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Digital Identity, Self-perception and AI-mediated Communications in Nigeria

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Abstract

The study focuses on digital identity, self-perception and AI-mediated communications in Nigeria. Two research questions were raised in the study. A Survey design was adopted for this study. Two research questions guided the study. The population for this study consisted of youths in Nigeria. The sample for this study was 1000 youths from the study area. A stratified sampling technique was used to select respondents for the study. Data was collected through the use of a self-developed questionnaire titled Digital Identity, Self-Perception and AI-Mediated Communications Questionnaire - DISPAIMCQ. The instruments were duly validated and the reliability was tested using Cronbach Alpha which yielded a coefficient index of 0.75 and above (coefficient of determination, with a benchmark of 2.50 and above considered agreed and 2.49 below considered disagreed). The instruments were administered using online platform such as Google Form. Simple percentage, Mean Score and standard deviation were used to analyze data collected. In conclusion, AI-mediated communication plays a pivotal role in shaping digital identities and self-perception in Nigeria. AI-driven platforms significantly influence how individuals perceive themselves and manage their online persona. Thus, it shows that AI interactions shape self-image with comparisons to AI-curated standard affecting self-esteem and body image. The impact of AI on identity is obvious with many adjusting their online behaviour in responses to AI-driven feedback and algorithms. There is an urgent need for the government to promote digital literacy to help Nigerian youth critically engage with AI-driven platforms to attain ideal digital identity that collate with self-identity. Encourage healthy online behaviour and self-expression on AI-mediated platforms. Foster awareness about AI's influence on digital identity and self-perception in Nigeria.

Keywords

Digital Identity; Self-Perception; Artificial Intelligence (AI); Communications; Nigeria

1. Introduction

Digital identity encompasses an individual's online representation, including personal details, behaviors, and interactions, often incorporating verifiable credentials such as national identification, social media profiles, and biometric information. This online persona can either align with one's ideal self or be fabricated based on how individuals wish to be perceived. Self-perception refers to how people view themselves, shaped by feedback from social interactions, comparisons, and digital engagement. AI-mediated communications utilize artificial intelligence in messaging, content generation, recommendation systems, and interactions, influencing how information is shared and perceived. The convergence of these factors is particularly significant in evolving contexts like Nigeria, where rapid digital

adoption collides with infrastructural and socio-cultural hurdles (Anyanwu & Oluchi, 2020).

Worldwide, digital identity systems facilitate service access but also raise issues around privacy, surveillance, and exclusion. For instance, algorithmic systems can generate "feedback loops" that reinforce existing self-perceptions, with AI recommendations based on user data potentially stunting personal development. AI-mediated communications (AIMC) change the dynamics of interpersonal relationships; when AI adjusts messages (e.g., enhancing their positivity), it can influence self-perception towards an idealized persona, although this may undermine trust if deemed inauthentic (Guzman & Lewis, 2019).

Research indicates that AIMC tools affect how individuals present themselves, with users often finding AI-generated content less reliable, a phenomenon known as the "Replicant Effect." Generative AI also plays a role in shaping narrative self-concepts, as interactions with chatbots can alter one's sense of self and authority over their narrative. In digital spaces, identity construction involves both exploration and commitment, but platforms can skew self-perception through echo chambers, FOMO (fear of missing out), and idealized images. Mistakes in AI classification, such as incorrectly identifying user traits, pose risks to self-expression and can lead to feelings of regret. Problematic online interactions, including those between AI and humans, can distort aspects of one's narrative self, impacting connections and self-image (Manago & McKenzie, 2022).

In Nigeria, social media significantly influences self-perception and digital identity among the youth, who represent a substantial user demographic. Increased social media engagement aligns with the formation of national identity and civic involvement, with platforms like TikTok fostering social comparisons that can affect self-esteem. Ibe (2025) discovered that social media use, peer influence, social support, and identity collectively predict self-concept, particularly affecting females more strongly due to social support.

