



THE PROBLEMATIC OF CULTURAL IDENTITY BETWEEN THE REAL AND THE VIRTUAL: TOWARDS A SOCIO-CULTURAL APPROACH

Meklati Fatma Zohra¹, Saidi Louiza², Boudani Safia³

¹University of Chahid Cheikh Larbi Tebessi – Tebessa (Algeria), Email:

Maklati.fatma@univ-tebessa.dz

²Hassiba Ben Bouali University – Chlef (Algeria), Email: l.saidi@univ-chlef.dz

³Hassiba Ben Bouali University – Chlef (Algeria), Email: s.boudani@univ-chlef.dz

Abstract

Through a conceptual process driven by modern technologies (the Internet, globalization, media, digitization, artificial intelligence, etc.), a new culture emerges, one that often differs from the original (traditional) culture. This traditional culture is reflected in various aspects of social life such as language, religion, marriage, beliefs, and clothing. Modern cultures, in their diverse forms, exert significant influence on the original (traditional) culture. Since values constitute one of the most essential components of culture, being embodied in customs, traditions, and norms, they are ultimately what shape a society's identity. Identity, therefore, is fundamentally cultural, with the cultural dimension representing the highest level through which identity is expressed. This raises a central question: What is the status of cultural identity within the tension between the real and the virtual?

Keywords: identity, cultural identity, real (local) society, virtual society, etc.

Received: 18 Aug 2025

Accepted: 29 Sep 2025

Published: 11 Oct 2025

Problem Statement

The rapid technological transformations of recent decades have increasingly shaped and regulated human behaviour, whether at the individual or collective level, through communication processes that take place within virtual spaces originating from the proliferation of technological platforms (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Viber, etc.). This becomes evident in the reconfiguration of prevailing values, symbols, meanings, and other cultural markers. At the heart of this process lies the substance of identity, which can only be constituted through interaction with the *Other*, thereby producing the very meaning of identity.

This gives rise to the following question: Does the variation in defining cultural identity stem primarily from the differences inherent within real societies, or from those emerging within virtual societies?

First: Concepts Related to Cultural Identity:

A number of concepts are closely linked to cultural identity within both local (traditional) societies and virtual societies. These concepts exert a direct or indirect influence on the construction of identity in general and cultural identity in particular. They include: society, group, identity, local community, virtual community, and virtual culture.

1. Society

The concept of society is regarded as one of the most significant notions in sociological thought. It refers to a group of people who live within a defined space and are subject to a common system of political authority, and who are consciously aware of possessing an identity that distinguishes them from

surrounding groups. Some societies, such as hunting and gathering communities, are extremely small, numbering only a few dozen individuals. Other societies, however, are exceptionally large, comprising millions of people. Modern China, for example, has a population exceeding one billion inhabitants (Giddens, 2005, p. 761).

As society constitutes an integrated system, groups are considered components within it, embedded subdivisions consisting of individuals who form part of the larger whole. This raises the question: What do we mean by “group”?

2. Group

A social group refers to a collection of individuals who interact with one another in regular and structured ways. Groups may vary considerably in size, ranging from very small units to large organisations or entire communities. Regardless of their scale, the defining characteristic of a group is the awareness among its members of a shared identity.

We spend most of our lives engaged in relationships with social groups, and in modern societies, most individuals belong to a wide variety of different groups (Giddens, same reference, p. 747).

Given that the foundation of any group lies in its members’ awareness of a shared identity, the question then arises: What does identity mean in terms of its reference framework?

3. Identity

In the social sciences, identity refers to the capacity of a human group to preserve the continuity of its essence and existence across generations. Since what distinguishes one human group from another resides primarily in the realm of symbols, meanings, and signification, far more than in techniques or material forms of organisation, identity is fundamentally cultural in nature. This is precisely what renders cultural identity the core or principal component of national identity (A Group of Arab Scholars in Sociology, 2010, p. 838).

As for cultural identity specifically, it denotes the distinctive attributes that characterise the nature of an individual or a group, relating to their essence and to the profound meanings that give purpose to their existence. Among the principal sources of identity are: sexual orientation, nationality, ethnic origin, social class, and name, where the personal name is regarded as an important marker of individual identity. Likewise, naming plays a significant role in shaping group identity. Social identity, moreover, refers to the characteristics attributed to an individual by others (Giddens, same reference, p. 766).

