was launched on October 28, 2003, by Mark Zuckerberg, then a second-year computer science student at Harvard University. Initially, the site was a limited project where users could compare and rate photos. Very quickly, it spread among American university and high school students.¹²

After two years, Zuckerberg opened the platform to the public, leading to an unprecedented surge in users-from 12 million in 2006 to over 60 million by the end of 2007.

By 2007, Facebook had reached nearly 2 billion users worldwide. In July 2022, the number rose to about 2.9 billion.¹³ To expand its ecosystem, the company acquired other platforms such as Messenger, Instagram and WhatsApp. Recently, Zuckerberg rebranded the first quarter of 2023, maintaining its position as the world's leading social media company.¹⁴

THE THIRD TOPIC

Empirical Study

This section presents the methodological steps followed in the fieldwork, including the sample, data collection tools and the main findings.

First requirement: Sample and Method

First section: Sample

The study relied on a non-random convenience sample of 100 university students who actively use Facebook.

Second section: Tool

Data were collected through an online questionnaire, designed based on the theoretical framework and validated by expert professors.

Third section: Analysis

Responses were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 21.

Second requirement:

Table 01: Gender Distribution

	Frequency	Percentage
Male	32	32%
Female	68	68%
Total	100	100%

Table 01 addresses the gender variable. Our analysis of the results revealed statistically significant differences between the two genders in the sample, with males representing 32% and females 68%.

This indicates that more female students participated, explained by the fact many male youths tend to enter the workforce earlier due to social responsibilities.

Table 02: Age Distribution

19 – 23 years	52	52%
24 – 28 years	42	42%
Above 28 years	06	06%
Total	100	100%

Table 02 presents the age distribution of the sample. The results show that no participants were younger than 19 years. Most of the sample (over half) was aged between 19 and 23 years, indicating that this is the dominant category among university students surveyed. The 24-28 age group constituted 42% of the sample, reflecting the traditional undergraduate years. Only 06% of respondents were above 28 years, which suggests that older students represent a small minority within the study population.

Table 03: Habits of Facebook use

	Frequency	Percentage
Always	66	66%
Occasionally	30	30%
Rarely	04	04%

Total	100	100%
--------------	-----	------

Table 03 illustrates the habits of Facebook use among the university students surveyed. The finding indicates that a majority of respondents 66% reported using Facebook on a daily basis, suggesting a strong dependence on the platform as part of their everyday social and communication practices. A smaller portion 30% stated that they use it occasionally, while only 04% reported rare use. These results highlight the centrality of Facebook in the digital routines of university youth, reinforcing its role as a dominant social space for communication, entertainment and maintaining peer connections.

Table 04: Places of access to Facebook

Home	56	56%
University	15	15%
Mobile / 3G Open access	23	23%
Others (cybercafé, centers)	06	06%
Total	100	100%

Table 04 shows the distribution of Facebook use according to place of access. The majority of respondents 56% reported accessing the platform from home, reflecting the availability of Internet facilities within Algerian households and the preference for using Facebook in a private setting. About 23% rely on mobile and open access through 3G/4G networks, highlighting the increasing importance of mobile connectivity among youth. A smaller percentage 15% use Facebook from university facilities, while only 05% reported using it from scientific or recreational centers. These results suggest that Facebook use is primarily embedded within personal and mobile environments, rather than in public or institutional spaces, underscoring the individual and private nature of digital engagement among university students.¹⁵

Table 05: Duration of Facebook use

1-2 hours	42	42%
3-4 hours	14	14%
More than 4 hours	19	19%
Open/continuous access	25	25%
Total	100	100%

Table 05 presents the distribution of respondents according to the duration of their daily Facebook use. The results reveal that the largest

share of participants 42% reported spending between one and two hours on the platform, reflecting a relatively moderate level of engagement. However, a notable proportion 25% indicated continuous or open use throughout the day, while 19% reported more than four hours of daily use. Additionally, 14% stated their daily usage ranged between three and four hours. These finding suggest that while a significant portion of students maintain moderate patterns of engagement, a period on the platform, raising concerns about potential overuse and it's implications for academic performance, physical health and overall well-being.

The long usage times suggest risks of addiction and impacts on health (lack of sleep, eye strain, sedentary effects).

