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Acculturation in the Digital Sphere: Virtual Social Identity as a Buffer Against Marginalization

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how virtual social identity shapes early acculturation experiences among young Georgian migrants in Canada. The study is based on fifteen interviews with Georgian youths living in Quebec conducted in March 2025. The conversations explored participants' physical and digital identities and their interactions with Canadian culture. The study revealed the dual role of virtual social identity and its complexity within the acculturation process. Thematic analysis showed that virtual social identity plays an important role during adaptation. Digital communication helped most participants cope with displacement, stress, and isolation from previous social networks. However, this coping strategy also presents risks, including detachment from the physical environment, overreliance on digital social networks, and identity fragmentation. Strong virtual ties and the need for constant contact with friends and relatives in Georgia sometimes reduced motivation for engagement with Canadian society. Integration challenges were further shaped by limited familiarity with local norms, French language barriers, low participation in social activities, unstable employment, and interrupted educational trajectories. These findings show that early acculturation cannot be understood solely through offline experiences, as migrants actively construct belonging and identity continuity within digital environments that both support adaptation and shape engagement with the host society.

INTRODUCTION

Digital platforms have become a central arena in which migrants sustain relationships, negotiate belonging, and make sense of displacement. For newcomers, especially during early settlement, online interaction can provide continuity when offline networks are disrupted by language barriers, underemployment, and unfamiliar social norms. Yet digital connection is not uniformly beneficial: it may simultaneously comfort migrants and reduce incentives or opportunities to develop local ties. This tension is particularly relevant for young migrants, for whom everyday social life is often organized through social media and messaging apps.

This study examines how virtual social identity shapes the early acculturation experiences of young Georgian migrants living in Quebec. We focus on the ways participants describe (a) how they experience their offline social position after migration, (b) how digital communities sustain a sense of recognition and belonging, and (c) when virtual bonds support adaptation versus when they unintentionally slow integration into the host society.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Identity Theory and Identity Change in Migration

Social Identity Theory (SIT) argues that a sense of self is partly derived from group memberships and the perceived value of one's in-group relative to relevant out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel, 1982). Migration can destabilize this balance: newcomers may experience a sudden loss of social recognition and feel repositioned as outsiders, which can threaten self-esteem and belonging. In this context, maintaining access to valued in-groups and affirming social comparisons becomes psychologically important (Abrams & Hogg, 1988). SIT therefore provides a useful lens for understanding why migrants may seek contexts—offline or online—where their identity is affirmed and where belonging is more readily available.

Virtual Social Identity as a Coping Resource

Coping theory conceptualizes coping as the process through which individuals manage stressors that exceed available resources, using strategies that are often emotion-focused or problem-focused (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Digital environments may support both. They can reduce emotional distress through social support and familiarity, and they can assist problem-focused adaptation by providing information, resources, and practical guidance. For migrants, virtual social identity can function as a short-term “psychological anchor,” offering continuity with homeland networks during a period when offline participation in the host society is limited.

Why Virtual Identity Can Be Both Helpful and Constraining

Research on online self-presentation and identity flexibility suggests that digital contexts allow individuals to manage what is visible about the self and to access communities built around shared interests or cultural belonging (McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Bargh et al., 2002; Turkle, 1995). Such flexibility can be protective, particularly when offline settings feel socially uncertain or stigmatizing. However, the same process can generate an online–offline imbalance: if online belonging substitutes for local engagement, migrants may remain socially peripheral offline even while feeling strongly connected online. This duality is central to the present study. Rather than treating digital life as merely an extension of offline acculturation, we approach it as a parallel sphere in which identity and belonging are negotiated, sometimes in ways that accelerate adaptation and sometimes in ways that delay it.