In light of the close interconnection that situates identity as fundamentally manifested through cultural identity, the question arises: What does cultural identity mean within these contexts?

4. Cultural Identity

Cultural identity is not merely what we live *by*; it is, to a large extent, what we live *for*. As Eagleton puts it, sentiment, relationship, memory, place, the wider community, emotional fulfilment, intellectual delight, and a sense of essential and intrinsic meaning, all these are closer to most of us than human-rights charters or trade agreements. Culture, as an identity, can also be intimately tied to well-being. Yet this very feature is threatened by the risk of becoming ever more pathological and obsessive, carrying within it considerable potential for harm unless it is situated within an enlightened political framework, one capable of reinforcing its value through more abstract, interactive, and human forms of belonging, and through more flexible practices (Imad, 2017, p. 108).

5. Local Community

A local community is a group of people residing within a defined geographical area, among whom reciprocal human relationships develop. Over time, and by virtue of shared spatial experience and social bonds, they come to form common customs, traditions, values, beliefs, aspirations, and goals. These shared elements help cultivate a collective self-awareness as an independent group, that is, they come to possess a shared culture that distinguishes them from other local communities.

Although the local community constitutes a geographically and economically localised unit that provides many essential services and basic goods to its members, thereby meeting their fundamental needs, it does *not* necessarily form an independent political unit, nor must it be demarcated by legal boundaries, as is the case with a city or town (A Group of Arab Scholars in Sociology, previous reference, pp. 722–723).

Since what binds individuals within the local community is the nature of the prevailing social relationships, formed through direct face-to-face interaction and shaped by various social processes such as cooperation, social control, adherence to norms, and so forth, the question then arises: Where does indirect interaction between individuals take place within the virtual community, and through what means?

6. Virtual Community

A virtual community is a networked community resembling a spider's web, interconnected, linked through the network, communicating at a distance via collective communication systems, and inhabiting a cyber-space which, over time, may become a dwelling place for virtual groups.

The virtual community is a free community, unconstrained by traditional boundaries. Individuals communicate with others virtually, regardless of their location, nationality, identity, or religion, and at any time. All of this magnifies the importance of values and ethics within the emerging virtual community (A Group of Arab Scholars in Sociology, previous reference, pp. 714–715).

With the rise of the virtual community, a further question emerges: What communicative media led to its formation amid rapid technological transformations? This leads us to an examination of social networking sites.

7. Social Networking Sites

Social networking sites are systems of electronic networks that allow users to create their own personal profiles and subsequently connect them, through an electronic social system, with other members who share similar interests and hobbies. The concept of social networking is one of the key notions associated with the virtual community (Isa Asiri, 2019, p. 13).

Given the rapid technological transformations taking place today, it is evident that these changes affect all aspects of social life, economic, cultural, political, religious, and others. They have contributed, directly or indirectly, to the formation of cultural identity among individuals and groups, becoming in turn a constitutive element in the very construction of society. This raises an important question within this context: How has cultural identity been generated among individuals and groups over time in light of the aforementioned technological transformations?

Second: The Historical Process of Identity Formation (The Plurality of Approaches):

Several theoretical approaches have examined the formation of cultural identity. Among these is the methodological theoretical orientation which adopts a dynamic socio-cultural approach. This perspective views the individual as a social actor who develops within a social and cultural environment, shaped through interaction with their surroundings according to both objective and subjective determinants. As a social actor, the individual participates in adjusting their own choices; thus, identity is not acquired once and for all. Rather, it depends on the strategies through which individuals construct, emphasise, and negotiate their patterns of belonging and loyalty.

Belonging, therefore, as experienced by social actors within various social formations, is no longer considered a purely natural given. Individuals participate, to some extent, in constructing the conditions of their social affiliation. They adopt and distribute the meanings that establish their shared sense of similarity, and through which the relational dimensions among individuals become visible, dimensions rooted fundamentally in subjective identities and structural interactions that reveal socio-cultural dynamism (Imad, previous reference, p. 168).

