

## Virtual communication experiences and identity role-playing in the Telegram account community

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**Abstract** In today's interconnected digital era, roleplay on social media platforms such as Telegram serves as a space for adolescents to create and perform virtual identities. This study explored the verbal and non-verbal communication experiences, meanings, and motivations underlying virtual identity formation among adolescent role-players. Employing a phenomenological qualitative approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews (n = 5, June 2025), observation, and documentation. The findings reveal three interrelated themes: (1) verbal communication is primarily text-based due to anonymity constraints; (2) non-verbal communication is conveyed through textualised cues, such as '/' symbols, emoticons, and stickers, which substitute for gestures and body language; and (3) virtual identity carries patterned meanings shaped by escapism, social experimentation, and self-exploration. Adolescents construct and perform identities that enable emotional expression, alternative self-exploration, and meaningful peer engagement. This study highlights how roleplay functions as a digital 'third space', where anonymity and textual communication facilitate identity development and socio-emotional literacies.

**Keywords:** adolescent communication; roleplay; telegram apps; virtual identity

### Introduction

One of the most intriguing phenomena to emerge in the digital sphere is roleplay activity, wherein individuals assume fictional characters and interact within collaboratively constructed narratives. In today's increasingly interconnected digital era, social media has become the principal medium through which individuals communicate, express themselves, and form virtual communities. Roleplay activities serve not only as a form of entertainment—particularly on platforms such as Telegram—but also as a space for distinctive communicative experiences, enabling adolescents to explore identity and engage in self-expression in ways unavailable offline (Forsyth, 2017; Bondi, 2023; Weigel, 2023). Role-players are required to understand the characters they portray, respond creatively, and construct narratives through dialogue-based interactions.

The world of role-players began to gain recognition in Indonesia around 2011-2012, coinciding with the global expansion of the Hallyu Wave (Rahayu, 2021). Following the rise of Hallyu, numerous fandoms emerged and were categorised into several groups according to their preferences. Initially, these fandoms functioned as a medium for interaction and communication among fans (Rahma & Winata, 2024). Through roleplay, individuals can assume the personas of idols or artists, maintaining the characters they portray to preserve the image or reputation of those idols. Korean role-players constitute the majority compared with Western or other types of role-players (Chua & Iwabuchi in Nuraini, 2021), a trend influenced by the Korean Wave, which has become one of the most widely discussed global phenomena of the past decade.

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Role-play participants establish social relationships within the community, ranging from casual friendships to closer bonds that resemble familial or romantic relationships (Pratiwi & Putra, as cited in Hildawati, 2022). Although interactions occur online, role-players exhibit a high degree of emotional involvement, as these relationships are affective in nature (Fatmawati & Ali, as cited in Hildawati, 2022). Communication within roleplay may take verbal or non-verbal forms, depending on the character's representation. Notably, there is no requirement for one's communicative identity to align with one's real-life identity, including gender, as interactions are conducted anonymously (Khoerunnisa, 2024; Pérez-Torres et al., 2024; Ahngari, 2020).

These interactions can be understood through the lens of symbolic interactionism. According to Mead, every form of gesture—verbal or non-verbal—that acquires meaning through mutual understanding constitutes a significant symbol (Hecht, 1993; Citraningsih & Noviandari, 2022 in Rahma & Winata, 2024). Within role-play communities, participants frequently promote their accounts through channels such as *Role-play Promote* or *PINED* on Telegram. These promotions typically feature character images, engaging text designed to attract interaction, and usernames to facilitate connection. Such practices underscore the centrality of symbols, language, and other textual cues in role-play communication (Ahngari, 2020).

While existing literature discusses the social bonds formed among role-players (Pratiwi & Putra, as cited in Hildawati, 2022) and the anonymous nature of roleplay (Putri et al., 2024), a significant gap remains in understanding the phenomenological experience of communication itself. For instance, Weigel & Rudnick (2023) highlighted the role of gaming and roleplay in identity negotiation but did not examine how adolescents interpret and enact these identities through exclusively text-based interaction. Similarly, Bondi (2023) emphasised identity discovery within the *Poufflons* community but focused on autoethnographic and small-scale observations, leaving a gap in understanding broader patterns of identity formation in Indonesian digital contexts. Nielsen (2015) investigated identity performance in role-playing games yet concentrated primarily on theoretical frameworks, without capturing participants' lived communication experiences. Furthermore, Gupta et al. (2020) explored identity transformation in virtual reality roleplay but did not address the nuanced use of textual and symbolic cues to reproduce non-verbal functions in text-only environments. Collectively, these studies reveal a paucity of research on how adolescents navigate the complexities of forming genuine emotional connections through text-only, fictional personas, and the deeper personal meanings they derive from such interactions.

