



Fragmented Selves: Identity, Consciousness and Reality in the Digital Age

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Abstract

In the digital age, the concept of identity has evolved in ways that challenge long-held philosophical assumptions about the self. No longer has fixed or continuous, identity become fragmented, shaped by multiple digital personas that people craft in response to the ever-expanding digital universe. Now, there is no sense of a fixed self that remains constant throughout space and time. Self and identity can be seen as a Heraclitean flux always in a state of becoming and never for a moment being in a state of being. The boundaries between the real and the virtual have blurred, and hyperreal experiences now often seem more significant than actual events. This review delves into the complex relationship between selfhood and digital representation, exploring how traditional theories like Baudrillard's hyperreality and Buddhist notions of impermanence help explain this transformation. It examines the implications of digital simulations, especially in the context of digital immortality, which raises profound questions about consciousness, existence, and the essence of being. In a world where avatars, social media profiles, and virtual realities dominate, self-navigates an uncertain terrain between reality and simulation. This study is an exploration of the evolving nature of identity, consciousness, and human experience in the age of digital fragmentation, with a focus on the philosophical and psychological dimensions of selfhood in the modern, digitized world.

Keywords: Identity; Consciousness; Hyperreality; Digital Immortality; Mind-Body Dualism; Manipulation

Introduction

We live in an age where digital technology not only permeates everyday life but also fundamentally alters how we perceive ourselves and others. The rapid advancement of social media, virtual worlds, and artificial intelligence has transformed the notion of identity from a relatively stable construct into one that is fragmented, fluid, and transient. In this context, individuals no longer present a single, unified self; rather, they curate multiple, often conflicting digital personas across various platforms. This portrayal of multiple identities through various social networking sites has created the authentic-inauthentic dichotomy. The dichotomy

creates most of the relationship issues and psychological misunderstandings in our society because when we portray our inauthentic and made-up digital identities and selves in front of public we are only trying to hide our true identity through the mask of the digital identity. We are using the digital models of technology to hide our real and authentic selves from the society because a fear has developed in today's culture that if we expose ourselves fully in front of the public without the mask of our created and manipulated, then somehow our flaws and weaknesses will be exposed, which will be a psychological threat to the sense of our ego or the "I". The ego or the "I" always wants some sort of stability and uncertainty and to create that stability and to



avoid facing the threat of uncertainty, the “I”, “the ego”, or the small self creates fake personas, fake identities considering them to be stable, but the small self doesn’t know that these identities of ours are just like an ever-changing flux of thoughts, emotions, feelings and perceptions which don’t even stay constant for even one moment as was upheld by the Buddhist conception of Kshanikvada or momentariness. When we finally grasp this reality of momentariness at the fundamental, insightful and intuitive level, then we finally let go of the constant effort to hold on to the fixed meanings of norms, rituals and construct which hinders our life from being a free flow of dynamic expression ever metamorphosing into ever new vibrant colours and species of experiences, perceptions, emotions, feelings and memories. Historically, the self was viewed through a lens of continuity grounded in memory, physical presence, and social interaction [1]. The traditional self was seen as something relatively permanent and consistent as was with the case of philosophies such as Nyaya-Vaisesika, Advaita Vedanta, Jainism, and many others, deeply tied to both personal and collective experiences. However, the concept of no-self in Buddhist philosophy, the digital age, with its endless opportunities for self-representation, challenges this conception. Social media profiles, digital avatars, and virtual realities have created spaces where the self is continually curated, edited, and reconstructed [2-4]. The rise of hyperreality, as articulated by Baudrillard [5], suggests that the distinction between reality and simulation is becoming increasingly obscure [3]. In fact, our digital lives often seem more ‘real’ than our physical ones, raising important philosophical questions about what it means to be authentic and what constitutes the self in this era. In his Book *Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the problems of philosophy*, David Chalmers mentions about the concept of simulation realism or virtual realism in which he tries to suggest that even if take that we are in a Simulation [4], most of our ordinary beliefs are true, there really are cats, persons, chairs, cars and ordinary objects around us. Chalmers says that the simulation or virtual world contains virtual objects, but despite these facts, these virtual objects are real objects made of bits [2]. This opinion article explores these shifts in identity by examining key philosophical theories, including Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality, mind-body dualism and Buddhist notions of impermanence. By investigating the intersections between digital experiences and traditional understandings of the self, this opinion article seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of how identity is being reshaped in the digital age [3,5,6].

