

# **Blurring the Line: Digital Anonymity, Deception, and the Crisis of Online Authenticity**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The digital age has changed how people present themselves online and perceive representations of the truth. This paper examines how online anonymity, disinformation, and identity reconstruction can undermine authenticity in digital spaces. Today, with over five billion social media users worldwide, the boundary between genuine and manufactured realities has been blurred by the rise of deepfakes, filters, and AI-generated content. This paper explores how anonymity creates conditions where fake content can thrive, accountability is reduced, and digital deception is normalized. It also discusses the motivating factors and consequences of spreading disinformation online. The paper further examines how identity reconstruction through curated personas leads to cognitive dissonance, loneliness, and the potential disintegration of authentic selfhood. Ultimately, it argues that unchecked anonymity and disinformation can pose ethical, psychological, and societal risks that impact digital integrity and democratic stability. Promoting media literacy, enforcing digital accountability, and developing AI-based content verification systems are essential to safeguarding authenticity in an era where online deception is rapidly increasing.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In 2018, a viral video appeared to show Barack Obama calling Donald Trump a 'complete dipshit.' Millions of people shared it before realizing it was a deepfake. That moment revealed both the power and danger of online identity reconstruction. With the widespread availability of modern technology, social networking platforms and image-editing apps have become deeply ingrained in everyday life. The number of global social media users on all platforms has increased from 3.71 billion users in 2020 to 5.24 billion in 2025, reflecting the rapid expansion of online interaction and digital self-presentation. Alongside this increase in interactive media and online identity creation is the prevalence of cyber deception—the strategic act of manipulating digital content to falsify aspects of a person's identity and deliberately mislead others (McArthur, 2023).

While maintaining online anonymity can help promote self-expression and safety, it also facilitates the ability to misrepresent reality through highly curated or false identities (McArthur, 2003). This anonymity, the state of participating in online activities without revealing personally identifiable information, can be positive when a user seeks protection in posting a controversial opinion, but often it allows for deceptive practices to take place, making both misinformation and disinformation easy to spread. From subtle filters to advanced AI-generated videos, users now have access to tools that can blend authentic truth with false fabrication, allowing them to craft their realities online in order to reconstruct their virtual

identities. This paper argues that digital anonymity, misinformation, and identity reconstruction not only blur the line between authenticity and fabrication but also pose ethical, psychological, and societal risks that demand stronger digital accountability and media literacy.

### **AUTHENTICITY AND IDENTITY ONLINE**

Misinformation and disinformation are occasionally mixed up and used interchangeably, but there are key differences between the two that help give context for how they are used in social media environments. Misinformation refers to false or inaccurate information spread without intent to deceive, while disinformation is deliberately created and shared to mislead. While the two share similar traits, such as the end result of deception, they are typically used in different instances, and while misinformation is false information, it does not necessarily mean it always must be intended to mislead, which is different from disinformation, which has the key goal of deceiving. In short, misinformation is false or inaccurate information shared without intent to mislead, and disinformation is false information deliberately created to mislead. There are many types of disinformation online in the social media scape, with some recognized forms being fake news, hoaxes, conspiracy theories, and manipulated media (Shu, 2020).

Ethical concerns may be raised from the spreading of disinformation; in fact, studies have been done where they tested the correlation between those who post disinformation online with dark triad traits, finding that those who struggle with Machiavellianism are more likely to use disinformation in their posts (McArthur, 2023). With the line between what is ethical on social media being blurred, it raises issues of accountability. Since there are different extremes to disinformation, the ethics seem to vary differently from one situation to another; different boundaries need to be made for things as small as influencers using Photoshop to things as large as deepfake videos that have the potential to affect election results. These are only some examples of what has the possibility of happening; other instances of disinformation have been spread online, harming careers. One example of this is found within an advertisement made for a plastic surgery clinic that went viral showcasing a female Taiwanese model with another male model, with children that did not fit the beauty standard. This advertisement was to imply that one of them did not fit the beauty standard and as a result went through plastic surgery, which is why the children do not fit the beauty standard. The advertisement went viral, leading many to believe the model had undergone extensive plastic surgery. As a result, she faced hate comments and career setbacks—despite the ad being entirely fabricated.

### **MOTIVATIONS AND IMPACTS OF SPREADING ONLINE DISINFORMATION**

There are a few reasons why someone might want to spread disinformation online; for example, it could be from personal factors, lack of knowing what they are spreading is false, or social factors. Reasoning for disinformation can even be from cognitive processes, for example, confirmation bias or skewed judgment. There are also potential gains that people can get from disinformation, such as social validation, feelings of belonging, and influence. Since there are positives for disinformation, it is likely that people are more willing to do it. There are also repercussions of spreading disinformation, for example, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, cognitive overload, and polarization, but it is likely that most people are unaware of these side effects, making it seem like the positives completely outweigh the negatives (Munusamy, 2024). As mentioned previously, studies have also been done to see the correlation between spreading online misinformation and dark triad traits. This also could serve as a psychological framework as to why people may want to spread disinformation.

