

VIRTUAL IDENTITY ON SOCIAL MEDIA: AN ANALYSIS OF THE SECOND ACCOUNT AND FAKE ACCOUNT PHENOMENON IN SOCIAL REPRESENTATION

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Abstract. This research is motivated by the increasing use of social media, which encourages the formation of virtual identity through the practice of secondary accounts and fake accounts. The aim of this study is to analyze the construction of virtual identity among Generation Z within the framework of Moscovici's Social Representation Theory (SRT), emphasizing the processes of anchoring and objectification in the formation of social meaning. The initial hypothesis suggests that digital identity is fragmented and contextual, depending on the social function of each account. This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach within the constructivist paradigm. The research subjects consisted of eight Generation Z informants who are active on social media and have alternative accounts. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, digital observation, and documentation, then analyzed using open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, along with thematic analysis based on SRT. The findings reveal that virtual identity is formed in three main layers: the main account as a curated public representation, the secondary account as a space for personal and emotional expression, and the fake account as a tool for anonymity and social observation. These results align with previous studies that position alternative accounts as impression management strategies, yet extend them within the context of social representation and power relations. The processes of anchoring and objectification are evident through digital symbols such as usernames, language styles, and interaction patterns. This study concludes that virtual identity is an adaptive and layered social construct, serving as a communication strategy for negotiating public-private boundaries, social control, and authenticity in the digital space.

Keywords: Virtual Identity, Generation Z, Secondary Account, Fake Account, Social Representation Theory

INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology (ICT) has transformed how individuals interact, communicate, and form identities in the digital space. Social media is no longer merely a medium for sharing information; it has also become an arena for complex virtual identity construction. In Indonesia, internet penetration reaching 229.43 million users, or 80.66% of the population, indicates that social media has become an integral part of society's daily life, particularly for Generation Z. This condition signifies that identity is no longer singular; rather, it can be dynamically constructed through various digital accounts as a form of self representation in the online space.

The phenomenon of using second accounts and fake accounts is one of the tangible manifestations of these virtual identity dynamics. Previous studies indicate that second accounts are used as a freer and more authentic space for personal expression, while fake accounts are utilized to maintain anonymity and conduct social observation without direct involvement (Fitria & Eriend, 2024; Alamsyah et al., 2025; Budiani & Hapsari, 2023). This practice highlights an individual's need to manage the boundaries between public and private spaces, while also serving as a response to the pressure of social norms on social media.

Theoretically, this phenomenon can be explained through Social Representation Theory (SRT) developed by Moscovici (1961; 1984), which posits that social reality is shaped through a collective process of understanding and giving meaning to social phenomena. In the context of social media, virtual identity is the result of social construction formed through the processes of anchoring and objectification, where meaning is manifested through digital symbols, such as profile pictures, language, and interaction patterns. Furthermore, the concept of virtual identity is supported by Turkle's (2011) thought on multiple selves, which explains that individuals can possess various self representations in the digital space, as well as Boyd (2014), who emphasizes the importance of the audience in shaping the self presentation of social media users.

Although various studies have discussed the phenomena of second accounts and fake accounts, most still examine them separately and have not integrated them within a social representation framework. Previous research also tends to focus on specific platforms and has not captured the increasingly complex cross platform dynamics (Nanda et al., 2025; Rismayanti et al., 2025). This indicates a research gap that needs to be addressed, particularly in understanding how Generation Z comprehensively constructs and interprets their virtual identity across various social media contexts.

Based on this background, the formulation of the problem in this study is how is the virtual identity of social media users constructed through the practice of second accounts and fake accounts within the framework of social representation? This issue is critical to investigate because it relates to the dynamics of digital communication, identity management, and social implications such as privacy, social control, and power relations in the digital space. Therefore, this research is expected to provide a theoretical contribution to the development of digital communication studies and enrich the understanding of virtual identity practices among Generation Z.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical framework in this study focuses on relevant communication theories to explain the phenomenon of virtual identity on social media, particularly regarding the practice of second accounts and fake accounts. The primary theory employed is Social Representation Theory (SRT), which is further supported by the concepts of virtual identity, social media, and the phenomenon of using alternative accounts.

Social Representation Theory (SRT). Social Representation Theory, developed by Moscovici, explains that social reality is shaped through a collective process of meaning construction in social interactions (Moscovici, 1961; 1984). This theory emphasizes two main processes: anchoring, which is the process of linking new phenomena to a familiar knowledge framework, and objectification, which is the process of materializing abstract ideas into concrete symbols such as language, visuals, and social practices. Furthermore, social representation serves the functions of knowledge, identity, orientation, and justification in social life (Jodelet, 2008; Howarth, 2011). In the context of this study, SRT is used to analyze how social media users interpret second accounts as private expression spaces and fake accounts as symbols of anonymity in digital interactions.