Coping with a Negative Social Identity

When individuals experience a devalued or disrupted social identity, they often attempt to protect self-worth by changing how they position themselves in relation to groups and social comparisons (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Ellemers, 1993). In digital contexts, this can involve distancing from stigmatizing offline labels and emphasizing alternative strengths and affiliations (Goffman, 1959). Migrants may also seek online communities that provide recognition and positive feedback, reflecting the role of digitally mediated in-groups in identity reconstruction (McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Bargh et al., 2002; Turkle, 1995).

Potential outcomes of virtual identity work

Virtual identity practices may increase perceived support, reduce loneliness, and stabilize self-worth when offline roles are disrupted (Ellison et al., 2007; Craig & McInroy, 2014; Gonzales & Hancock, 2011). At the same time, reliance on online belonging can widen the online–offline gap by decreasing motivation to develop local relationships and reinforcing avoidance of challenging offline interactions (Kraut et al., 1998; Bessière et al., 2008). In migration settings, virtual ties may therefore operate simultaneously as a buffer and a barrier, depending on how digital belonging interacts with offline participation opportunities (Papacharissi, 2010).

Problem Statement

In the 21st century, digital spaces increasingly operate as everyday coping environments where migrants seek reassurance, maintain social ties, and experiment with alternative forms of self-expression (McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Turkle, 1995; Papacharissi, 2010). For migrants, the construction of a virtual identity may offer emotional comfort, belonging, and continuity when offline identities are disrupted (Hall, 1990; Berry, 1980; Schwartz et al., 2010). At the same time, excessive reliance on digital interaction may create tensions between virtual belonging and offline participation, potentially contributing to social withdrawal and delayed integration (Kraut et al., 1998; Bessière et al., 2008; Gonzales & Hancock, 2011).

While virtual identity can temporarily reduce the psychological strain associated with migration, it may also intensify feelings of detachment from local communities and reinforce the need for validation within online environments. Acculturation research has traditionally focused on offline adaptation processes, leaving limited understanding of how virtual identity practices shape migrants' experiences of recognition, belonging, and integration (Berry, 1980; Schwartz et al., 2010; Vertovec, 1999).

This study therefore examines how young Georgian migrants in Canada construct virtual identities as a response to negative social identity experiences and how these practices influence adaptation, coping, and engagement with the host society.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

This study employed a qualitative approach, well-suited for capturing in-depth personal narratives and unpacking complex social phenomena.

Participants

The sample comprised fifteen Georgian migrants residing in Canada for no longer than two years (seven women and eight men), aged between 22 and 29. Selection followed a convenience sampling strategy. Fieldwork took place in the province of Quebec in Georgian locations chosen for the participants' comfort. Data collection occurred in March 2025 through in-depth interviews, allowing participants to elaborate freely on their experiences (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes (Israel & Hay, 2006) and was fully transcribed for analysis.

Instruments and Procedure

The interview protocol was grounded in three main theoretical lenses: Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), Transnationalism Theory (Portes, 1997), and Cultural Identity Theory (Hall, 1990). Open-ended questions guided the discussion across several domains, including demographic background (age, gender, education, work history), participants' physical social identity within Georgian and Canadian contexts, the role of virtual social identity in their adaptation, and perceived barriers to integration (e.g., language proficiency, employment obstacles, social isolation, and perceived distance from Canadian culture).

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was utilized to systematically identify, explore, and describe the meanings and patterns in the dataset, using Braun and Clarke's (2006) established procedure. The process started with familiarization, where interview transcripts were read and re-read several times to acquire rich understanding of participants' experiences and make initial notes on emerging ideas. Next, systematic coding was carried out to emphasize important sections of text that matched the research question. The codes were subsequently aggregated into higher-level thematic categories that reflected recurring concepts and relationships found in the data. The themes proceeded to a review and refinement phase, where they were compared with the dataset to ensure accuracy, uniformity, and internal coherence. At the last phase, all the themes were given clear definitions and labels, leading to a nuanced story that combined personal insights with commonalities, therefore providing rich implications to the research questions.