Previous studies indicate that roleplay participants are predominantly adolescents, typically aged between 12 and 24 years (Purwaningtyas & Oktara, 2023; Aditia Elovani Br Keliat et al., 2024). In line with these findings, the present study focuses on adolescents and seeks to investigate their perspectives, experiences, and the meanings they attach to communication in the process of virtual identity formation, in order to understand how cyberculture influences their everyday lives ((Avci et al., 2025 Villani, 2016; Soh, 2024; Kumar & Shukla, 2024). Accordingly, this research explores how adolescents experience verbal and non-verbal communication in Telegram roleplay interactions, how they construct and interpret the meanings of their virtual identities, and the backgrounds and motivations underlying the formation of these identities.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological research design, selected for its capacity to explore in depth the communication experiences of adolescents within roleplay communities (Monem, 2015; Bacchini et al., 2017). Phenomenology enables a detailed exploration of the lived experiences of individuals (Kaharuddin, 2021). Through this approach, the researcher seeks to understand the subjective experiences of participants within the roleplay community on the social media platform Telegram, the dynamics of their interactions, and the processes of meaning construction through virtual communication (Ahngari, 2020). Furthermore, this approach allows the researcher to consider the social and cultural dimensions underpinning these interactions.

The subjects of this study are five anonymous role-players who are members of the Role-play/PINED community on the social media platform Telegram. The principal informants are identified by the initials L, A, SA, SL, and H. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, according to specific criteria: aged between 12 and 24 years; actively engaged in roleplay activities on Telegram; members of the 'Role-play/PINED' community; having direct communicative interactions within the community; and constructing virtual identities that differ from, or expand upon, their real-life identities in terms of personality, character, or gender expression. The demographic details of the participants are as follows at table 1.

**Table 1.** List and informants backgrounds

No.	Name (Initials)	Identity comparison	Age
1	Informant L	real-life female, virtual gender male	Between 12-24
2	Informant A	real-life female, virtual gender female (explores character more freely than in real life)	Between 12-24
3	Informant SA	real-life male, virtual gender male (explores other aspects of character within same gender)	Between 12-24
4	Informant SL	real-life female, virtual gender male	Between 12-24
5	Informant H	real-life female, virtual gender male	Between 12-24

Source: Processed by the researcher, (2025)

The primary data were obtained through semi-structured interviews and observation. The interviews were guided by key questions concerning experiences of virtual verbal and non-verbal communication, the meanings attached to virtual identity, and the background underlying the formation of such identities. All interviews were conducted in a text-based format via Telegram, and participants confirmed that they were within the age range of 12-24 years. The duration of the interviews varied according to the participants' responses, averaging approximately 45-60 minutes per informant.

Observation within the 'Role-play/PINED' community was carried out over a period of one month, focusing on the activities of potential participants and the communication styles they employed, including account promotion practices and character portrayal. The findings from these observations informed the selection of informants for the interviews.

The data analysis followed the OAS coding technique (Alhassan et al., 2023), consisting of The data analysis followed the OAS coding technique (Alhassan et al., 2023), which comprised three main stages: open coding, in which emerging themes were identified from interview transcripts and observation notes; axial coding, which involved establishing categories and relationships among the identified themes; and selective coding, which aimed to determine the core themes that addressed the research questions. Secondary data were obtained from scholarly articles, reputable websites, and other relevant literature concerning role-play, virtual communication, and identity formation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Experiences of verbal virtual communication

Based on the analysis of interviews conducted with five informants, findings were derived from the key questions, which addressed experiences of virtual verbal and non-verbal communication, the meanings of virtual identity, and the background to virtual identity formation.

The participants in this study shared their perspectives on verbal communication experiences within roleplay activities on Telegram. Informants A and SA explained that their verbal communication in roleplay primarily occurred through written interactions. This form of communication employed a style that was easily understood among fellow role-players.

