

## **What about Identity in Social media? A short analysis on ME&MYSELF identity (#justme) in TikTok Videos**

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### **Abstract**

Humankind has been living ‘online’ for more than twenty years now, under the pressure of extending its real-life existence into the virtual world. The increasingly complex virtual life has also brought forth a paradigm shift in identity. Our daily lives seem caught in a digital web with profound ramifications at individual, organisational, and societal levels.

The analysis of identity construction, performance, and development, and the ‘rules’ to be followed for successful integration in specific environments (acting, television, education, etc.) have become central topics of identity studies over the past few decades. Online identities have got very little attention so far, despite a long legacy of critical management and organisation studies literature on identity. The assumption of online gender identity, love affairs, or reality shows routinely exposed on different platforms to form communities and ultimately earn money, influencers, and the ethics of almost uncontrolled advertising are topics fiercely debated by specialists.

In this context, the massive evolution of digital tools is changing perceptions, businesses, and even lives, which makes us pay special attention to digital identity, as an emerging concept. The article thus traces a potential online identity path that leads (if we know how) to what we want to be perceived as “I” and co-exists with us, sometimes even after our physical disappearance.

**Keywords:** digital era, identity, (moral) values

### **Introduction**

After more than 20 years of intensive and widespread use of the internet, under the pressure of online presence, of online activity as a prerequisite for the extension of real-life existence, the increasingly complex and developed virtual life also brings with it paradigm shifts in identity. Our daily lives seem caught in a digital web with profound ramifications at individual, organisational and societal levels. The analysis of identity construction, performance and development, and the ‘rules’ to be followed for successful integration in specific environments (acting, television, education, etc.) are central topics of online identity studies over the past few decades. Online identities have so far gotten very little attention, despite a long legacy of critical management and organisation studies literature on identity. Gender change on the internet, romantic encounters, reality shows routinely exposed on different platforms to form communities and ultimately to earn money, influencers and the ethics of almost uncontrolled advertising are topics debated by specialists, but the surprising, massive evolution of digital tools is changing perceptions, businesses and even lives, which makes us pay special attention to this concept of digital identity. With the introduction of new digital tools, we can speak of a layered identity (declared, performative and calculated identity), a connected presence (otherwise it does not exist), a staging, a reincarnation (based on realities that do not exist) in the form of an avatar, alias, profile, hyper Me/I/Self, digital double, and very soon a Me/I/Self in the Metaverse, a genuine double with an independent life, similar to an echo chamber.

## Context

Identity in the digital world refers to how individuals present and manage their personal information, characteristics, and behaviours in online environments. This concept has evolved significantly with the rise of the internet, social media, and digital services, creating both opportunities and challenges in how people interact, communicate, and protect their data. In an online social environment, social identity is shaped by how individuals present themselves and interact with others on social networks. People may curate their profiles, posts, and interactions **to project a certain image**, which may differ from their offline identity. This can affect self-perception, social relationships, and even mental health on a long-term dimension (Haidt & Allen: 2020).

