




Cyber identity: determining the meaning-making process of university students in terms of the phenomenological perspective

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to investigate the perceptions of university students of the cyber identity they experience on a day-to-day basis, especially following the pandemic lockdown. The research uses a basic interpretive research design with a qualitative, and particularly focuses on the phenomenological perspective. The data was gathered from 155 university students from 18 universities in Turkey and was analysed through the use of the inductive content analysis method. The meaning-creation process of students leads them to view cyber identity as a process which includes the personal characteristics and interpersonal interaction that takes place in any kind of digital platform. The findings from the study are categorized into two main themes: structural conditions and inner conditions. These themes consist of issues related to process, technology, personal factors, and other issues. In this study, cyber identity is considered to refer to a new way of relating to the technological world.

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Introduction

Identity is a concept that has been studied for many years and has been defined according to the various perspectives of many different fields. Although it is not easy to provide an overall definition of identity, due to its multidimensional structure consisting of physical, cognitive, and social elements, the most common method of considering identity is as the answer to the question “Who am I?”. From the perspective of structuralist symbolic interaction, the word “identity” refers to what individuals consider when they think about themselves (Stets & Serpe, 2013). Burke (1997) defined identity as a set of meanings attributed to oneself in a social role or situation that explains what it means to be who one is. Another definition of identity is that it describes the set of meanings attributed to the roles that individuals occupy in the social structure (role identities), the groups they identify with and belong to (group identities), and the unique ways

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they see themselves (personal identities) (Stets & Serpe, 2013). These meanings are the reactions of individuals when they reflect on themselves in terms of a role, social or personal identity (Burke & Stets, 2016). For example, a woman may consider herself to be both a hardworking academic, an innovative teacher, and a prudent mother. These perceptions of being hardworking and innovative are the meanings that help define her employee/work/professional identity, as well as her being prudent when assuming her parental identity. More generally, identity can be viewed as being a structure that helps regulate the individual's place in an interaction, directs behaviour, facilitates the development of social relations, and enables interaction with others (McCall & Simmons, 1978, as cited in Stets & Serpe, 2013).

Gourlay et al. (2021) examined the impact of "moving online" on university staff by focusing on how a range of boundaries – spatial, temporal, material, digital, professional, personal, and emotional – are negotiated in a setting where conventional boundaries have been profoundly disrupted. They found that "although the home office allowed the participant to cross the boundary from home to work effectively, to do so, she had to disrupt other boundaries in her domestic space." An example of this disruption is enjoyment and work devices being used interchangeably, such as the TV being used as a computer monitor. Gourlay et al. also found that the sense of the temporal boundary (working hours) used to separate home and work became confused. Related to this concept, teachers are asked how do the processes of identity generation and authentication operate in a social media presence which includes students, colleagues, administrators, social friends, relatives, partners, and children? Namely which role/personal/social identity does the individual demonstrate, highlight, or confirm through his/her social media account? Furthermore, how does a teacher behave during the synchronous online learning process, and are there any differences between the experiences of online and face-to-face teaching? A final consideration is if role identities in daily life can be directly digitalized or not, or if there is now a need to define another form of identity.

Cyber identity refers to the whole set of meanings that are used to present our existence to others in the digital world, and that are used to define who we are (Sancar, 2022). In short, cyber identity can be described as being a digitally mediated identity (Davis, 2016). We reflect our own nature in almost every digitally mediated environment. This reflection is primarily to ourselves, but we also reflect the others with whom we interact. It can also be seen that digitally mediated environments represent the existence of a new situation, and this is one which certainly does not include real-world interpersonal, temporal, and spatial clarity. This study considers cyber identity as being a new concept that takes all of this change and transformation into account by emphasizing the importance of investigating how this concept is understood by others.

A search in April 2022 for the term “cyber identity” within the article title, abstract and keyword fields of a commonly used database located only forty-one articles, book chapters, and conference papers. The main focus of these citations was generally on cyber identity being an avatar on any kind of digital platform. In the earliest article found, the term “cyber identity” was used to describe the behaviour of users on the “Euroland platform” through an avatar. The article suggested that an interactive situation plays a decisive role in establishing users’ identities by employing strategic “positioning” (Talamo & Ligorio, 2001). Similarly, the aim of Nagy and Koles (2014) was to define the virtual identity framework for virtual world inhabitants. It is noteworthy that the focus of their work was on how the identities of the inhabitants of this virtual world, and the avatars created by users in the real world, are formed. Nagy and Koles found that the avatars, the inhabitants of the virtual world, are considered to be a means of reflecting the personal fantasies and wishes of living users. Although the main focus of the articles was on an avatar being an actor, some of the researchers did not restrict identity to one particular kind of virtual or digital platform (e.g., Ebben & Murphy, 2022; Le et al., 2022).