Perceptions of privacy play a role in self-disclosure, with Nigerian youths navigating the balance between sharing for social validation and clarifying their identity while being mindful of cyber threats. Among women, motivations often include relationship building and self-expression, leading to the construction of digital identities that reinforce their societal roles. The interplay between digital identity, self-perception, and AI-mediated communications in Nigeria remains underexplored but holds significant potential. Digital identity interacts with self-perception shaped by social media; while AI may improve verification, it also presents risks of exclusion and bias. AI's role in communications could impact self-perception by mediating identity negotiation, as highlighted in youth protests or educational initiatives (Omenugha & Duru, 2018).

2. Statement of the Problem

The rapid digital transformation in Nigeria, driven social media and the growing integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in communications, presents a complex landscape where digital identity, self-perception, and AI-mediated communications intersect. Despite the potential for inclusive growth, several critical problems persist, creating gaps on the conflict of identities, how we see ourselves, how we want others to see us and what we truly are.

2.1 Research Questions

The following research questions were raised in the study:

1. How does AI-mediated communication influence digital identity in Nigeria?
2. How does AI-mediated communication influence self-perception in Nigeria?

3. Literature Review

The study is hinged theoretically on Self Discrepancy Theory (SDT), propounded by Tory Higgins (1987). The theory posits how inconsistencies between different aspects of a person's self-concept can lead to specific emotional and motivational states. It builds on earlier theories like cognitive dissonance and self-inconsistency but uniquely assigns distinct emotions to different types of self-mismatches. SDT posits that individuals hold multiple self-representations and the discrepancies between these representations create psychological discomfort, motivating behaviors aimed at reducing those gaps.

This represents the attributes and qualities that a person (or others) believes they currently possess. It is grounded in reality, based on personal experiences, feedback from others, and self-observation. For example, someone might see their actual self as introverted and average in fitness. This is the aspirational self—the person one ideally wants to be, shaped by personal goals, dreams, and wishes. It often includes traits such as successful, charismatic, and

physically fit. The ideal self is self-generated but can be influenced by cultural or societal ideals. This represents the person one believes they should or ought to be, based on duties, obligations, and external expectations (e.g., from family, society, or norms). It might include traits like "responsible, dutiful, and morally upright." Unlike the ideal self, the ought self is more about avoiding negative outcomes and fulfilling roles imposed by others (Ayeniet al., 2025).

SDT is highly relevant here because digital spaces allow users to curate and present versions of themselves that may diverge from their actual self, often amplifying discrepancies. In online environments, people can construct an "idealized" digital self highlighting successes, editing appearances, or adopting personas—to bridge actual ideal gaps. SDT applies by showing how online interactions can heighten awareness of discrepancies, altering self-perception. In digital spaces, constant exposure to others' curated lives (via social comparison) can make one's actual self feel inadequate, widening actual-ideal gaps and fostering negative self-views like reduced self-esteem or anxiety. SDT is pertinent because AI can either mitigate or exacerbate self-discrepancies by altering how people present and perceive themselves in communication. AI can help reduce gaps: for example, AI clones or avatars in meta-verses allow users to embody ideal selves, fostering autonomy and recovery from discrepancies (Samuel & Okpoko, 2024).

AI-mediated communication (AI-MC) involves interactions where artificial intelligence aids, creates, or modifies human communication. This encompasses social media algorithms that tailor content, AI chatbots that mimic dialogue, virtual assistants like Siri or Grok, generative tools for creating text, images, or profiles, as well as deep fakes or avatars in virtual spaces. Such technologies are becoming integral to everyday life, from dating platforms to professional networking, affecting not only our expressions but also our self-presentation and self-perception (Farinha, 2022).