Informants A and SA (10 June 2025) explained that their verbal communication in roleplay primarily occurred through written interactions. This form of communication employed a style that was easily understood among fellow role-players. As Informant A stated, *"In role-play, my verbal communication style reflects my own personality, but it also depends on my interlocutor, as each person I interact with is different."* Everyday language was therefore the most commonly used style within the roleplay community. However, some role-players also adapted their speech to match the traits of their characters—such as speaking like a child or incorporating foreign words—to create a more immersive interaction. Informant A further noted that they adjusted their communication style according to their conversation partner, while still

maintaining an informal and accessible tone.

To make verbal communication feel more natural and realistic, Informant SA (10 June 2025) employed colloquial expressions that resembled direct, face-to-face conversation. As they explained, *“For verbal communication, it is usually conducted through chat or written dialogue, crafted as if the characters were speaking directly to one another.”* The written form was therefore carefully adapted to align with each character’s personality, creating the illusion of real, synchronous dialogue even within a text-based medium.

Another form of verbal communication was evident in the tendency to exchange lengthy text messages. Informant L (10 June 2025) stated, *“Moreover, most role-players enjoy exchanging long texts, which significantly enhances their writing skills.”* This preference for extended text-based interaction not only functioned as a means of communication but also provided a space for creativity, emotional expression, and the development of writing competence within the roleplay environment.

**Table 2.** Experiences of verbal virtual communications by participants

No.	Coding	Category	Theme	Participants
	Long text			L
1.	Daily language	Text	Experiences of Verbal Virtual Communication	A
	Colloquial language			SA

Source: Result of the researcher’s processing (2025)

The phenomenon of verbal communication in roleplay (See Table 2), which appears realistic through language crafted by players to align with their constructed virtual characters, can be better understood through Baudrillard’s concept of simulation. Rather than merely imitating real-life communication, role-players create a linguistic reality that feels authentic despite being entirely fabricated. Baudrillard (1985) contends that, in the era of simulation, meaning is no longer derived from the real but from the continual reproduction of signs and symbols that replace it. Within this context, the players’ dialogue functions as *simulacra*—representations that no longer refer to an original ‘authentic’ self but instead generate new forms of identity and social presence within the virtual environment.

Interview data indicate that the linguistic styles employed by role-players—such as tone, choice of words, and narrative flow—are deliberately adapted to sustain the illusion of realism. This adaptation reflects the mechanism of *hyperreality*, in which the boundary between authentic and artificial communication becomes blurred. Although mediated through text, role-players’ interactions evoke emotional intimacy and social connection comparable to offline relationships. Consequently, communication within roleplay functions as a space where simulation supplants direct experience; players construct believable realities and relationships through codes, symbols, and textual signs.

Supporting studies, such as (Maysarah et al., 2025), also emphasise that verbal communication within social contexts plays a crucial role in fostering interpersonal bonds and expressing identity. However, within the context of roleplay, this function extends beyond social interaction—it becomes a performative act of constructing and sustaining simulated realities. Verbal communication in this setting does not merely represent identity but actively produces it within the hyperreal framework of digital interaction.

### Experiences of non-verbal virtual communication

From the interviews, the informants described two main forms of non-verbal virtual communication experiences within role-play. The first involves the use of the symbol ‘//’. According to Informant L (10 June 2025),

*“For non-verbal communication experiences, as we know, physical reactions such as smiling, nodding, and other expressions cannot be visibly observed in the real world. Therefore, we use imagination to make those non-verbal expressions feel real in chat by using double slashes (//).”*

Similarly, Informant SA (10 June 2025) explained, “The non-verbal communication I usually engage in involves using *imagine*, where I add descriptive gestures or expressions such as a slight smile or staring intently.”

The ‘//’ symbol, placed at the beginning of a sentence, serves as a textual cue representing gestures or expressions performed by players. Informants L and SA (10 June 2025) explained that within the context of roleplay, this symbol is referred to as *imagine*, functioning as a substitute for physical reactions and expressions that cannot be directly observed in virtual interactions. Examples from their conversations include “Thank you //Smiling”, used to signify a facial expression in response to another role-player; “//Nodding, I agree with you”, indicating a supportive gesture; and “//Staring intently to...”, which replaces body language with textual description. These practices demonstrate how role-players creatively compensate for the absence of visible cues through imaginative written expressions.