Identity, therefore, represents the spiritual bond that ties individuals to their communities, prompting them to build and elevate its standing by preserving the essential constituents of the nation, namely religion, language, lineage, history, and culture. Individuals organise the meanings of their lives and experiences around a central, foundational identity characterised by relative continuity across time and space (Giddens, 2005, pp. 90).

Here we return to the socio-cultural approach through which identity is understood as a dynamic process constructed within an evolving system of meaning for the individual who interacts with others, and with the symbolic order through which both develop simultaneously. Accordingly, identity is realised as a dialectical process in the integrative sense of complementarity: it allows for the emergence of individual differences, the differentiation of the self, and the alignment of the individual with the group to which they belong.

In light of this approach, we can understand how the individual becomes an agent in the construction of their own culture and, simultaneously, in the construction of their personal identity (Imad, previous reference, p. 168).

This means that the formation of identity is not only, as previously indicated, understood from a socio-cultural perspective, but is in fact shaped from a *psycho-socio-cultural* perspective, that is, through a three-dimensional framework. How so?

The first dimension is the psychological one; observable in the emergence of individual differences (intelligence, cognitive abilities, and the distinctiveness of the self). The second is the sociological dimension, represented by the social relationships between individuals. The third is cultural plurality, reflected in the manner through which the individual contributes to the construction of their own culture and, consequently, to the construction of their identity, through socio-cultural dynamism.

If we trace the transformations in the concept of self-identity in traditional and modern societies, we note a movement away from the stable inherited factors that once structured the formation of identity. Whereas one's identity in the past was shaped primarily by belonging to broad social groups or by factors linked to class or nationality, it has now become less stable and more diversified in its aspects and dimensions (Giddens, 2005, p. 91).

To understand this latter point regarding the stability of identity, we find that the modern world compels us to discover ourselves through our human capacity for self-awareness and through our recognition of our own abilities. We create our identity and continuously recreate it (Giddens, previous reference, pp. 90–91).

The researcher summarises this by arguing that there are at least two distinct ways of conceiving and understanding cultural identity. The first is a **narrow conception**, which views cultural identity as an already existing and fully formed reality. The second sees cultural identity as something that is continuously produced through ongoing interactive processes, processes that are never complete and never will be (Imad, previous reference, p. 10).

Thus, identity emerges from history, yet it simultaneously reflects ongoing transformations. Identity cannot be fixed, given that the actors who bear these identities are at the same time the ones who reproduce them through their relationships, roles, and practices in everyday social life. As a result of their adaptation to these practices, identity is subject to continuous reconfiguration.

Contemporary critical social theory rejects the notion of a stable, unified, coherent identity, viewing identity instead as the cumulative outcome of a series of negotiations, differences, and discourses. In cyberspace, identities are more malleable than ever before: avatars, online identities, homepages, email identities, and even bodies are inherently unstable. The separation between representation and the body, which remains a foundational source of identity in the physical world, is, by definition, limitless in cyberspace. The electronic environment allows individuals to choose identities, disguise themselves, imitate others, transcend bodily identities, and interact with the world as though they were someone

entirely different. It is a space in which race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other constraints on interaction can be circumvented. Cyberspace enables individuals to adopt identities that bear no relation to their social gender or racial background in real life (K. Nayar, 2019, p. 29).

Thus, we understand that this theoretical approach within social theory, regarding the formation of identity, is closely tied to the concept of cyberspace through the processes of masking and simulation, whereby the individual adopts a new identity that may contradict their lived, physical reality.

Conclusion

Current technological transformations, arising from conceptual processes triggered by the Internet, globalisation, the media, digitisation, artificial intelligence, and other developments, have led to profound shifts in the notion of cultural identity within both real and virtual societies. This brings us to the task of identifying the dilemma or gap between real and virtual cultural identity, each of which is shaped by the practices, roles, and relationships enacted by social actors in everyday social life, and by their contributions to the construction of their cultures and, consequently, their identities.

Since identity is fundamentally rooted in historical origins, it cannot remain fixed; rather, it is continually reproduced and reshaped in response to ongoing technological changes. Thus, cultural identity is permanently in the making, re-formed, reconstructed, and renegotiated over time in light of these evolving transformations.

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