Identity conflicts can emerge when there is a mismatch among three essential elements: self-concept (one's view of themselves), ideal self (the image they wish to project), and authentic self (their true characteristics, including raw emotions and experiences). AI-MC can intensify these conflicts by producing feedback loops, algorithmic biases, and artificial identities, thereby obscuring authenticity. As AI influences our communication, it may result in fragmented identities, inciting self-doubt, performative behavior, or existential inquiries about the nature of humanity. This effect is notably strong among adolescents and frequent users, as developmental flexibility intersects with continuous digital interaction (Lau, 2020).

AI-mediated communication heavily influences self-perception, serving as a distorted mirror that shows curated versions of reality. Social media algorithms favor content that resonates with past user interactions, creating echo chambers that reinforce pre-existing beliefs and self-images. For example, AI recommendations based on past engagements might heighten insecurities (such as body image issues spurred by filtered influencers) or showcase strengths (like professional accomplishments), leading to distorted self-esteem. Research indicates that extensive use of AI links to cognitive offloading, where individuals depend on AI for decision-making, which can undermine critical thinking and foster a narcissistic reliance, impacting how people view their own agency and intelligence (Silver, 2019).

In the realm of conversational AI, users often anthropomorphize these systems, attributing human-like characteristics that can alter self-reflection. When an AI chatbot offers emotional support or guidance, it can either affirm or challenge an individual's selfperception, lacking the reciprocal feedback inherent in human interactions, which may foster over-dependence. For instance, teenagers engaging with AI companions as "identity playgrounds" experiment with different roles, but this can blur the lines between fantasy and reality, impairing their self-concept clarity during crucial developmental phases. Neuropsychological insights suggest this can decrease sensitivity to genuine social feedback, potentially resulting in identity confusion as individuals fluctuate between self-perceptions (Turkle, 2011).

Furthermore, AI's ability to generate personalized content can lead users to feel that their identities merge with the AI output, enhancing their perceived abilities but risking identity fragmentation if the AI's "voice" deviates from their actual thoughts. This phenomenon is particularly evident in large language models (LLMs) that emulate personalities, leading users to adopt AI-generated traits, which can reshape their self-identity. While this can boost creativity and confidence, it can also induce fears about unemployment as AI encroaches on traditionally "human" roles, adversely affecting self-worth (Sugimura, 2020).

AI-mediated communication allows for hyper-curated self-presentation, widening the divide between authentic and ideal selves. Tools like AI-generated profiles or text empower users to create "optimized" identities—such as clever responses in messages or refined LinkedIn profiles—that can engender perceptions of trustworthiness or competency that may not be genuine. This dynamic can lead to deception or in-authenticity, such as when people attribute

AI-generated content to themselves, undermining authentic dialogue. Social media algorithms shape interaction patterns, influencing group affiliation and how identities are projected to others. Users might adopt AI-suggested trends or avatars to conform to desired images, risking a chaotic merging of personal and professional identities (Farinha, 2022).

In situations where individuals use AI clones or delegates, they offload social tasks for convenience, but this can jeopardize authenticity as the interactions may feel one-sided. Consequently, this creates challenges in impression management, where adopting clone behaviors aids in identity projection but complicates one's sense of self. Ethical questions arise when AI reinforces beliefs more powerfully than human interactions, causing users to feel more assured about their views post-AI engagement, which may entrench polarized identities. In professional settings, AI's effect on creative identity may increase anxiety, compelling individuals to exhibit resilience while internally grappling with contradictions (Wang, 2023).

The primary conflict stems from the dissonance between these mediated experiences and one's authentic self. AI-mediated communication often emphasizes performative efficiency over vulnerability, leading to fragmented identities, such as the "virtual self" versus the "real self." This can result in moral identity distortions, where AI normalizes behaviors that lack societal pushback, desensitizing individuals to empathy and ethical considerations. However, there are positive aspects, including self-extension, where AI facilitates exploration and growth, potentially aligning projected and authentic selves (Tei & Wu, 2021).