Ethical Considerations

All participants provided informed consent and were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage. Confidentiality was guaranteed through anonymization of data. Interviews were recorded only with explicit permission, adhering to established qualitative research ethics guidelines (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001).

RESULTS

The thematic analysis revealed several interconnected themes illustrating how virtual social identity interacts with the acculturation experiences of young Georgian migrants in Canada. These themes reflect both structural and emotional challenges encountered during migration, as well as the coping strategies participants developed to maintain continuity of identity, belonging, and psychological stability while navigating a new sociocultural environment.

1. Migration journeys and early settlement

Participants described migration as the culmination of long-term aspirations that often required years of preparation, financial sacrifice, and complex bureaucratic navigation. Migration decisions were strongly linked to hopes for educational advancement, economic stability, and broader life opportunities. However, the transition itself was frequently accompanied by uncertainty, emotional strain, and practical difficulties related to documentation, employment, and housing.

Pathways of entry varied considerably. Some participants arrived without formal status and later initiated asylum procedures, while others entered on temporary visas or relied on relatives already residing in Canada who provided initial accommodation and emotional support. Regardless of these differences, participants consistently described the early settlement phase as emotionally demanding, characterized by simultaneous cultural adaptation and economic insecurity.

Importantly, none of the participants had returned to Georgia since migration. Financial limitations, unresolved residency status, and concerns about interrupting adaptation processes contributed to prolonged separation from their homeland. This physical distance intensified emotional longing and reinforced the role of digital communication as a critical mechanism for sustaining relationships and preserving cultural continuity.

2. Cultural adaptation and identity tensions

Participants repeatedly emphasized the contrast between Georgian collectivist values and the individualistic orientation of Canadian society. Many described the adaptation process as more psychologically complex than anticipated, requiring adjustments in communication styles, expectations of social support, and interpretations of interpersonal boundaries.

Georgian migrants frequently contrasted collectivist social norms with the more individualistic interaction patterns encountered in Canada, reflecting broader cultural differences in values related to autonomy, social expectations, and interpersonal distance (Hofstede, 2001).

Language difficulties represented one of the most persistent barriers to integration, particularly in Quebec where French proficiency was essential for employment, education, and everyday interaction. Limited language competence contributed not only to practical challenges but also to reduced self-confidence and increased social withdrawal.

Participants also described an ongoing identity tension involving the desire to preserve Georgian identity while adapting to Canadian social norms. These experiences often produced feelings of emotional fragmentation and uncertainty. As one participant expressed:

“I feel like I stayed in Georgia and only my body came here.” (27-year-old woman).

Another 28-year-old woman reflected on a perceived loss of personal agency and recognition:

“Since moving to Canada, I feel like I’m no longer lucky—like this big country has swallowed me.”

These narratives illustrate how migration disrupted previously stable identities and generated a sense of symbolic dislocation.

3. Social isolation and reliance on virtual networks

A pronounced contraction of everyday social interaction emerged as a central theme. Participants contrasted their socially embedded lives in Georgia with experiences of limited, often transactional interactions in Canada. Routine communication frequently became restricted to

short exchanges within workplaces or service environments, contributing to feelings of loneliness and emotional detachment.

In response, participants relied heavily on digital communication with friends and family in Georgia. Online platforms functioned as primary sources of emotional support, familiarity, and validation. While these virtual connections provided comfort and helped maintain continuity of identity, participants also acknowledged their ambivalent effects. For some, strong virtual ties reduced motivation to actively develop local relationships. As one participant noted:

“I’m so fulfilled by my interactions with my Georgian friends that I don’t really seek new contacts here.” A 29-year-old woman

This finding highlights the dual role of virtual belonging as both a protective resource and a potential barrier to host-society engagement. The development of hybrid identity among participants illustrates how cultural identity is not fixed but continuously reshaped through migration and cross-cultural interaction (Hall, 1990).