Generally speaking, people nowadays have a presence on digital platforms in areas such as socializing, education, job-related issues, banking and shopping. This presence takes the form of both avatars and themselves. For example, a recent article focuses on the professional identities of professors on the Zoom platform. It is predicted that as faculties become more familiar with online virtual instruction, the experiences of the virtual lecturer and the analogue teaching self will become inseparable (Ebben & Murphy, 2022). Another recent research project attempts to determine whether online and offline identities are different (Qin & Lowe, 2021). It was found that when participants compare two types of identities, they actually consider three online aspects: self-expression /self-exposure, communication, and recreation. As it is felt that the concept of cyber identity has not been adequately investigated by currently utilized research questions, this research aims to more accurately reveal the meaning-making processes of senior and junior university students. The main research questions of

this study are below:

- (1) How aware are the participants of the concept of cyber identity?
- (2) What are the participants’ perceptions of reality regarding the concept of cyber identity?
- (3) With which platforms do the participants associate the concept of cyber identity?
- (4) How do the participants construct meaning regarding the concept of cyber identity?

Methodology

Merriam (2009) suggests that if a researcher aims to discover, sense, and understand the perspectives of research participants, it would provide a major change in the lives of others. In this regard, and especially in terms of the phenomenological perspective, basic interpretive research design is employed as a qualitative measure to gather the perceptions of participants on the concept of cyber identity. Researchers focus on phenomena as defined by individuals (the object of research) (Creswell, 2007), and one of the important concepts in phenomenology is that the thing itself (nomen) expresses the individual and reducible complexity, while the term “phenomenon” is used to express the experience of things by individuals (Ferguson, 2003). In this regard, the main focus of research is to determine meaning by examining personal experiences (Flathery, 2009).

Participants

Data was obtained from 155 students from different universities in Turkey. In order to determine the meaning-making process of the participants in the research, it was a requirement that the individuals involved in the process should have experience with the phenomenon in question (Merriam, 2009). Based on the research phenomenon, school counsellor candidates (SCCs), who provide professional guidance for teachers, students, and parents, were invited to participate in the research. All universities in Turkey with Guidance and Psychological Counselling Departments were informed of the process by corporate email, with the emails being shared in institutional WhatsApp groups, as well as the mail groups of the students, through the lecturers. A mix of foundation and state universities from different parts of Turkey was selected to better represent the national student population. Although the nature of qualitative research does not require such broad representation, the diversity of the participants does increase diversity in the research data. It is seen that 85% of the SCCs are female and 15% are male, with 42% of the SCCs being 3rd-grade students and 58% 4th-grade students. A breakdown of the universities attended by the participants is provided below (Table 1).

It is seen in Table 1 that the participants are from 18 different universities in Turkey, only two of which are private. The majority of the participants are studying at Kirsehir Ahi Evran, Necmettin Erbakan, Ankara, Biruni, Amasya, and Erciyes universities.

Data collection and analysis

An online interview form was created to obtain demographic information. The form included questions, such as “What do you think cyber identity is?”, that aim to learn the perceptions of participants of the concept of cyber identity.

Table 1. Universities attended by participants.