Another form of non-verbal communication expressed by participants involves the use of emoticons and stickers. As Informant L (10 June 2025) explained, “As a substitute for non-verbal communication, we often use stickers, emojis, and other reactions supported by the platform we use.” Informant SL elaborated further, stating, “For non-verbal communication, I often use emojis, stickers, and GIFs that are commonly recognised. All of them align with the personality I have created.” She also added, “For non-verbal communication, I tend to use emoticons and stickers more frequently than imagination, as using imagination requires greater consideration.”

These statements reveal that, in addition to using the ‘//’ symbol, role-players rely heavily on emoticons and stickers as immediate and expressive substitutes for real-life reactions. While the *imagine* format requires greater effort and reflection to ensure that meaning is conveyed accurately, emoticons and stickers enable quick and spontaneous emotional expression, while still aligning with the personality of each virtual character.

**Table 3.** Experiences of non-verbal virtual communications by participants

No.	Coding	Category	Theme	Participants
1.	//Smiling	Imagine with ‘//’ symbol	Experiences of non-Verbal virtual Communication	L, SA
	//Nodding			L
	//Staring intently			SA
2.	Substitutes for real-world reactions	Emoticons or stickers		L, A, SL, H

Source: Result of the researcher’s processing (2025)

Based on the findings of this study (See Table 3) and the statements of the informants, role-players employ specific symbols such as ‘//’, emoticons, and stickers as alternative forms of non-verbal communication. This practice can be interpreted through Mead’s theory of symbolic interactionism, particularly his concept of *significant symbols*—symbols whose meanings are mutually understood by participants, thereby enabling coordinated social interaction. In the context of virtual role-play, the use of ‘//’ represents an evolved form of the significant symbol, functioning as a textual substitute for physical gestures such as smiling, nodding, or making eye contact. Through a shared understanding within the community, these textual cues enable participants to sustain the illusion of embodied presence despite the absence of physical interaction.

The ‘//’ symbol exemplifies how meaning in digital communication is actively negotiated and co-constructed. Drawing on Hardjana (2003, as cited in Novianti et al., 2025), non-verbal communication traditionally encompasses body language, gestures, and objects that convey affective or relational cues. However, within a simulated environment such as role-play, these elements are recontextualised into textual and visual signs. Thus, ‘//’ functions not merely as a replacement for bodily gestures but as a socially recognised symbol that sustains emotional resonance and mutual understanding within the interaction.

Similarly, the use of emoticons and stickers—common within role-play communities on Telegram—extends this symbolic process. As noted by Lawson and Neck (as cited in Trinastuti et al., 2025), emoticons function as visual proxies for non-verbal cues, helping to establish interpersonal closeness in environments where physical signals are absent. From a sociolinguistic perspective, as discussed by Fauzia et al. (2025), these practices represent a form of multimodality, wherein textual and visual elements converge to enrich meaning making. In this sense, emoticons not only compensate for the absence of physical expression but also expand the expressive range of digital interaction, allowing users to convey tone, humour, and affect in a more nuanced manner.

Building upon this, recent studies further demonstrate how adolescents utilise digital symbols to communicate emotion and identity. Minich et al. (2025) found that adolescents employ emojis not merely as decorative elements but as tools to convey emotion, tone, and social connection in digital conversations. This finding aligns with the current study's observation that role-players utilise emoticons, stickers, and expressive text styles to simulate gestures and emotions within roleplay interactions, thus enabling more immersive and affective exchanges despite the absence of physical cues.

Ultimately, these findings reveal that within virtual role-play, symbols such as '///', emoticons, and stickers do not merely supplement text but function as significant symbols that sustain the social and emotional dynamics of interaction. Through these shared semiotic conventions, players collaboratively construct a sense of presence, intimacy, and authenticity within a simulated communicative space.