Identity in the digital era is a multifaceted topic that touches on various aspects of personal, social, and professional life (Turkle, 2011). When talking about identity in digital dimension(s), here are some key aspects that can be taken into consideration. First, specialists (Boyd, 2014, Papacharissi, 2014) speak about a different (1) **online identity**, because in the digital age, much of our identity is shaped and expressed online. Social media profiles, online forums, and personal websites contribute to how we present ourselves to the world. This can include everything from curated personal content to professional achievements. Secondly, the digital era has heightened concerns about (2) **privacy and data security**. Personal information can be easily collected, stored, and shared by various entities, leading to challenges in controlling and protecting one's identity. Data breaches and surveillance are significant issues that affect how we manage our digital identities. Thirdly, everything we do online creates a (3) **digital footprint** (Lupton, 2016). This includes our browsing history, social media activity, and interactions. This footprint can impact our reputation and how we are perceived by others, both positively and negatively. Then, in virtual spaces and online games, individuals can create alternate identities through avatars or personas that may differ significantly from real-life selves; so we speak about (4) **virtual identities and/or avatars**: These virtual identities can offer a space for experimentation and self-expression. Digital platforms increasingly require (5) **verification of identity** (Turow, 2017) for access and security purposes. This includes biometric data, two-factor authentication, and other methods to ensure that individuals are who they claim to be. (6) **Digital Divide** means that access to technology can influence identity formation. Those with limited access to digital tools and platforms might experience a different set of opportunities and challenges compared to those with full access. Social media and other online platforms have created new (7) **social norms and expectations** (Bucher, 2023). This can affect how people present themselves and interact with others, sometimes leading to pressure to conform or present an idealized version of oneself. Then, the internet facilitates (8) **global communication and cultural exchange**, which can influence personal identity. People are exposed to diverse perspectives and cultures, which can enrich or challenge their own identities. And, of course, in a digital medium, we also face what is called (9) **self-representation and authenticity** because balancing self-representation and authenticity in a digital world is an ongoing challenge. People often navigate between presenting an idealized version of themselves and staying true to their genuine selves. And, in the end, in the digital space is also about (10) **legal and ethical issues**. The legal landscape surrounding digital identity is evolving. Issues like identity theft, online harassment, and intellectual property rights are becoming increasingly important in discussions about digital identity.

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In essence, identity in the digital era is **dynamic and fluid**, shaped by both online and offline experiences. Navigating this landscape requires careful consideration of how we **present** ourselves, **protect** our privacy, and **interact** with the digital world.

### **Online Presence. Concepts, application(s)**

Online, digital, digitalisation, globalization, multiculturalism, identity... “when a word is fashionable”, as Tuşa says (2024: 2013), as is the case today with the word “communication”, when the activities or events it represents multiply, the meaning tends to widen because of the very interest it enjoys”. This is the case of the concept of identity too, because nowadays to talk about identity is to take into account so many dimensions and so many contexts that it has become difficult to superimpose a single definition on this concept.

The past few decades have seen the rise of identity studies around the research of identity formation, performance, and evolution (Hall, 1990, Goffman, 1956, Giddens, 1991), as well as the 'rules' to be followed for successful integration in particular domains (acting, television, education, etc.). Over the past two decades, humanity has been residing "online" due to the demand to expand its physical presence into the virtual realm. In this context, a paradigm shift in identity has also been brought about by the increasingly complicated virtual life. Our everyday existence appears entangled in a digital maze that has significant implications for people, organizations, and society as a whole. Topics as diverse as gender identity, love affairs, reality shows, communities, influencers or advertising deal differently with the concept of identity and how we relate to identity.

Identity is defined as a subjective experience of who one is (Kroger and Marcia 2011), which offers a sense of coherence across time and place and across social roles (Erikson 1968). Identity development is the process through which identity elements (e.g., personal characteristics, wishes, goals, roles, identifications, and mirroring from others) are gradually integrated into the evolving identity configuration (Erikson 1994). The development of identity is a dynamic and multifaceted process, influenced by both **internal and external factors**. As Kroger and Marcia (2011) argue, identity formation occurs through two key processes: (1) exploration and (2) commitment. During the exploration phase, individuals engage in a search for **values, beliefs, and roles** that resonate with their sense of **self**. This involves questioning existing ideas, trying out different roles, and reflecting on various aspects of life, such as careers, relationships, and personal interests. Commitment, on the other hand, refers to the degree to which individuals settle on and invest in the choices made during the exploration phase. By committing to certain values, roles, or goals, they consolidate a sense of personal identity.

In addition to these processes, **autobiographical reasoning** (McAdams 2001) plays a crucial role in shaping identity. It involves reflecting on one's past experiences and interpreting them in a way that contributes to a **coherent life narrative**. By making sense of significant life events and linking them to one's present identity, individuals create a continuous sense of self over time. This narrative process allows for a deeper understanding of personal growth and change, reinforcing a more stable and consistent identity. We will try to seek in an online context, how these ways of building an identity are expressed through videos, marked with hashtags such as *#myself*, *#me\_and\_myself*, or *#justme*.