University	N	F
Kirsehir Ahi Evran University	30	19.35
Necmettin Erbakan University	26	16.77
Ankara University	16	10.32
Biruni University	15	9.68
Amasya University	12	7.74
Erciyes University	10	6.45
Aksaray University	8	5.16
Akdeniz University	7	4.52
Hacettepe University	7	4.52
Trakya University	6	3.87
Ordu University	5	3.23
Mugla Sitki Kocman University	4	2.58
Kastamonu University	3	1.94
Gaziantep University	2	1.29
Anadolu University	1	0.65
Bursa Uludag University	1	0.65
Hasan Kalyoncu University	1	0.65
Mehmet Akif Ersoy University	1	0.65
Total	155	100.00

After the data collection process was completed, the data was analysed by the inductive content analysis method. The phrases “Introduce yourself properly, use consciously.” (ID-20) were incorporated throughout as the unit of analysis employed. For example, while the first part was coded as being related to clarity, the second part was coded in terms of the psychologic characteristics in this quotation. This process was named the open coding procedure. The codes associated with each other were then accumulated to create sub-categories and categories. During the open coding process, all subcategories, including those related to clarity, security, reality, and crime, were collectively labelled process related categories. After this coding process, the data was clearly reported through the use of tables and figures.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the research is an integral aspect of the analysis procedure, including the preparation, planning, and production of output. Trustworthiness is also a central consideration in the production of adequate and well-saturated data. (Elo et al., 2014). The reliability of research refers to the extent to which research findings can be repeated and similar results obtained. Due to the nature of the qualitative research, reliability is assessed in terms of the consistency of results with the data collected. The concept of consistency relates to whether or not the results are consistent with the collected data, rather than if similar findings are reached when the research is repeated (Merriam, 2009). Detailed descriptions and direct quotations can be used to ensure consistency in this research. In order to ensure trustworthiness throughout the entire process of the research, from the choice of research participants to the gathering of data, and from the analysis of the data to the reporting of the

research results, clear, precise, detailed, and thick descriptions were employed. The reliability and transferability of the research were further supported through the use of direct quotations in each category.

Results

The findings presented in this chapter are organised according to the research questions

The cyber identity awareness

SSCs are familiar with the concept of cyber identity (See Table 2). When the distribution of SCCs based on the groups is evaluated, the majority of SCCs claim that they are able to explain the concept of cyber identity. Moreover, the second populous group declare that they are fully aware of the value of cyber identity.

While many SSCs have only heard of cyber identity, there remains a significant number who are completely unaware of it. This is of concern as SSCs are responsible in Turkey for raising awareness of and explaining the concept. With this in mind, it is of particular note that only five SSCs are comfortable explaining the concept of cyber identity to others.

The reality perceptions of cyber identity

When SSCs' answers are examined based on how they perceive the actual nature of cyber identity, it is seen that the majority consider cyber identity to be real. While it is true that some SSCs do assume that cyber identity doesn't actually exist, there are only a few who seem to be hesitant about admitting the existence of this concept (See Table 3).

When the comments made by SSCs on cyber identity are examined, it can be seen why SSCs consider cyber identity to be real. For example, one comment stated that "the totality of personal characteristics that a person presents in the cyber network represents the form of personality presented in cyberspace." (ID-42) and "Identities of people in the virtual environment that greatly affect their behaviour, attitude, feelings and thoughts towards other people." (ID-53). One another comment made by SSCs on this issue was "the incarnation of an

Table 2. Awareness of participants.

Categories	Sub-Categories	N	F
Awareness of the concept of cyber identity	I've just heard of the concept	38	25.00
	I do not know what the concept is	23	15.13
	I can explain the concept	46	30.26
	I am aware of the day-to-day value of the concept	40	26.32
	I have sufficient knowledge to be able to explain it to others	5	3.29
Total		155	100.00

Table 3. Participants opinions on the actual existence of cyber identity.

Categories	Sub-Categories	N	F
The existence of cyber identity	Real	95	61.29
	Unreal	37	23.87
	Both Real and Unreal	12	7.74
	Unspecified/Unrelated	11	7.10
Total		155	100.00

artificial identity is created by itself in the digital environment, and so not as it is created in reality". (ID-25). Another comment is "Cyber identity is the artificial identity of individuals on digital platforms where they try to appear as someone they are not." (ID-127). These could aid in an understanding of SSCs' belief in the existence of cyber-identity, particularly the category of the unreal. Although it was not common, SSCs also expressed cyber identity as being both real and unreal. An example comment is: "it is our identity that is compatible with or completely different from the true identity that we create on digital platforms." (ID-26).