The Fragmentation of Identity

With the growing influence of digital technologies, identity has become more fragmented than ever before. In the past, one’s identity was relatively stable, formed through face-to-face interactions, personal relationships,

and lived experiences. In contrast, today’s digital landscape encourages individuals to present idealized versions of themselves online, often across multiple platforms, each with its own set of norms and expectations [7]. This leads to the creation of multiple selves, each tailored to a particular context, audience, or platform. When we try to tailor and match our identities to the social personas and environment, we lose sense of our own unique way of expressing things and we lose our creativity, so this constant effort to fit ourselves into the society by constantly changing and manipulating our authentic and natural way of being amounts to a collective brainwashing where individual thought is diminished slowly and slowly, and only rotten and old ideas of community are being inculcated forcefully into an individual from the moment he or she is born, that’s why when people are on their deathbed, the regret they have is that they couldn’t show their real selves to the people because they were constantly afraid of being judged, laughed at and rejected. This is not to say that we should not try to adjust our identities to the situation and the environment, but with the rise of digital technologies people have taken this habit of manipulating their real, authentic and genuine identities and personas to an extreme limit and that’s why nowadays we see a lot of misunderstanding between political leaders of different parties, wars happening, just due to the fact that everyone is trying their best to confirm to a certain fixed ideology or viewpoint without questioning it and accepting and portraying any identity just to gain the fame and attention. This fragmentation of identity leads to a lot of problems at the level of individual, society, the world and the entire species of existence at large because as everything is connected deeply, so any sense of fragmentary activity anywhere in this globe, will have an after-effect at some other places. The phenomenon of fragmented identity is reminiscent of existentialist philosophy, particularly the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, who argued that identity is not a fixed essence but a project of becoming [8]. Sartre’s view aligns with the digital self, which is never fully realized but is instead constantly being constructed and reconstructed in response to the demands of the online world [8]. Each social media platform, from Facebook to Instagram to LinkedIn, requires a different performance of self, resulting in a fragmented, multifaceted identity that may bear little resemblance to the ‘real’ person behind the screen [7]. In this context, the self becomes not a singular, unified entity, but an amalgamation of various online personas, each designed to fit the expectations of different digital environments. This raises significant questions about authenticity and the nature of identity in the digital age [9]. Is the person we present online an accurate reflection of who we are, or is it merely a performance, a carefully curated image designed to satisfy the demands of a particular platform or audience? The digital self is not limited to social media. In virtual worlds and online games, individuals can create entirely new identities, embodying avatars that may bear no

physical or psychological resemblance to their creators [10]. These digital selves can experience a form of life independent of their creators, leading to the possibility of 'living' multiple lives simultaneously in different digital realms [10]. This multiplicity of selves further fragments our sense of identity, making it difficult to discern where the 'real' self ends and the digital self begins. Buddhist philosophy, particularly the concept of anatta (non-self), offers a valuable framework for understanding this phenomenon [6]. According to Buddhist teachings, the self is not a fixed, permanent entity but rather an ever-changing collection of thoughts, emotions, and experiences [11]. In this sense, the fragmented nature of the digital self-aligns with the Buddhist view that identity is fluid and transient, constantly shifting in response to external circumstances [6]. This perspective challenges the Western notion of the self as a stable, enduring essence and instead presents identity as something that is constantly in flux [12].

Hyperreality: The Collapse of the Real and the Simulated

Baudrillard's J concept of hyperreality is crucial for understanding how digital identities and experiences have come to dominate our perception of reality [3]. Hyperreality refers to a state in which the boundary between reality and simulation becomes blurred, to the point where simulations are perceived as more 'real' than the reality they represent [3]. In today's digital world, hyperreality is ubiquitous, from social media to virtual realities to the metaverse [13]. Consider the example of social media influencers, whose lives are often presented as perfect, glamorous, and unattainable. These digital personas, carefully curated and filtered, become more 'real' to their followers than the actual lives they lead offline [14]. The hyperreal world of social media creates an illusion of reality that is far removed from the messy, imperfect nature of actual human existence. Yet, for many, this hyperreal world is more compelling, more desirable, and ultimately more meaningful than the real world [15]. As we are grossed into the lives and the trend followed by our celebrities today on social media and all the digital sites, we think that, that is actually what happens in reality in their lives. An Ad of a perfume done by our favourite sportsperson makes us to believe that there is something really unique and special about that perfume, but it may be the case that your favourite sportsperson of yours doesn't even touch that perfume, using it is a far off business and further it can also be hypothesized that though the sportsperson looks very happy in the Ad, he may be doing the Ad just to get over the debt he or she is having recently, and he is not actually happy and he has been trained by the Ad production to give the brightest smile to the audience in the Ad to show how happy he is, but he only knows how much happy he is from the inside. These cases are not to generalize that every famous person or a star is doing like this, but it's just my opinion given to support