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Identity is not formed in isolation but is shaped in interaction with social contexts\* Relationships with family, friends, and broader societal structures, such as culture, religion, and social norms, provide a framework for individuals to explore and commit to different identity aspects. Social contexts can either support or constrain identity development, depending on how they allow for exploration and the degree of pressure they place on individuals to conform to certain roles or expectations. But online, interaction can be easily skipped, because of the possibilities offered not to respond, not to post, not to expose but the good parts, the “good hair days” so to speak, or the best experiences, and all these aspects cannot form a complete and a real form of identity.

Thus, identity is an evolving construct that emerges through a combination of personal exploration, autobiographical reflection, and ongoing interaction with social environments. This dynamic process allows individuals to continually reshape their identity in response to both internal self-reflection and external influences.

Additionally, individuals often maintain multiple online profiles across various platforms, shaping their digital presence. Social media, blogs, and other online platforms provide tools for personal branding and self-expression. The digital era has influenced how people perceive and express their identity.

McLuhan, in a now-famous phrase, said, “We shape our tools and afterwards our tools shape us”. Digital identities have become popular worldwide due to their potential to improve efficiency, functionality, scalability, and coverage.

The digital identities we possess enable us to carry out a plethora of activities in the virtual world, from accessing online services like banking and e-commerce, participating in the sharing economy, to interacting with government services and even social media platforms. As of the end of 2023, there were 5.3 billion internet users worldwide, which amounted to 65.7 per cent of the global population.

### **Context analysis: #ME&MYSELF, #justme in TikTok Videos**

Online contexts are distinguished from other everyday contexts with regard to the conditions for identity explorations, self-presentations, and social interactions. This paper provides a short analysis of some videos marked with the hashtag #Me&myself, in which the content creators explain or present aspects linked to their own personality to their audience. The article thus traces a potential online identity path that leads (if we know how) to what we want to be perceived as “I” and co-exists with us, sometimes even after our physical disappearance.

### ***Digital identity***

In the age of digitisation, the concept of identity has evolved beyond physical attributes or paper documentation. Today, digital identity is a cornerstone of numerous online interactions, from financial transactions to social engagements.

We live in a social landscape where the need and ability to prove that we are who we assert we are has become the quintessential aspect of the social contract and may underpin many online activities. An increasing number of individual-to-individual, individual-to-authority, or individual-to-entity interactions may be established only based on a trustful identity determination process.

### ***What about “ME”? Who am I online?***

In this context, the massive evolution of digital tools is changing perceptions, businesses, and even lives, which makes us pay special attention to digital identity, as an emerging concept.

With the introduction of new digital tools, one can speak of a layered (declared, performative, and calculated) identity, a connected presence, a staging, a reincarnation (based on realities that do not exist) in the form of an avatar, alias, profile, hyper self, digital double, and very soon an alternative self in the Metaverse, a genuine doppelganger with an independent life, similar to an echo chamber.

### ***TIKTOK***

TikTok is a popular social media platform known for its short-form video content. Launched in 2016 by the Chinese company ByteDance, TikTok allows users to create, share, and discover videos that are typically between 15 seconds and 3 minutes long. The platform covers a wide range of content, from dance and lip-syncing videos to educational content, comedy sketches, and more. It is particularly known for its viral trends, challenges, and the use of background music, which users can easily integrate into their videos. Some key features show us what TikTok is about: (1) For You Page (FYP) - the app's algorithm-driven feed displays a personalized stream of content based on user interests and behaviour, making it easy for users to discover new creators and trends; (2) video creation tools: TikTok offers a wide variety of tools, including filters, music, special effects, and text overlays, allowing users to be creative and make high-quality videos; (3) trends and challenges: the platform is well-known for viral challenges, dances, and memes that users across the world participate in. These trends often spread rapidly, leading to massive engagement; (4) music integration: TikTok's strong association with music, particularly through partnerships with major record labels, has helped drive the popularity of songs, making it a key platform for artists to promote their music.