Digital platforms associated with cyber identity

According to Table 4, most of the SSCs believe that cyber identity can be related to all forms of digital platforms, such as bank accounts, governmental apps, social networks, blocks, wikis, and YouTube. One comment suggested that "it is the identity that is the reflection of oneself and character in the virtual world, social media, online games, forums, etc." (ID-3), while another said, "I think it is a concept that describes the image that an individual draws in all kinds of social media applications and on all online platforms." (ID-118). These statements clearly demonstrate the opinion of the concept existing on all kinds of digital platform. It was also seen that SSCs rarely believed that cyber identity is only related to social networks. One comment that exemplifies this view is "I can define the concept as being the identities that people use on social media." (ID-30).

The meaning-making process of cyber identity

From a qualitative perspective, the main focus is to fully appreciate the participants' meaning-making process on the phenomenon of research so that

Table 4. Platforms cited by participants when defining cyber identity.

Categories	Sub-Categories	N	F
Associated platforms	Any Kind of Digital Platform	125	80.65
	Only Social Network	12	8.39
	Unspecified/Unrelated	11	7.10
	Undetermined	6	3.87
Total		155	100.00

collaborative meaning could be established. It is valuable to understand what the extremely modern concept of cyber identity is, and what features are attributed to it. In [Table 5](#), the wide range of idiomatic expressions used to describe the concept of cyber identity can be seen.

When SSCs defined what cyber identity was and exemplified its essential features in two main themes, namely structural and inner conditions, they commonly mentioned process-related (35%), technology-related (34%), personal-related (25%), and the others related (2%) issues. Process-related category consists of security, reality, crime, and clarity-related issues. This means that SSCs focused on designing/creating id, cyberbullying, stealing personal data, and being transparent/clear. One comment states that “I think it is a kind of identity that determines that every transaction we perform on the internet belongs to us.” (ID-4). This quotation provides evidence that the main focus of SSCs was on security-related issues. A further comment relates to a focus on both security and realty-related issues: “they are artificial digital identities that people put forward for different purposes or to hide their original identities. It is the creation of identity by members of the digital environment using information that does not match their identities in the real environment.” (ID-27). It should be underlined that cyber, as a word, is directly associated with crime for many SSCs.

The second most common category is related to technological issues. As previously mentioned, it can be seen that meanings are created through social media or technology itself. “Our identity on the internet.” (ID-29), “Our online identity.” (ID-56), and “Identity created through technology.” are examples of relevant responses for this category.

The third common category is of personal related issues, or “the totality of personal characteristics that a person presents in the cyber network; the form of personality presented in cyberspace.” (ID-42). In this quotation, the SSC clearly explained what she personally considers cyber identity to be, i.e., issues of

Table 5. The idiomatic expressions used by participants to describe the concept of cyber identity.

Theme	Categories	Sub-Categories	N	F
Structural Conditions	Related to Process	Security related	26	14.61
		Reality related	23	12.92
		Crime related	10	5.62
		Clarity related	4	2.25
	Related to Technology	Digital platforms related	61	34.27
	Related to Other Users of a Digital Platform	Confirmability related	2	1.12
Inner Conditions	Personally Related	Perceptions of others	2	1.12
		Demographic characteristics	14	7.87
		Desired characteristics	13	7.30
		Psychological characteristics	12	6.74
		Related to knowledge and ability	4	2.25
	Awareness related	1	0.56	
	Unspecified		6	3.37
	Total		178	100.00

demographic, desired, and psychologic characteristics, knowledge, and ability, as well as awareness-related issues (See [Table 5](#)). One of the SSCs in the study used the term “username” to clarify the essential feature of cyber identity, while another said that “All information about the person is available, such as age, occupation, place of residence etc.” (ID-138). It may therefore be helpful to point out that demographic characteristics are valuable in explaining the concept of cyber identity.

It was revealed in the definition of sub-categories that desired and psychologic characteristics were interrelated. It was pointed out by some of the SSCs that if people are dissatisfied or uncomfortable with their actual individual character then they can easily create a new and desired identity on social platforms. Some comments were: “For me, it stands for a reflection of the identities that people want to have in their social life, but cannot achieve for whatever reason.” (ID-30), and “The effort to create a new identity stemming from insecurity, anxiety, hidden needs and self-dissatisfaction.” (ID-102).