4. Economic and employment challenges

Employment instability and occupational downgrading represented major sources of stress. Many participants who had previously held skilled or professional roles in Georgia reported working in low-paid service positions due to language limitations, lack of credential recognition, and unfamiliarity with the labor market. This mismatch affected not only financial stability but also self-esteem and perceived social status.

At the same time, some participants maintained professional engagement through remote work connected to Georgia. These virtual professional ties enabled continuity of professional identity and reduced feelings of downward mobility. A 26-year-old man noted “I was a teacher in Georgia, but I started working in a café here. Eventually, I continued working online with Georgia because I didn’t want to limit myself.”

These experiences appear to suggest how virtual professional spaces can serve as coping mechanisms that preserve identity coherence and professional self-worth.

5. Adaptation and resilience strategies

Despite considerable challenges, participants appear to demonstrate adaptive coping strategies including acceptance of temporary employment, participation in language courses, engagement in online learning, and active involvement in virtual communities. Cultural continuity practices—such as maintaining traditions, food practices, and language use—were also described as stabilizing factors.

Adaptation was generally perceived as gradual rather than immediate. Participants emphasized learning through everyday experiences and small achievements that contributed to growing confidence. As one participant noted: “It’s difficult, but I’m learning. Every day I understand a little more and find ways to adapt.” 25-year-old man.

These accounts reflect active identity negotiation and resilience rather than passive withdrawal.

6. Divergence between offline and virtual identities

Participants described a notable divergence between socially embedded pre-migration identities and their post-migration offline experiences characterized by reduced recognition, weakened social roles, and heightened uncertainty. Many participants felt that the loss of familiar social status, professional validation, and everyday interpersonal recognition contributed to a sense of invisibility and emotional dislocation in their offline lives.

In contrast, virtual identities often remained socially active, emotionally supported, and symbolically continuous through sustained digital interaction with Georgian networks. Online environments enabled participants to maintain previously established roles, preserve meaningful relationships, and experience validation that was less accessible in their offline context. For some, virtual spaces also allowed selective self-presentation that reinforced competence, belonging, and emotional stability.

While these virtual identities provided continuity and psychological comfort, participants acknowledged that reliance on them could unintentionally delay engagement with local communities and limit opportunities for offline identity reconstruction. This dynamic occasionally created tension between maintaining emotional security in familiar virtual spaces and investing effort in building new social roles within the host society, ultimately contributing to an imbalance between online and offline identity development.

7. Demographic influences and future uncertainty

Patterns of digital engagement varied across demographic groups. Younger and highly educated participants were more likely to use digital environments strategically for networking, professional opportunities, and information exchange, whereas others primarily relied on them for emotional connection and maintenance of close relationships.

Across interviews, uncertainty regarding employment prospects, legal status, and long-term plans emerged as a pervasive theme that intensified reliance on virtual communities as emotional anchors. One participant captured this sentiment:

One 29-year-old woman wrote: “It feels like I’ve lost control of my life and just accept what happens.”

These findings suggest that uncertainty is a defining feature of early migration experiences, moderated by coping resources, social support, and opportunities for meaningful participation in the host society.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how virtual social identity shapes early acculturation among young Georgian migrants in Quebec. Across interviews, digital spaces emerged as a consequential site of identity work rather than a peripheral “tool” of communication (boyd, 2014; Turkle, 2011). Participants consistently described online ties—especially with Georgian friends, family, and networks—as providing emotional continuity during the first months of settlement (McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Ellison et al., 2007). In this sense, virtual social identity functioned as a buffer

against marginalization: it helped manage loneliness, preserve a sense of belonging, and protect self-worth at a time when language barriers, underemployment, and unfamiliar norms reduced participants' capacity to feel competent and recognized offline (Best et al., 2014; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011).