TikTok has gained immense popularity worldwide, with over a billion active users as of 2023. It appeals primarily to younger audiences, particularly Gen Z and Millennials, and has become a hub for youth culture, influencing everything from fashion to language. The app is also a significant platform for influencers, with many creators building large followings and monetizing their content through sponsorships and brand collaborations.

Despite its popularity, TikTok has faced several controversies. Concerns about data privacy, content moderation, and national security—especially regarding its Chinese ownership—have led to scrutiny from governments worldwide. In some countries, TikTok has been banned or faced the threat of regulation due to these concerns.

From a marketing perspective, TikTok is a powerful tool for brands to engage with younger audiences through influencer partnerships, paid advertisements, and viral marketing campaigns. The app's Creator Fund and TikTok for Business platforms allow creators and businesses to monetize their content and reach large audiences through targeted ads.

In summary, TikTok is a highly influential social media platform that has revolutionized the way people create and consume short-form video content, shaping popular culture while also sparking debates on digital privacy and content governance. TikTok is a platform where users express themselves through short videos, and the "Me & Myself" theme allows for creative and

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personal content. When creating TikTok videos centred on this theme, various values can be incorporated to make the content relatable and engaging.

### **#ME&MYSELF dimensions on TIKTOK. (MORAL) VALUES**

The dimensions of "Me" and "Myself" on TikTok offer unique insights into how individuals construct and express their identities within the social media platform's environment. These two dimensions can be understood as part of a larger framework for understanding how users navigate their "personal identity" (the "Myself" dimension) versus their "social identity" (the "Me" dimension) on TikTok. This dichotomy reflects how individuals balance their authentic selves with the curated, performative personas they present to their audience.

#### ***The "Myself" dimension: personal identity and self-expression***

The "Myself" dimension refers to the "private, inner self", which encompasses an individual's authentic thoughts, feelings, and experiences. On TikTok, users often explore this dimension through content that expresses vulnerability, creativity, or personal beliefs. This can manifest in various ways:

- ***authentic*** self-expression: users may create videos that reflect their true interests, passions, or challenges. For example, TikTok has become a space for sharing mental health experiences, personal stories, or reflections on identity, allowing users to connect deeply with their own inner selves and with others who resonate with similar experiences.
- ***intimate storytelling***: the platform's format allows for highly personal and reflective content, such as "day in the life" videos, journaling about personal growth, or documenting personal journeys like weight loss, career transitions, or coming out experiences. These types of videos focus on the development of the "*myself*" aspect, inviting audiences into the creator's personal world.
- ***creative freedom***: TikTok's easy-to-use editing tools allow individuals to present unique and creative sides of themselves, offering a direct channel for exploring personal interests, hobbies, and talents that might not be showcased in traditional social settings.

#### ***The "Me" dimension: social identity and public persona***

The "Me" dimension, on the other hand, refers to how individuals project themselves in a social context, often in alignment with social expectations or the desires of their audience. On TikTok, this dimension is shaped by how users manage their **public persona**, interact with trends, and present a curated version of themselves. Many TikTok users engage with trending challenges, viral dances, or popular memes to connect with the platform's larger community. This often involves presenting a **performative** version of the self—one that is shaped by what will garner likes, followers, or attention. In this way, users may highlight aspects of their identity that align with broader social norms or aesthetic preferences. So, the "Me" dimension is often a **curated version of the self**, selected for public consumption. Users are acutely aware of how they are perceived by their audience and may tailor their content to fit certain niches (e.g., fitness, fashion, comedy) or aesthetics. This process of curation can involve presenting a more **polished**, idealized version of oneself that contrasts with the authentic, personal expression of the "Myself" dimension. Participation in **viral trends** is a key part of TikTok culture. While these trends can offer a fun and collaborative way to engage with the platform, they often reflect the pressure to conform to certain

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social norms or to fit into popular content styles. The "Me" dimension, in this case, is shaped by external pressures to gain social validation and acceptance through likes, views, and follows.