the theory of hyper-reality that how people of today's times are fooled by the constant bombardment of virtual reality shows, Ads and so on, leading them into a sort of ignorance which doesn't let their intellect to distinguish between what is real and unreal. In Indian Philosophy, a pupil needs to possess the ability to differentiate between what is real and what is unreal? (nitya-anitya vastuviveka) before he can join under a guru to begin his studies. Common people like us should also try to develop this quality to clear our mind from the dust of inauthentic portayals of feelings, emotions and manipulations in this age of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Digitality. In virtual environments, such as video games or virtual reality simulations, the line between the real and the simulated becomes even more difficult to discern [16]. Players may spend hours immersed in a digital world, forming relationships, completing tasks, and even experiencing emotions that feel as real as those in the physical world [17]. For some, these digital experiences become more significant than their interactions in the real world, leading to a form of digital escapism that blurs the boundaries between reality and simulation [17]. Baudrillard's J hyperreality suggests that in the digital age, the simulated world has become more 'real' than the physical world. As our lives become increasingly mediated by digital technologies, the distinction between reality and simulation becomes less clear [18]. This raises profound philosophical questions about the nature of reality, authenticity, and existence [19]. If our digital experiences are more meaningful to us than our physical ones, does that mean that the digital world is more 'real' than the physical world? Or are we simply losing touch with reality, as Baudrillard suggests, in favour of a world of simulations [3]?

Mind-Body Dualism and the Problem of Digital Immortality

The rise of digital avatars and the possibility of digital immortality challenge the traditional philosophical debate surrounding mind-body dualism [5]. Mind-body dualism, most famously articulated by Rene' Descartes, posits a clear separation between the mind (or soul) and the body [20]. According to this view, the mind is an immaterial, thinking substance, while the body is a physical, extended substance [5]. In the digital age, however, the distinction between mind and body becomes more difficult to maintain [21]. Digital avatars, for example, allow individuals to 'exist' in a virtual world, separate from their physical bodies. These digital selves can persist even after the death of the physical body, raising the possibility of digital immortality [22]. If a person's thoughts, memories, and personality can be uploaded into a digital medium, does that mean that their consciousness can continue to exist independently of their body [22]? If a person's data of the mind can be tele transported into machine or a robot, then the clear line of distinction which was being drawn between the mind as a

mental, non-extended and something which was beyond spatio-temporal order can be challenged. This question raises profound ethical and philosophical concerns about the nature of consciousness and identity [23]. Can a digital avatar truly possess consciousness, or is it merely a simulation of the person it represents [24]? Does the ability to replicate a person's memories and personality in digital form mean that their consciousness has been preserved, or is something fundamental lost in the process [24]? These questions challenge the traditional dualist view of the mind as something that exists independently of the body, suggesting that consciousness may be more closely tied to the physical world than previously thought [20]. The possibility of digital immortality also raises questions about the nature of identity [25]. If a person's digital self continues to exist after their physical death, is that digital self still the same person? Or is it merely a copy, a simulation of the original person [26]? This leads to a deeper inquiry into the nature of selfhood and whether identity can be preserved in digital form [26]. As we move further into the digital age, these questions will become increasingly relevant, challenging our assumptions about what it means to be human and what it means to exist [27]. If we can just exist in a digital way in the form of data, does that mean that we exist, or do we not exist or do we exist and not exist in a state of indeterminacy or uncertainty because just a form of data cannot totally be called as having a sense of existence, until and unless it has some sort of consciousness. This raises further questions such as can Data be Conscious? If a form of Data is conscious, then does it mean that it exists? Is Consciousness a necessary or a sufficient condition for existence? If it is just a sufficient condition, then it is possible for existence to be there even without consciousness? What does it mean for a Data to exist or not exist, or to express itself and not to express itself? Is Data God? Is God the only form of "Meta-Data" which is creating the Data of the world which we can as "Data"? If there is such a thing as "Meta-Data", then what is the relationship between Data and Meta-Data? These are some of the questions which spontaneously came into my mind with regard to digital data and digital immortality. These questions are not directly linked to any academic and conceptual way of enquiry, but can be just seen as my inner urges of quest and being in awe flowing in the form of words in the form of these questions. These questions can open new dimensions and field of research in this ever-evolving and trending field of Artificial Intelligence.