Table 06: Superficial/transient relationships on Facebook

	frequency	Percentage
Always	34	34%
Sometimes	41	41%
Rarely	25	25%
Total	100	100%

Table 06 illustrates how respondents evaluated the superficial or transient nature of their relationships on Facebook. The results show that 34% of students described their online relationships as consistently superficial and short-lived, while 41% reported that such relationships occur occasionally. Only 25% indicated that they rarely experience superficial ties. These finding suggest that a significant proportion of online interactions among university youth lack depth and continuity, which may be attributed to the limited trust users place in virtual acquaintances. This pattern aligns with the understanding of Facebook as a global social hub where individual connect for diverse purposes, often without the stability or authenticity that characterizes real-life relationships.

Many students hesitate to trust strangers online, viewing relationships as superficial.

Table 07: Deep and continuous relationships

	frequency	Percentage
Always	55	55%
Sometimes	27	27%
Rarely	18	18%
Total	100	100%

Table 07 presents the distribution of responses regarding deep and continuous relationships formed or maintained through Facebook. The

findings indicate that more than half of the participants 55% perceive their online ties as consistently and enduring, while 27% consider them so only occasionally and 18% rarely experience such relationships. These results highlight Facebook’s role not only as a platform for casual interaction but also as a medium for sustaining meaningful social bonds. The platform thus extends real-life relationships into the virtual sphere, reinforcing existing networks and fostering a sense of continuity in social connections.

Indicates that Facebook often serves to maintain and extend real-life relationships in a virtual setting.

Table 08: Persistent superficial relationships on Facebook

	Frequency	Percentage
Always	34	34%
Sometimes	37	37%
Rarely	29	29%
Total	100	100%

Table 08 examines the persistence of superficial relationships among respondent on Facebook. The findings show that 34% of students reported maintaining consistently superficial ties, 37% indicated that such relationships occur occasionally, while 29% experienced them rarely. This distribution suggests that while many interactions lack depth, they may still be sustained over time, highlighting the paradox of continuity without intimacy. These results align with Boyd’s (2008)¹⁶ argument that social networking sites are often more effective for maintaining existing connections rather than fostering genuine new friendships. Thus, the term “friend” used by such platforms does not always correspond to the traditional meaning of friendship, as online ties may remain shallow despite their persistence.

Most deny engaging in romantic ties online, though a minority admit to them.

Table 09: Professional/Scientific relationships on Facebook

	Frequency	Percentage
Always	22	22%
Sometimes	24	24%
Rarely	54	54%
Total	100	100%

Table 09 illustrates the extent to which respondents engaged in romantic or intimate relationships through Facebook. The results show

that 22% of participants reported forming such relationships on a regular basis, 24% indicated that they occur occasionally, while the majority 54% stated that they rarely or never establish intimate ties on the platform. These findings suggest that, although Facebook provides opportunities for romantic encounters, most university students in the sample do not perceive it as a primary space for building intimate relationships. This contrasts with some international studies that point to social media as a major catalyst for modern dating practices. In the Algerian context, however, cultural norms and privacy concerns may limit the extent of which youth openly pursue such relationships online.

Table 10: Professional/Scientific relationships on Facebook

	Frequency	Percentage
Always	38	38%
Sometimes	35	35%
Rarely	27	27%
Total	100	100%

Table 10 present the extent to which respondents use Facebook to establish professional or scientific relationships. The results indicate that 38% of students consistently engage in such connections, 35% reported doing so occasionally, while 27% rarely use the platform for this purpose. These finding suggest that, beyond its social and entertainment functions, Facebook also serve as a tool for academic and professional networking among a notable segment of university youth. Nevertheless, the relatively moderate percentages imply that many students still view the platform primarily as a space for leisure and social interaction rather than professional development. This trend reflects the existence of other specialized platforms, such as LinkedIn, that are more strongly associated with career-oriented networking.¹⁷

Some students use the platform for academic or professional networking, through this is less common than social use.

Table 11: Use of real identity on Facebook

	Frequency	Percentage
Real identity	64	64%
Fake / Altered identity	36	36%
Total	100	100%

Table 11 highlights the extent to which respondents use their real identity on Facebook. The results reveal that a majority of students 64% reported using their authentic identity, while 36% admitted to using an alternative or fabricated identity. This finding underscores the dual nature of identity practices among university youth: while many prefer transparency and authenticity online, a significant proportion still rely on anonymity or pseudonyms. Such practices may be motivated by concerns related to privacy, harassment, or freedom of expression. The contrast between authenticity and self-protection in digital spaces.