The last and rarely mentioned category is related to other users of a digital platform (See [Table 5](#)). This category consists of two sub-categories which include confirmability related issues and perceptions of others, or as described by one of the SCCs “The perceived appearances of individuals in virtual environments.” (ID-1)

Discussions and conclusions

This research aims to reveal how, and in what way, university students known as SSCs attribute meaning to cyber identity as a concept experienced on a daily basis, especially after the pandemic. Based on the findings of research conducted amongst 155 SSCs, which deals with cyber identity from the perspective of phenomenological research, it can be inferred that the concept of cyber identity can be attributed to a process that includes personal characteristics and interpersonal interaction on any kind of digital platform.

Both the earliest and current inquiries on the identity theory attempt to answer two main questions. The first issue focuses on the relationship between identities and the social structure that influences one’s commitment to and the importance of identities. What structural conditions increase the commitment and importance of identities, and what makes more than one identity active at a given time? This issue of social structures and commitment needs to be addressed explicitly to determine the concept of cyber identity. The second set of questions is about the inner workings of identities: how do multiple identities work in the general system of perceptual control, do identities control each other, do they work independently, and under what conditions does one or more of them work? (Stryker & Stryker, 2016). In order to address this concern, two main themes, namely structural and inner conditions, are used by this research to determine how SSCs define cyber identity. The structural conditions

are related to process (security, reality, crime, and clarity), technology, and the others, with the latter sub-category relating to confirmability issues and perceptions of the others. SSCs emphasize the approval and perceptions by others when defining the concept of cyber identity. Similarly, Le et al. (2022) found that teachers tend to be invisible in interaction with social networks used for professional learning, and act according to the expectations of their society. They underlined that teachers are greatly influenced by their own culture as social network users. Work performed by Eichelberger and Leong (2019) finds that lecturers are affected by beliefs regarding online students during the online instruction process.

The inner conditions are related to the categories of demographic, desired, psychological characteristics, knowledge, ability, and awareness. For example, in the context of online learning, research shows that personal characteristics should be considered in order to effectively design and implement the online learning process (Firat & Bozkurt, 2020). According to Diao and Hedberg (2020), the learning style of many now involves the use of numerous tools, devices, apps, and networks for communication. These technologies have altered many in-class environments and how teachers implement teaching activities in their lessons. It is obvious that new forms of communication have created new behavioural outputs. It is found that when the cyber identity is defined by SCCs, it is most commonly underlined that demographic, desired, and psychological characteristics mediate responses to any kind of digital platform.

In their account of how parents react and cope with “the school at home” process, Price et al. (2021) emphasise that this process led to identity confusion in the cyber context. Boyd (2010) called this confusion a “collapse of context” to refer to the collapse of the context/situation of any interaction during the expansion of networks established with other individuals. While this collapse does not actually denote destruction, it does demonstrate that the established network blurs the boundaries with other users/individuals, and that more than one situation is being simultaneously intertwined. It also points to the existence of a new phenomenon between conditions (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014). Another research finding considered as vivid examples of the expression “collapse of context” show that especially female academics attempt to simultaneously balance their work and home spaces or find a way that they can be integrated. However, it has been determined that academics working under these conditions are likely to feel that they are being torn apart (Rode et al., 2022). To address this concern, An and Oliver (2021) suggested that a philosophical perspective could enhance the understanding between human-technology and human-education relations. An and Oliver (2021) stress that technological conditions should be “handy”, so that they are freely available in the service of the educational requirements of individuals. They also point out that technology is an integral part of what “being in the world” means and suggest that technological conditions should be considered in terms of what it means to be

a human in contemporary society. Similarly, it is appreciated in this study that cyber identity is related to a new way of existing in the technological world. Therefore, it is suggested that the findings of this research be taken into account in not only educational decision-making processes, but also in other areas, including politics.

Limitations and recommendations

This study has a few limitations. Initially, although the study is based on identity theory, while examining the new and less familiar concept of cyber identity, it is obviously seen that it did not develop an in-depth understanding of the identity theory. Moreover, since it is conducted with qualitative perspective, the context of the study is crucial. Therefore, it considers that participants of this study were limited to university students called SCCs. Secondly, this study aimed to examine the meaning-making process of the SSCs. However, indicators of the concept were gathered only from the online interview form. To obtain more dedicated results, the data should be supported with data triangulations such as interviews, observations and diaries which would allow focus more on daily experiences. Since this study aims to reveal the situation at the descriptive level, dissemination of research with the different participants can contribute to both the literature and practice.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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