Nasidi, Norde, Dahiru & Hassan (2024) carried out a cross-sectional survey of 314 TikTok-using university students (Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria) used structural equation modeling (SEM-AMOS). Key findings: TikTok usage positively predicted self-esteem ($\beta = 0.330$, $p < 0.001$), as did social comparison ($\beta = 0.570$, $p < 0.001$). Gender moderated effects—stronger for females (significant chi-square differences > 3.84). Drawing on Social Identity Theory, the study shows how algorithmic curation and comparisons on short-video platforms enhance or challenge self-perception, with Nigerian youth leveraging TikTok for identity experimentation and validation amid cultural pressures.

Oduba (2023) qualitative study with four focus groups (20 female undergraduates, aged 18–26, diverse ethnic/religious backgrounds) and content analysis of 10 participants' Facebook posts. Findings: Women engaged in strategic, limited self-disclosure—using coded/vague posts, fabricated profile details (e.g., job titles), privacy settings, and private groups—to maintain relationships and inspire others while protecting against envy, family monitoring, or predators. Motivations aligned with CPM theory (risk-benefit balancing) and Social Penetration Theory (layered intimacy). This curates a "safe" digital identity that reinforces cautious, relational self-perception rooted in Nigerian cultural norms.

These studies show Nigerian users actively curate digital identities for relational and protective self-perception, with AI introducing new affordances (anonymity, personalization) alongside challenges (authenticity, access inequities). Empirical work is stronger on social media self-presentation than full AI intersections, reflecting the technology's relative novelty. Overall, digital identity in Nigeria is a site of empowerment and risk, where self-perception navigates cultural norms and AI increasingly mediates authentic expression (Omenugha & Duru, 2018).

4. Methodology

A Survey design was adopted for this study. Two research questions guided the study. The population for this study consisted of youths in Nigeria. The sample for this study was 1000 youths from the study area. A stratified sampling technique was used to select respondents for the study. Data was collected through the use of a self-developed questionnaire titled Digital Identity, Self-Perception and AI-Mediated Communications Questionnaire - DISPAIMCQ. The instruments were duly validated and the reliability was tested using Cronbach Alpha which yielded a coefficient index of 0.75 and above (coefficient of determination, with a benchmark of 2.50 and above considered agreed and 2.49 below considered disagreed). The instruments were administered using online platform such as Google Form. Simple percentage, Mean Score and standard deviation were used to analyze data collected.

Table 1 shows the AI-mediated communication influence digital identity in Nigeria. From the remark, the respondents agreed on all items.

Table 1. Response to AI-mediated communication influence digital identity in Nigeria

Items	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Std	Remark
AI-driven platforms influence how I present myself online	277 (27.7%)	260 (26%)	230 (23%)	233 (23.3%)	2.70	.78	Agreed
AI-mediated interactions shape digital identity	330 (33%)	290 (29%)	114 (11.4%)	266 (26.6%)	2.80	.80	Agreed
Adjust online content based on AI algorithms	366 (36.6%)	141 (14.1%)	89 (8.9%)	404	2.88	.86	Agreed
AI-mediated communication affect self-image	580 (58%)	342 (34.2%)	43 (4.3%)	35 (3.5%)	2.90	.92	Agreed
AI-driven feedback influence online behaviour	280 (28%)	253 (25.3%)	267 (26.7%)	200 20%)	2.78	.89	Agreed

Table 2. Response to AI-mediated communication influence self-perception in Nigeria

Items	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Std	Remark
AI-mediated interactions shape how I see myself	310 (31%)	290 (29%)	288 (28.8%)	112 (11.2%)	3.20	.96	Agreed
I compare my life style to AI-curated online standard	321 (32.1%)	245 (24.5%)	234 (23.4%)	200 (20%)	2.76	.72	Agreed
AI-driven feedback affect self-esteem	250 (25%)	297 (27.7%)	198 (19.8%)	255 (25.5%)	2.82	.85	Agreed
AI-driven content affects how I perceive my body image	179 (17.9%)	412 (41.2%)	234 (23.4%)	175 (17.5%)	2.93	.81	Agreed
AI-driven interactions influence self-expression	160 (16%)	241 (24.1%)	292 (29.2%)	307 (30.7%)	2.35	.61	Disagreed

Table 2 shows the AI-mediated communication influence self-perception in Nigeria. From the remark, the respondents agreed on items 1, 2, 3. 4 and disagreed with items 5.