Online disinformation does have profound psychological and societal impacts, both digitally and in the real world. False or misleading content can erode public trust in institutions, as seen in the aftermath of the 2020 U.S. presidential election, where widespread claims of voter fraud, amplified through social media, led to a portion of Americans doubting the legitimacy of democratic processes. Disinformation thrives in echo chambers, where algorithmic amplification reinforces users' existing beliefs, making it easier to manipulate public opinion and harder to correct falsehoods (Cinelli et al., 2021). Careers and reputations can be destroyed through viral misinformation, often spread anonymously, with few consequences for the perpetrators. This digital anonymity and lack of accountability foster environments where false narratives can flourish. Over time, repeated exposure to disinformation creates a “manufactured reality,” where facts become subjective and civic discourse is undermined, posing long-term risks to democratic stability and social cohesion (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). “Manufactured reality” is also related to online identity reconstruction, with a fake reality typically emerging from someone reconstructing their online identity to the point of it being notably falsified. These same psychological and social motivators of disinformation overlap with the drivers behind online identity reconstruction, where people manipulate their digital selves for validation or protection.

### **IDENTITY RECONSTRUCTION AND DECONSTRUCTION ONLINE**

Identity reconstruction is easier now than ever within the digital space. Online, people are able to curate a persona that may or may not be reflective of who they are in person. With new tools and filters online able to make someone appear a certain way, the possibilities of how people will present themselves are endless. It is to the point that the number of people who turn to tools such as Photoshop to construct their identity is getting increasingly high, with approximately 80% of the population engaging in some form of “catfishing” to amplify their social status (Jesus et al., 2022). Given the low effort required and high social reward, individuals are incentivized to reconstruct online identities. Some motivations that have been found within identity reconstruction online are to appear more desirable, to explore and experiment with online identities, and to protect privacy. As mentioned before, the anonymity of being someone online also provides a platform in which other people do not know directly what a person running an account actually looks like beneath the filters. Since the identities of the people online are for the most part anonymous, it allows for them to experiment with what works in an account or what works in an online algorithm as well (Huang et al., 2021).

Even though reconstructing an identity can construct a feeling of belonging in certain communities, it blurs the line between who a person actually is. When someone is pretending to be someone they are not on social media, it could lead to cognitive dissonance, which could lead someone to feel shameful or anxious because of their actions. On top of this, people will likely be less willing to trust someone that has a record of faking their reality within social media, which could lead to loneliness and isolation, thus worsening the effect of identity reconstruction (Liu et al., 2024).

Identity deconstruction tends to happen alongside identity reconstruction. Some examples of identity deconstruction could be masking the “real” self behind filters or “digital disassociation,” where accounts are logged off of or deleted. In digital spaces, there is also the phenomenon of online disinhibition, which reflects how individuals often feel emboldened to reveal or obscure aspects of themselves when shielded by anonymity, invisibility, or

asynchronicity. These factors typically dismantle social restraints and self-awareness (Suler, 2004). With “cancel culture” being more prominent in recent years, the anonymity allows the owner of the account to feel safe if they end up being “canceled,” allowing them to fall back to their real-life identity that is detached from their online one. With this being said, anonymity can also be used to create misleading personas, such as bots, to manipulate public opinion on a topic, making it hard to discern what is real when researching a specific topic on social media.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the recent frequency of online deception, misinformation, disinformation, and identity reconstruction shows the ways digital technologies shape human interaction and perception of authenticity. Even though anonymity and self-presentation tools can promote ideas of self-expression and creativity, they can also create an environment where deception is prominent and truth is difficult to discern. With everything from manipulated media to curated online personas, the digital sphere allows individuals and organizations to make the boundaries between authenticity and fabrication difficult to discern, frequently seen alongside serious psychological and social consequences. As manufactured realities are seen more, the risks to personal well-being and public trust are ever more prominent. Ultimately, understanding motivations behind online deception and impacts of identity reconstruction is important for developing strategies to promote ideas of digital accountability, media literacy, and ethical engagement at a point in time where the line between the real and the fabricated reality is more fragile than ever. If this issue proceeds to go unchecked in the future, there is little chance that it will stop or even decrease in prominence. Without safeguards to protect digital authenticity, society may enter an era where deception is not the exception but the foundation of online reality. An example of such a safeguard could be using AI detection tools to detect whether an image is seemingly altered or not so that a tag gets put on the image to inform the viewer that the content is altered, similar to what some websites– such as Pinterest– do to inform a viewer that content may have been AI modified.

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