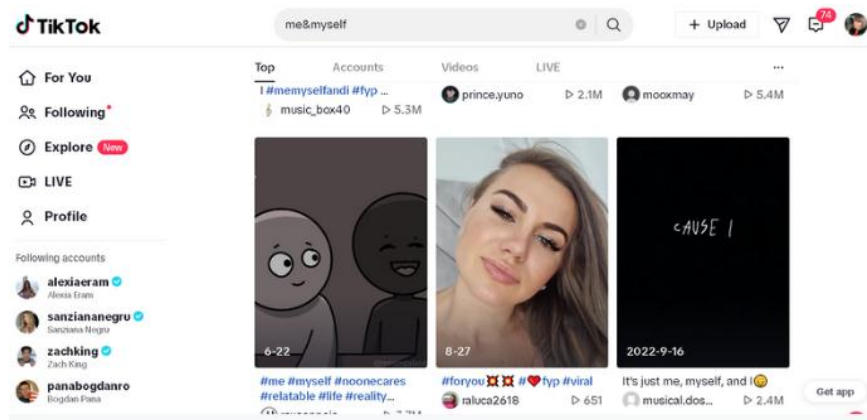
### ***Interaction between "Me" and "Myself" dimensions***

The interaction between the "Me" and "Myself" dimensions is dynamic and fluid. While TikTok offers ample opportunities for authentic self-expression, it also encourages users to consider how they are perceived by others. The tension between these two dimensions plays out in several ways by balancing authenticity with curation, for example. Many TikTok creators strive to maintain a balance between their authentic selves and the curated personas they project. For some, TikTok can become a space to negotiate the boundary between personal and social identity. While they may reveal certain aspects of their inner self (e.g., through personal stories), they might also conceal or alter other parts of their identity to fit the expectations of the TikTok community or their followers. We can also affirm that the platform allows *for fluidity in identity expression*, meaning users can oscillate between personal and performative selves depending on the context. One day, a user might share a deeply personal experience (reflecting the "Myself" dimension), and the next, they might participate in a light-hearted trend that appeals to the broader community (reflecting the "Me" dimension).

In a world where social media plays a central role in identity formation, TikTok provides a unique space for individuals to explore and present different facets of themselves. However, the tension between these dimensions can also reflect societal pressures to conform, perform, or present an idealized version of the self. In addition to that, there is often a cultural emphasis on being "authentic" on platforms like TikTok, but this can conflict with the performative nature of social media. The constant negotiation between these two aspects of identity reveals deeper issues around the pressures of social media validation, the commodification of self-presentation, and the evolving meaning of authenticity in the digital age.

In order to identify these different ways of expressing the self, we searched TikTok videos marked with hashtags like #me&myself and #justme. We have identified 54 videos, and we watched the entire video. So, shared messages (video, music, text) with these hashtags promote most likely (1) *self-love* and *empowerment* because their author (single author) encourages the audience to embrace their uniqueness and celebrate their individuality presenting in most of the videos real moments from their life, including both successes and challenges; (2) *authenticity* resonates with viewers and helps them connect with the main character in the video, on a personal level and (3) *positive affirmations* to uplift the audience. We have identified 80% of motivational messages that inspire confidence and a positive mindset. These three directions are the most used when it comes to *me&myself* or *#justme* videos on TikTok.

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In addition, we have also extracted 7 *moral values* that support the directions mentioned above and match with the *me&myself* or *#justme perspective*. The TikTokers (mostly girls) talk about:

### 1. **Resilience**

Shared stories of resilience and overcoming challenges. Messages about how they have grown stronger through adversity and inspire others to persevere in the face of difficulties.

2. **Inclusivity** by embracing and celebrating diversity. Advocate for inclusivity and create a welcoming space for people of all backgrounds and identities.

3. **Humour and Light-heartedness**. Videos infused with humour and light-hearted moments. Laughter can be a powerful way to connect with your audience and create a positive and enjoyable viewing experience.

4. **Self-Discovery**. Documented journeys of self-discovery. Whether it's trying new things, learning about themselves, or setting personal goals, sharing their experiences can inspire others on their own paths of self-discovery.

5. **Mindfulness and Well-being**. Incorporate content related to mindfulness and well-being. This could include sharing relaxation techniques, meditation practices, or discussing mental health in a positive and supportive way.