Table 12: Reasons for not using real identity on Facebook

	Frequency	Percentage
Avoiding harassment	42	42%
Protecting privacy	33	33%
Freedom of expression	11	11%
Fear of hacking	10	10%
Seeking intimate ties	03	03%
Total	100	100%

Table 12 outlines the motives reported by respondents who chose not to use their real identity on Facebook. The most frequently cited reason was avoiding harassment 42%, followed by concerns about protecting privacy 33%. A smaller proportion indicated the desire for greater freedom of expression 11% or fear of hacking 10%. Only 3% admitted to concealing their identity in order to pursue intimate or romantic ties. These findings suggest that the primary motivations for concealing one's real identity are defensive rather than deceptive, with most students seeking protection from external threats or constraints.¹⁸ At the same time, the data reflect the broader debate around privacy and security on social networking platforms, where anonymity provides both opportunities and risks.¹⁹

Table 13: Reasons for using real identity on Facebook

	Frequency	Percentage
Easier communication with friends and acquaintances	28	28%
Extension of real-life identity	23	23%
Responsibility for one's opinion/posts	20	20%
Transparency and clarity	17	17%
Building professional/scientific	12	12%

connections		
Total	100	100%

Table 13 presents the motives behind students' choice to use their real identity on Facebook. The most common reason, reported by 28% of respondents, was to facilitate communication with friends, acquaintances and primary social groups. Another 23% viewed their online identity as an extension of their real-life identity, thereby maintaining continuity between the two spheres. Approximately 20% expressed a sense of accountability for their interactions. A smaller proportion 12% used Facebook in a more formal manner, aiming to establish professional or academic connections. These findings emphasize that, for many students, authenticity online is linked not only to ease of social interaction but also to responsibility, credibility and the desire to extend real-life networks into the digital domain.

Third requirement: Discussion of findings

The empirical results of this study provide important insights into how university students engage with Facebook and how their practices reflect broader issues of identity, social interaction and digital culture.

First, the demographic distribution shows that female students are more represented than males in the sample and the majority belong to the age group of 19-23 years, confirming that this is the most active demographic segment in the virtual sphere.

Regarding usage patterns, the finding reveal that Facebook is deeply embedded in students' daily routines. Most respondents reported using the platform regularly, with a significant proportion spending more than four hours a day or maintaining open access throughout the day. Such habits raise concerns about overuse and possible negative effects on academic performance and health, while also highlighting Facebook's central role in shaping youth communication practices.

The analysis of relationships formed through Facebook demonstrates a dual dynamic. On the one hand, many interactions are perceived as superficial and transient, reflecting the limited trust placed in virtual acquaintances. On the other hand, a substantial proportion of students reported maintaining deep and continuous relationships online, often as an extension of their real-life social ties. This duality suggests that Facebook serves both as a space for casual connections and as a tool for sustaining meaningful relationships.

When it comes to sensitive aspects such as intimacy most respondents denied using Facebook for romantic relationships, although a

notable minority admitted to engaging in such ties. This indicates that cultural and social norms still play a strong role in shaping online behavior in the Algerian context. Conversely, a more pragmatic use of the platform was observed in the domain of professional and academic networking, through these purposes remain secondary compared to entertainment and socializing.

The issue of identity reveals another important dimension. While a majority of students 64% used their real identity, a significant minority 36% relied on pseudonyms or alternative identities. The motives for hiding one's true identity were largely defensive-avoiding harassment, protecting privacy, or ensuring freedom of expression-rather than deceptive. By contrast, those who used their real identity emphasized the importance of communication, continuity with real life, accountability and transparency. This contrast reflects the tension between authenticity and anonymity in digital spaces, a tension that shapes not only individual identity but also broader patterns of trust and interaction.

Taken together, the findings highlight the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which university students negotiate their identities and relationships on Facebook. The platform emerges simultaneously as a site of opportunity – facilitating communication, sustaining bonds and supporting self-expression and a site of risk where concerns about privacy harassment and overuse are ever-present. This duality underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of virtual identity, one that acknowledges both its empowering and its challenging dimensions.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, this research paper set out to answer a central question: **To what extent does the identity of university youth in cyberspace align with their real identity in the real world?**

The study was presented in two main parts. The first was the theoretical section, which outlined the objectives, signification and research problem, along with conceptual foundations for key terms such as virtual identity, cyberspace and social networking sites. It also traced the socio-historical context of social media, with special emphasis on Facebook. The second was the empirical section, which described the methodology, the sample, data collection tools and analysis.