### **The meaning of virtual identity**

The virtual identity of a role-player holds personal and emotional significance for its owner. From the interviews, several key meanings of virtual identity emerged, reflecting how role-players perceive, express, and construct their online selves. One dominant theme is the notion of freedom of expression. Informants described the role-play environment as a space that enables them to reveal aspects of themselves that might remain hidden in real life. As *Informant L (10 June 2025)* stated, "I can freely express myself in the role-play world, in ways that I might not be able to do in real life." Similarly, *Informant H (19 June 2025)* explained, "I prefer engaging in role-play to express my extroverted personality because I feel free to be more expressive—even a bit 'toxic' at times—and there are many other role-players who share the same frequency as me. Everyone has different or even unique traits, and through that, I feel more comfortable and interested in being open as an extrovert within the role-play environment." In line with this, *Informant SA (10 June 2025)* described their role-play identity as "an alternative version of myself, one that can express freely without limitations."

*Informants L, H, and SA* emphasised that role-play functions as a medium for uninhibited self-expression—one that enables them to explore emotions, thoughts, and personal reflections that might otherwise be constrained in face-to-face settings. Within this framework, the virtual identity they construct becomes an extension of the self, offering psychological freedom and creative release. *Informant A (10 June 2025)* also shared, "The meaning of my current identity aligns with my real-life personality, and it also serves as a medium that allows me greater freedom in expressing myself." Although *Informant A* maintains a personality similar to their real-life self, they reported feeling more open and expressive within the role-play environment. The sense of shared interests and emotional resonance with other role-players allows this openness and authenticity to flourish.

Another key meaning is *connection*. The virtual identity in role-play facilitates social bonding and a sense of belonging. *Informant A (10 June 2025)* stated, "I can also freely build deep connections and stories with the people closest to me." These connections are often established through role-play groups on Telegram, known as *squads*, where participants interact, collaborate, and cultivate relationships that mirror real-world social structures.

Virtual identity also represents a greater sense of openness for some role-players. *Informant SL (10 June 2025)* shared, "In role-play, I can also express more freely whatever is bothering my heart and mind." This openness reflects a psychological comfort found in virtual spaces, where emotional expression feels safer and less restricted by real-world expectations.

Finally, learning and self-development emerged as another important meaning. *Informant SL (10 June 2025)* explained, “As a role-player, I don’t adhere too strongly to the role-play itself. My identity there is merely a formality—a means for me to learn and grow in this space.” The role-play environment thus becomes a site of experiential learning, enabling participants to develop communication skills, empathy, and self-awareness through interaction and conflict resolution within their virtual communities. This finding also resonates with Ochsner et al. (2024), who observed that adolescents’ digital self-expression often arises from underlying psychological needs for autonomy and emotional fulfilment—needs similarly reflected in the ways role-players construct and engage with their virtual identities. Overall, these narratives illustrate that virtual identity in role-play is not merely performative but deeply reflective—it offers adolescents a sense of freedom, connection, emotional release, and opportunities for personal growth within the imaginative yet socially meaningful realm of digital role-play (See Table 4).

**Table 4.** The meaning of virtual identity by the participants

No.	Coding	Category	Theme	Participants
1.	Freedom of expressions			L, A, SA, H
2.	Finding connections	Feelings	The Meaning of Virtual Identity	A
3.	Greater penness			SL
4.	Learning			SL

Source: Result of the researcher’s processing (2025)

Based on the informants’ statements, it can be concluded that the virtual identities they construct embody diverse meanings. The significance of these identities varies among role-players, depending on the virtual personas they create and how they perform them in interaction. For some, the virtual self-functions as an extension of their real-life personality, whereas for others, it serves as a space to explore entirely new dimensions of identity that may be constrained in the physical world.

This phenomenon can be further understood through Jean Baudrillard’s theory of *simulacra* and *hyperreality* (Kumalasari et al., 2024). In the context of role-play, *hyperreality* arises when players’ engagement with their virtual characters generates experiences that appear more authentic than those encountered in real life. The boundaries between fiction and reality become increasingly blurred as players internalise their simulated identities, responding emotionally and socially as though these interactions were genuine. The virtual identity, therefore, functions not merely as a product of imagination but as a lived experience within a simulated reality—a process through which symbols and representations come to replace the original referents of the ‘self’.

Ultimately, role-play transcends its role as a mere form of entertainment. It operates as a site of meaning-making and identity experimentation, where players navigate the shifting boundaries between the real and the hyperreal. Through this ongoing interplay, the virtual world becomes both a reflection and a reconfiguration of their lived realities, illustrating how digital simulation can construct an alternative sense of authenticity and emotional fulfilment—one that may even exceed what is experienced in the physical world.