6. **Creativity and Expression**. Showcase your creativity through various forms of expression, such as art, music, or dance. Encourage your audience to find their creative outlets as a means of self-expression

7. **Gratitude**. Express gratitude for the positive aspects of your life. This could involve creating videos highlighting things you are thankful for or encouraging your audience to reflect on their own blessings.

All these values related to the concept of *me&myself* are just a part of the multiple ways in which the TikTokers choose to express their own personality but having always in their mind the medium, the context, the followers, the trends, the audience, and all sort of constraints of the online system. In a world led by changes, instability and unpredictability, the *me&myself* and *#justme* videos on TikTok seem to be a way of isolating the young generation from the negative effects of the V.U.C.A. concept. V.U.C.A. is an acronym, as Tuşa says (2022): “It consists of the initials of the



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English words volatility (V), uncertainty (U), complexity (C) and ambiguity (A). (...) *Volatility* refers to the speed of change in a field, industry, market or world in general, (...) *uncertainty* refers to the extent to which we can confidently predict the future, (...) *complexity* refers to the number of factors to consider, their variety and the relationships between them, (...) and *ambiguity* refers to a lack of clarity about how to interpret something” (Tuşa, 2022: 351). All these realities are faced through attitudes and examples governed by resilience, creativity, mindfulness, various forms of expression and gratitude. Of course, this is a short list, and this list can vary from one person to another, but the final objective is to make a better #me.

### **Who am I Online? Identities through short-form videos: propositions**

The perspectives of “Me” and “Myself” dimensions on TikTok offer a compelling lens through which to analyse identity formation in the digital age. TikTok is both a platform for personal self-expression (Myself) and a stage for the performance of socially curated identities (Me). The balance between these two dimensions is constantly negotiated, reflecting the tensions between authenticity, social validation, and the pressures of public presentation. This dynamic has broad implications for how individuals form and manage their identities in an increasingly digital world.

Investigations of the meaning of online contexts for identity development might add valuable knowledge about how identity processes are contextualized. Analyses of content creation, editing techniques, and engagement with trends and challenges can also show how engagement with TikTok influences users' online identities and relationships. This could include studying the blurring of boundaries between online and offline life.

The question "Who am I Online?" in the context of short-form video platforms like TikTok brings forward complex dynamics of identity construction, negotiation, and presentation in the digital space. As users engage with these platforms, several key propositions emerge that help us understand how online identities are shaped and expressed.

Short-form video platforms force users to balance the *performance* of identity with expressions of *authenticity*. On one hand, users create curated and sometimes exaggerated versions of themselves that align with trends, audience expectations, and social validation through likes, comments, and followers. On the other hand, many use these platforms to express authentic emotions, share personal stories, or explore hidden aspects of themselves. The negotiation between these two forms of identity—performative and authentic—shapes how users perceive and project themselves online.

The identities expressed through short-form videos are often *fragmented* and *fluid*, reflecting the dynamic nature of online self-presentation. Users can present multiple versions of themselves depending on the context of the video, the audience, and the trends they engage with. This flexibility allows individuals to experiment with different facets of their personality, testing out various identities that might not be as easily expressed in offline spaces. However, it also raises questions about the coherence and stability of online identities when different personas are constantly being constructed and deconstructed.

The desire for social validation through likes, comments, and shares is a driving force in how individuals craft their online identities. The pressure to gain followers or become "TikTok famous" can push users to prioritize content that aligns with popular trends or conforms to socially desirable standards of beauty, humour, or talent.

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In conclusion, the construction of online identities through short-form videos is a multifaceted process influenced by performance, social validation, algorithmic forces, and cultural norms. Users on platforms like TikTok navigate complex tensions between authenticity and curation, individuality and conformity, as well as personal expression and community influence. These dynamics create a space where identities are fluid, experimental, and continually evolving, but also subject to external pressures and constraints. The way we answer the question "Who am I Online?" is shaped by this ever-changing digital landscape, where the boundaries between self-expression, performance, and social interaction are constantly negotiated.

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