The overall findings show that Facebook functions as a virtual space that allows individuals to communicate and establish social relationships with a wide range of users—often without resorting to their real identities. As such, the primary use of the platform revolves around

communication between participants through identities that may be authentic or entirely virtual.

Bibliography List:

* Corresponding Author

¹ Ahmed Hamdi Shoura. Youth Attitudes toward Local Community Development Programs in Light of the Millennium Development Goals. Higher Institute of Social Work, Aswan, Egypt, 2006–2007, p.

² Sonia Abdech. Algerian Youth and Facebook: Between Opportunities of Use and the Dilemma of Addiction. Taksejcom for Studies, Publishing and Distribution, pp. 203–204.

³ International Telecommunication Union. ITU Toolkit for Cybercrime Legislation. Geneva, 2010, p. 12.

⁴ Samia Khidr Saleh, Asmaa Mohamed Nabil. Social Networking Sites: Emergence and Influence. Journal of the Faculty of Education, Issue 24, Part II, 2018, p. 193.

⁵ Lamia Yahiaoui, Mariam Sharfi. Virtual Identity among Facebook Users: A Field Study on a Sample of Graduate Students in the Department of Media and Communication Sciences. Master's Thesis, Department of Media and Communication Sciences, Specialization in Public Relations, Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, University of M'sila, 2017–2018, p. 17.

⁶ Peter Singer. Lessons from Past Wars and Future Technological Trends. Future Wars in the 21st Century. 1st ed., Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2014, p. 8.

⁷ Kalthoum Zineb. The Principle of Communication as a Reference for Digital Literature between Technology and Philosophical Thought. Maqalid Journal, Issue 3, December, p. 175.

⁸ Ali Hussein Bakeer. The Fifth Domain: Cyber Wars in the 21st Century. Al Jazeera Center for Studies. Retrieved from: <https://goo.gl/2fC3WM>

⁹ Abdelkarim Ali Al-Dbaisi, Zuheir Yassin Al-Tahat. The Role of Social Networking Sites in Shaping Public Opinion among Jordanian University Students. Dirasat: Human and Social Sciences, Vol. 40, Issue 1, 2013, p. 70.

¹⁰ same source.

¹¹ Shereen Mohamed Kadwani. The Use of Youth of Social Networking Sites on the Internet and Its Relationship to Democratic Transformation in Egypt. Unpublished PhD Thesis, Faculty of Arts, Assiut University, 2015, p. 118.

¹² The History of Facebook and How It Was Invented. ThoughtCo. Retrieved 22/11/2019.

¹³ Ahmed Youssef Farghali. The Role of Modern Technologies in the Shift of Arab University Youth from Reading Printed Press to Electronic Press. Unpublished Master's Thesis, Holland University, p. 100.

¹⁴ Shiona McCallum. Facebook: How Meta's Profits Exceeded Expectations. BBC Arabic, published 27/04/2023, accessed 29/08/2024. <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/science-and-tech-65415787>

¹⁵ Interview conducted by the two researchers.

¹⁶ Dana Boyd, Nicole B. Ellison. Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, Issue 13, 2008. <http://www.danah.org/papers/2013/SocialityThruSNS-preprint.pdf>

¹⁷ Should You Friend Your Boss on Facebook? Mechanisms of Anger Control. Orient News, published 15/11/2012, accessed 25/04/2024. http://orient-news.net/ar/news_show/551/0/-/آليات-التحكم-على-الفيسبوك-ماهي-بغضبك

¹⁸ Amr Mohamed Asaad. The Relationship between Egyptian Youth's Use of Social Networking Sites and Their Social Values: A Study on YouTube and Facebook. PhD Thesis, Department of Radio and Television, Faculty of Mass Communication, Cairo University, 2011, p. 220.

¹⁹ Amanda Lenhart, Kristen Purcell, Aaron Smith, Kathryn Zickuhr. Adults and Social Network Websites. Unpublished report. The Pew Internet & American Life Project, USA, January 2009, p. 10.