### **The background of virtual identity formation**

The formation of virtual identities is shaped by a range of individual backgrounds and motivations that differ among role-players. Drawing from the informants’ accounts, several key factors were identified as influencing this process.

One of the primary factors influencing the formation of virtual identity is admiration for favourite idols. As stated by *Informant L* (10 June 2025), *"The character I choose is also based on the idol I admire in real life."* Similarly, *Informant H* (19 June 2025) remarked, *"When choosing an idol, I mostly pick those I personally like, although sometimes I also take suggestions from friends."* Within the roleplay context, virtual identities are performed through the characters selected by players, often reflecting their personal interests and emotional attachments. Both informants constructed their virtual selves around idols they admire—*Informant L* chose Lee Hyesung from the Korean boy group Enhypen, while *Informant H* also indicated that peer recommendations contribute to the selection of a character.

Another influencing factor is the desire to broaden social connections. According to *Informant L* (10 June 2025), *"For the name and gender I chose, I personally think I fit better portraying a male character, even though in real life I am a female. Moreover, other factors such as the ease of gaining more friends and exposure when using a male character in roleplay also influenced my decision in shaping this virtual identity."* In this instance, *Informant L* constructed a virtual identity with a gender different from their real-world self, as they felt more comfortable representing a male character within the role-play environment. This phenomenon, known as gender swapping, refers to the practice of portraying a gender distinct from one's real-life identity as a means of exploring social experience and self-expression (Riandra & Sukardani, 2025).

The formation of virtual identity is also driven by the desire to explore a range of emotions. Several informants described roleplay as both a form of entertainment and a means of self-healing. *Informant A* (10 June 2025) expressed, *"I consider role-play as a form of entertainment as well as a means of self-healing whenever I feel exhausted from the real world."* They further noted that roleplay serves as a space for acceptance, stating, *"In role-play, I can freely explore different sides of myself and connect with people who can accept my personality."* For *Informants A* and *SA* (10 June 2025), roleplay offers an avenue for emotional escape. As *Informant A* explained, *"What drives me to construct a virtual identity in role-play is, of course, as an escape from aspects of myself that I cannot express in the real world,"* while *Informant SA* added, *"At first, I just wanted to have fun and try something new, but over time, it became a place of escape as well."*

Imagination also plays a crucial role in the construction of virtual identities. *Informant SA* (10 June 2025) described this process by stating, *"This identity is a combination of my imagination, the things I like, and my personal experiences."* Meanwhile, curiosity serves as another influential background factor for some role-players. As *Informant SL* (10 June 2025) explained, *"I want to understand how deeply a virtual identity can influence a person and their social environment."*

In addition to personal motivations, external influences also contribute to the formation of virtual identities. *Informant H* (19 June 2025) explained, *"My personal reason for joining and creating a virtual identity in role-play was an invitation from a real-life friend who also happened to participate in role-playing."* This statement underscores how social connections, and external encouragement can influence an individual's decision to engage in role-play and construct a distinct virtual persona.

Based on the interview findings (See Table 5), role-players adjust their linguistic styles and behaviours to align with the characters they portray, reflecting a dialectical process between the personal self, the 'I', and the social self, the 'Me', as conceptualised by Mead (Nabilla & Junaedi, 2025). The *I* emerges as a spontaneous expression of imagination, creativity, and experimentation with alternative identities, whereas the *Me* represents an awareness of community norms and social expectations. For instance, one informant described adjusting their linguistic style according to both their conversational partner and the character being enacted, illustrating how every action in role-play is negotiated between self-expression and social awareness.

**Table 5.** The background of virtual identity formation by the participants

No.	Coding	Category	Theme	Participants
1.	Idol	Based on Favourite idols		L, H
2.	Easier to Makefriends	Desire to expand social connections	The background of virtual identity formation	L
3.	Desire to meet people from the virtual world			H
4.	Entertainment	Exploration of various emotions		A, SA
5.	Acceptance			A
6.	Escape			A, SA
7.	Imagination			SA
8.	Curiosity			SL
9.	Being invited by friends	Influence		H

Source: Result of the researcher's processing (2025)

Fan (2023) highlights that virtual communities provide adolescents with a social arena in which identity is continuously negotiated through symbolic and communicative practices. Within such spaces, individuals construct and affirm their sense of self through shared norms, language, and digital symbols. This perspective aligns closely with the present study, which explores how adolescents in the Telegram role-play community construct virtual identities through text-based and symbolic communication. The use of linguistic cues such as '///', emoticons, and stickers exemplifies how digital interactions function as social performances that both reflect and reshape the self. Consistent with Fan's argument, the findings of this study demonstrate that engagement in role-play fosters a sense of belonging, self-expression, and social validation—revealing how virtual spaces enable adolescents to experience authenticity and emotional fulfilment through simulated yet meaningful communicative acts.