5. Discussion of Findings

The study focuses on AI-mediated communication and digital identity in Nigeria. The findings revealed that AI-driven platforms influence how respondents manage their digital identities and online persona. AI-tools shape how Nigerian present themselves online. Nigerian use AI to curate bios, edit photos, write smarter post or adopt global accent. This creates a polished digital identity that may differ from offline reality. Self-Discrepancy Theory says distress happen when there is a gap between our actual self, ideal self and ought self. Thus, the theory explains why the psychological distress happens. The finding is evident for it, not against it. Participants indicate that AI-mediated interactions impact their self-image and online behaviour with many adjusting their content and comparing themselves to AI-curated standard. This is in collaboration with, Silver, (2019); (Lau, 2020) identity conflict arises when there's a dissonance between three core aspects: self-concept, ideal self and authentic self. AI-MC exacerbates these conflicts by creating feedback loops, algorithmic biases, and synthetic personas that blur authenticity. As AI shapes our interactions, it can lead to fragmented identities, where individuals struggle with self-doubt, performative behaviors, or even existential questions about humanity. This influence is particularly pronounced in adolescents and heavy users, where developmental plasticity meets constant digital mediation.

AI-mediated communication profoundly affects self-perception by acting as a mirror often distorted that reflects back curated versions of reality. Algorithms on platforms like social media prioritize content that aligns with our past behaviors, creating echo chambers that reinforce existing beliefs and self-views. For instance, if an AI recommends content based on your interactions, it might amplify insecurities (e.g., body image through filtered influencers) or strengths (e.g., professional achievements), leading to a skewed self-image. Studies show that heavy AI use correlates with cognitive offloading relying on AI for decision-making which can erode critical thinking and foster narcissistic dependency, altering how individuals view their own agency and intelligence.

The study examined AI-mediated communication and self-perception in Nigeria. The findings showed that AI-driven platforms influence self-perception with many agreeing that AI interaction shape their self-image, online behaviour and self-expression. Nigerians use AI to sound more articulate, look more polished or appear more successful. Over time, that curated version starts to influence how they see themselves offline too. AI-mediated communication

temporarily reduces self discrepancy by boosting self-perception online. It also increases long-term distress when your offline actual self cannot match the AI-assisted version during real-world interaction. The finding is evident for Self-Discrepancy Theory. This is in support of, Silver (2019) AI-mediated communication profoundly affects self-perception by acting as a mirror often distorted that reflects back curated versions of reality. Algorithms on platforms like social media prioritize content that aligns with our past behaviors, creating echo chambers that reinforce existing beliefs and self-views. For instance, if an AI recommends content based on your interactions, it might amplify insecurities or strengths leading to a skewed self-image. Studies show that heavy AI use correlates with cognitive offloading relying on AI for decision-making which can erode critical thinking and foster narcissistic dependency, altering how individuals view their own agency and intelligence.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, AI-mediated communication plays a pivotal role in shaping digital identities and self-perception in Nigeria. AI-driven platforms significantly influence how individuals perceive themselves and manage their online persona. Thus, it shows that AI interactions shape self-image with comparisons to AI-curated standard affecting self-esteem and body image. The impact of AI on identity is obvious with many adjusting their online behaviour in responses to AI-driven feedback and algorithms. There is an urgent need for the government to promote digital literacy to help Nigerian youth critically engage with AI-driven platforms. Encourage healthy online behaviour and self-expression on AI-mediated platforms, and foster awareness about AI's influence on digital identity and self-perception in Nigeria.

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