Buddhist Philosophy and the Impermanence of the Digital Self

Buddhist philosophy offers a unique perspective on the fragmentation of identity in the digital age [6]. According to the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* (non-self), the self is not a fixed, permanent entity but rather a constantly changing

collection of thoughts, emotions, and experiences [28]. In this sense, identity is fluid and impermanent, shaped by the ever-changing conditions of existence [6]. This view of self-aligns with the fragmented, fluid nature of digital identity [29]. Just as the self is not a fixed entity in Buddhist thought, the digital self is also not a singular, unified entity. Instead, it is an ever-changing collection of digital personas, each tailored to a particular context or platform [30]. This fragmented nature of the digital self reflects the Buddhist view that identity is fluid and transient, constantly shifting in response to external circumstances [6]. Buddhism also raises important questions about the nature of reality in the digital age [31]. If the self is not a fixed, permanent entity, then what does it mean to be 'real' in a world where digital simulations often feel more meaningful than physical experiences [31]? Buddhist philosophy suggests that the distinction between reality and simulation may not be as important as we think. Instead, both the real and the simulated are empty of inherent existence, constantly changing and dependent on external factors [6]. According to the Buddhist conception of Emptiness or *sunyata*, even this so called "real" world of ours is in fact empty of inherent existence, viewpoints, perspectives and solid realities. There is no sense of a solid or a fixed reality of space and time existing apart from the construction of the "false self" which is also a construct of this inherent existence. So according to Buddhism this world of ours and the so called "virtual" world both are the same because in both there is no existence of a fundamental, independent and real essence on which the objects are relying on and depending upon. All objects are just the false constructions and reifications of the intellect and are not there in the external world. Even the distinction between the external world and the internal world is also a conceptual construct and finally "Emptiness is also empty of itself". Emptiness is also a construct of the intellect because it is also a concept written in a book. So, finally we are left we "everything as it is, that's all and nothing else and even to say this is to say too much, that's why Silence was the highest teaching for the buddha". A quantum physicist also said that if you understand quantum mechanics, then you don't understand quantum mechanics. I think here they are talking about how in certain sense the real understanding or absolute knowledge of anything like fragmented selves and Digital AI will not be found out in the concepts itself, but it will arise as an intuitive realization on the culmination and the end point of all understanding. As Wittgenstein said in his *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* "My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them as steps to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright" [2].

Conclusion

The digital age has fundamentally transformed the nature of identity, consciousness, and reality. In a world where digital personas, virtual realities, and hyperreal experiences dominate, the self is no longer a singular, unified entity but a fragmented, fluid construct that exists in multiple forms across various platforms. Philosophical theories such as Baudrillard's hyperreality mind-body dualism and Buddhist notions of impermanence offer valuable insights into these transformations, helping us to understand the complex and evolving nature of selfhood in the digital age. As we continue to navigate the digital world, it is important to reflect on the implications of these changes for our understanding of identity and consciousness. The rise of digital avatars, the possibility of digital immortality and the blurring of boundaries between reality and simulation raise profound philosophical and ethical questions about what it means to be human in the age of digital fragmentation. Ultimately, the digital age challenges us to rethink our assumptions about the self, encouraging us to embrace a more fluid, fragmented, and impermanent understanding of identity and existence. This fluid way of looking at things teaches us to not hold on to the fixed perceptions and viewpoints of things which will only further enmesh us in the webs of the conceptual structures, but rather to view existence as a flux, where there are no hierarchical fixed points of view, ways of looking at reality. This unfixedness and uncertainty in this age of age can ignite a sense of questioning which can lead to existential crises in us. But this crisis is hard to face at the start, because questioning makes us to challenge our so-called deep rooted, fixed and static beliefs through which we have viewed the world from the start. But, when we question these static beliefs sincerely, then our crisis of meaning turns into an opportunity of exploration of new ideas and values.

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