Extending this discussion, the anonymity of virtual identities further enables players to engage in private interactions with like-minded individuals. This anonymity fosters a sense of freedom, comfort, and safety in self-expression, allowing role-players to share personal experiences more openly without fear of judgement. Consequently, the construction of virtual identities is not merely performative but constitutes a reflective and socially mediated process through which individuals explore and experiment with facets of themselves that may be constrained in real life.

Underlying these dynamics are sociogenesis motives, as described by Rakhmat & Surjaman in *Psikologi Komunikasi*. These secondary motives stem from social and psychological needs that remain partially unfulfilled yet continuously drive behaviour. Within the context of role-play, three forms of sociogenesis motives are particularly pertinent. The first is the curiosity motive, which refers to the desire to comprehend, organise, and predict one's environment. When information is limited, players are compelled to explore and interpret the role-play world autonomously. The second is the love motive, reflecting the need for acceptance, belonging, and meaningful social connection within the virtual community. Finally, the self-esteem and identity-seeking motive encompasses the need to assert significance, gain recognition, and construct a coherent sense of self. Through the creation of clearly defined virtual identities, players are able to experiment with alternative personas, receive social validation, and fulfil emotional needs within the online space.

Together, these factors demonstrate that the meaning of virtual identities in role-play emerges from a dynamic interplay between personal expression (*the 'I'*), social awareness (*the 'Me'*), the immersive and anonymous nature of digital environments, and underlying socio-psychological motives. Virtual identities therefore, operate as meaningful extensions of the self, facilitating reflection, experimentation, and social engagement within digital culture.

Theoretically, these findings extend Mead's concept of the '*I*' and '*Me*' by showing that the dialogical process of self-construction persists within virtual spaces, where anonymity and

imagination mediate the performance of identity. This study further contributes to symbolic interactionism by illustrating that social validation and self-reflection may occur through text-based exchanges as effectively as through face-to-face interaction. Moreover, it expands the understanding of sociogenesis motives within mediated environments, offering a novel perspective on identity formation in the context of digital communication.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that role-play on digital platforms such as Telegram serves as a distinctive space in which adolescents navigate the interplay between communication and identity formation. Verbal communication, articulated through tailored text, and non-verbal communication, expressed through symbols, emoticons, stickers, and imagined gestures, operate as both constrained and creative modes of interaction. These communicative practices do not merely transmit information; rather, they actively enable adolescents to experiment with, negotiate, and reflect upon aspects of their personal and social selves, thereby illustrating the dialectical process between the 'I' and the 'Me' (Mead as cited in Nabilla & Junaedi, 2025).

The construction of virtual identities is driven by both personal desires and socio-psychological needs, including curiosity, social acceptance, and self-esteem or identity seeking, as conceptualised within Rakhmat's notion of sociogenesis motives. Enabled by anonymity and the flexibility of digital environments, adolescents can explore alternative selves, adopt the personas of admired idols, and safely express emotions and experiences that might otherwise be constrained in offline settings. This interplay between communicative limitation and creative expression positions role-play as a reflective '*third space*', within which members of Generation Z cultivate advanced competencies in digital identity management, emotional articulation, and social negotiation.

However, this study is constrained by the limited number of informants. Several role-players were hesitant to participate due to concerns about revealing their real-world identities or compromising their anonymity. Consequently, only five participants contributed data, which limits the generalisability of the findings. Future research could employ larger-scale quantitative surveys to assess the prevalence of sociogenesis motives among a wider population of role-players or undertake cross-platform comparisons to examine variations in identity formation. Nevertheless, this study offers a valuable contribution to understanding digital adolescence by demonstrating that roleplay functions not merely as entertainment, but as a meaningful space for self-exploration, social learning, and identity experimentation within online environments.

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