Virtual Identity. Virtual identity is a self-representation constructed by individuals in the digital space through social media. Turkle (2011) explains that individuals in the digital world possess multiple selves, which is the ability to present various identities in different contexts. This identity is fluid, dynamic, and open to negotiation. Boyd (2014) adds that digital identity is influenced by the audience and platform context, leading individuals to modify how they present themselves. Furthermore, Stets and Burke (2000) assert that identity is the result of social construction formed through interaction. Thus, virtual identity in this study is understood as a flexible and contextual process of self representation on social media

Social Media and ICT. Social media is part of the development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) that enables two-way interaction and the formation of social meaning. McLuhan (1964) introduced the concept of the global village, a condition where communication technology erases the boundaries of space and time in social interaction. Mansell (2010) asserts that ICT functions not only as a medium but also influences social structures and individual behavior. In the Indonesian context, high internet penetration indicates that social media has become the primary space for interaction and digital identity formation (APJII, 2025; DataReportal, 2024). Social media allows individuals to manage their audience, privacy, and communication strategies through various accounts.

The Phenomenon of Second Accounts and Fake Accounts. The phenomenon of second accounts and fake accounts is a concrete form of layered virtual identity practices. Research indicates that second accounts are used as spaces for personal expression that are more authentic, private, and free from the pressure of social norms (Alamsyah et al., 2025; Rismayanti et al., 2025). Meanwhile, fake accounts are used to maintain anonymity, avoid social surveillance, and conduct observation without direct

involvement (Fitria & Eriend, 2024; Budiani & Hapsari, 2023). From the SRT perspective, both forms of accounts are social representations that possess distinct functions, serving either as a means of self expression or as a tool for identity protection.

METHOD

Research method is the approach used to address the problem regarding the construction of virtual identity through the practice of second accounts and fake accounts within the framework of social representation. This study uses a constructivist paradigm, which posits that social reality is not a single objective entity, but is rather formed through individual experiences, interactions, and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This paradigm is relevant because the research focuses on how social media users subjectively interpret their virtual identities in specific social contexts.

Approach used is a descriptive qualitative approach. This approach was chosen because the phenomenon of virtual identity is complex, contextual, and cannot be measured quantitatively. Qualitative research allows the researcher to deeply explore the informants experiences, perceptions, and subjective dynamics in using their main accounts, second accounts, and fake accounts (Moleong, 2017; Creswell, 2018). The method utilized is a descriptive study focusing on meaning making and identity construction in digital interactions.

Research setting was conducted in a combined manner: offline in campus environments such as Universitas Pamulang, Universitas Esa Unggul, and Universitas Mercu Buana Jakarta, as well as online through digital communication platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and social media Direct Messages. The research was carried out over a ten month period, from September 2025 to June 2026, which encompassed the stages of preparation, data collection, analysis, and report writing.

Subjects of the study were Generation Z individuals aged 18–30 years who actively use social media and possess a second account or fake account. The selection of informants was conducted using a purposive sampling technique, based on specific criteria aligned with the research objectives, such as the intensity of social media usage and experience in using alternative accounts (Sugiyono, 2019). The number of informants in this study was eight individuals, characterized as active users of various platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter/X, with distinct experiences in managing digital identities.

Data collection techniques were carried out through in-depth interviews, digital observation, and documentation. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner to deeply explore the experiences and perceptions of the informants (Esterberg, 2002). Digital observation was used to observe interaction patterns, uploads, and identity representations on social media (Spradley, 1980). Documentation in the form of interview notes, transcripts, and digital evidence was used as supporting data in the analysis.

Data analysis technique employed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which includes the stages of data familiarization, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and report writing. Additionally, the interactive analysis model by Miles and Huberman (1994) was utilized, encompassing data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions. The analysis process was then integrated with the Social Representation Theory framework to identify the processes of anchoring, objectification, and the function of social representation in the construction of virtual identity.

Data validity in this study was tested using source and method triangulation techniques, namely by comparing data from various informants as well as the results from interviews, observations, and documentation. Furthermore, a member check was conducted to ensure the alignment of the researcher's interpretations with the informants' experiences. The validity of the research was also maintained through the principle of trustworthiness, which includes credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thus, the methods used are capable of providing a comprehensive and in-depth overview of virtual identity construction in digital communication practices.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study indicate that the construction of social media users virtual identities is not singular rather, it is formed in layers through the use of main accounts, second accounts, and fake

accounts. Based on interviews with eight Generation Z informants, it was found that each type of account has a different function, meaning, and representation in digital communication practices. In general, the main account is used as a public representation bound by social norms, the second account as a freer space for personal expression, and the fake account as an anonymity tool for social observation. To clarify the research findings, the following is a summary of the main results:

Table 1. Summary of Account Functions in Virtual Identity

Account Type	Main Characteristics	Social Function
Main Account	Open, curated, formal	Public representation & image management
Second Account	Semi private, expressive, emotional	Catharsis & self expression
Fake Account	Anonymous, minimal interaction, passive	Observation & identity protection

Overall, the research results show that social media users segment their identities according to their communication needs and the social pressures they face. Virtual identity becomes a space of negotiation between the authentic self and social demands in the digital environment.

The discussion begins with the general finding that social media functions as a space for social representation that allows individuals to build identities flexibly. This aligns with Social Representation Theory (Moscovici, 1984), which explains that social meaning is formed through the processes of anchoring and objectification. In this study, the second account is anchored as a safe and comfortable private space, while the fake account is anchored as an anonymity tool. The objectification process is visible through digital symbols such as usernames, profile pictures, language styles, and interaction patterns that differentiate each type of account.

Furthermore, on a more specific level, it was found that the main account is subjected to strong social norm pressure. Users tend to present an identity that is curated, positive, and aligned with audience expectations. These findings are in line with self presentation theory (Goffman, 1959) and Boyd's (2014) view that the audience influences how individuals present themselves. Thus, the main account functions as a "social storefront" that must be maintained to preserve one's self image.

On the other hand, the second account emerges as a form of resistance to these pressures. Informants use this account to express emotions, opinions, and personal sides that cannot be displayed on the main account. This function indicates that the second account serves as a cathartic space as well as a communication strategy to maintain a balance between public and private identities. This finding reinforces Turkle's (2011) concept of multiple selves, suggesting that individuals possess various distinct self representations depending on their social context.

Meanwhile, the fake account possesses different characteristics because it is not used for self-expression, but rather as a tool for social observation. Users leverage anonymity to monitor the activities of others without getting directly involved. Within the SRT framework, the fake account is an instrumental form of social representation, rather than a personal identity. This indicates the existence of power relations in digital communication, where users can observe without being observed.

The findings of this study also reveal four primary social functions of using alternative accounts: the protective function (maintaining privacy), the expressive function (channeling emotions), the relational function (managing the audience), and the evaluative function (assessing oneself and others). These four functions demonstrate that the use of alternative accounts is not merely a technical phenomenon, but a complex communication strategy for navigating social dynamics in digital media.

The novelty of this research lies in integrating the analysis of second accounts and fake accounts within a single framework of Social Representation Theory, which was previously mostly studied separately. This research also highlights that virtual identity is not solely about self expression but is the result of social negotiation involving norms, power, and communication strategies. Therefore, this study makes a significant contribution to digital communication studies, particularly in understanding how Generation Z constructs and manages their identity in the complex and dynamic space of social media.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the construction of virtual identity among social media users, particularly Generation Z, is layered and not singular, which is manifested through the use of main accounts, second accounts, and fake accounts. The main account functions as a curated public representation that adheres to social norms, the second account acts as a more authentic and emotional space for personal expression and the fake account serves as a means of anonymity for social observation. These findings indicate that virtual identity is the result of a dynamic social construction through the processes of anchoring and objectification within the framework of Social Representation Theory and is influenced by an individual's need to manage audiences, privacy, and social pressure in the digital space.

Furthermore, this research asserts that the use of alternative accounts is not merely a technical phenomenon but a complex communication strategy in negotiating the boundaries between public and private spaces, as well as reflecting power relations in digital interactions. The novelty of this research lies in the integration of the analysis of second accounts and fake accounts into a single social representation framework, which enriches digital communication studies, particularly concerning virtual identity.

Regarding recommendations, for academics, this research is expected to serve as a reference for the development of more in depth and comprehensive digital communication studies. For practitioners and social media users, it is important to increase awareness in managing digital identities wisely, especially concerning privacy and communication ethics. Meanwhile, for future researchers, it is recommended to expand the research object to different platforms or utilize other methodological approaches to provide a more diverse perspective on the dynamics of virtual identity in the digital era.

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