Interpreted through Social Identity Theory, these accounts suggest that online environments enable migrants to maintain valued in-group membership and social affirmation when the host context temporarily positions them as "outsiders" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Abrams & Hogg, 1988). For many participants, the offline transition involved a sharp drop in social status and everyday recognition, which they experienced as identity disruption (Schwartz et al., 2010). Participants' narratives describing loss of recognition and reduced social validation following migration resonate with Goffman's (1959) perspective on self-presentation and the importance of social acknowledgment in sustaining identity.

Virtual interaction partially compensated for this loss by sustaining in-group validation and everyday social support (McKenna et al., 2002). Importantly, the findings indicate that this buffering effect is not limited to "emotional comfort." Virtual spaces also served informational and practical functions: participants used digital networks to navigate bureaucracy, search for jobs, and locate services, aligning with scholarship on transnational digital practices and the everyday maintenance of cross-border social fields (Vertovec, 1999; Gandini, 2016). The interviews therefore extend acculturation research by showing that early adaptation is negotiated simultaneously across physical and digital contexts (Schwartz et al., 2010).

At the same time, the findings highlight the duality of virtual social identity. While online bonds reduced distress, they could also slow local integration by substituting for the hard work of forming new ties (Kraut et al., 1998). Several participants described being "fulfilled" by Georgian online interactions and consequently less motivated to seek relationships in Canada. This dynamic supports the idea that digital ties can operate as both bridging and bonding social capital (Ellison et al., 2007): they bond migrants to familiar communities but may not bridge them into host-society networks, especially when language barriers and precarious employment already restrict social opportunities (Berry, 1980). In Quebec, limited French proficiency intensified this effect by narrowing social spaces and reinforcing reliance on online Georgian networks.

Coping theory helps explain why this pattern is particularly salient in early settlement. Participants' narratives suggest that virtual identity practices are often emotion-focused coping responses to stressors that feel difficult to change quickly (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). However, when coping becomes primarily virtual, some migrants risk a growing discrepancy between online confidence and offline constraint (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011). Several interviews implicitly reflected this tension: online selves remained socially active and affirmed, while offline selves were described as isolated, alienated, or "swallowed" by the new environment. Rather than framing this as pathology, the data indicate a context-dependent strategy that may be adaptive in the short term but potentially costly if it entrenches avoidance of offline engagement (Suler, 2004; Turkle, 2011).

These findings also challenge common assumptions about "digital integration." Online connectivity does not automatically produce host-society integration; its effects depend on context and the availability of offline pathways to participation (Papacharissi, 2010). Where

employment is unstable and linguistic access is limited, digital spaces may become the primary arena for identity stability and economic coping (Gandini, 2016). This can protect psychological well-being while simultaneously delaying the acquisition of local social capital (Bessière et al., 2008). Overall, these findings highlight the need for acculturation models to better acknowledge digital–physical trade-offs. Migrants may feel socially connected and “integrated” within transnational online communities, while at the same time remaining socially peripheral in their everyday interactions within the host society (Portes, 1997).

Finally, demographic patterns in the interviews (e.g., stronger digital fluency among younger participants and broader digital engagement among higher-educated migrants) suggest that virtual identity practices may stratify adaptation experiences (Boyd, 2014). Digital skills can expand access to information and support, but they can also deepen dependence on online belonging if offline inclusion remains blocked (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Future work should test these propositions across different provinces, linguistic environments, and migration statuses to clarify when virtual social identity functions primarily as a bridge and when it becomes a protective retreat.

Instead of framing virtual social identity merely as an extension of communication practices, the findings reveal that it functions as a resource for preserving recognition and continuity during periods when migrants experience diminished social validation offline. The study therefore points to the importance of understanding acculturation as a process negotiated across multiple social arenas, where belonging, identity stability, and participation are shaped simultaneously within digital and physical contexts.

Rather than replacing offline integration, virtual identity appears to temporarily stabilize self-continuity during periods of disrupted recognition. This suggests that digital belonging should be understood as a transitional and context-dependent process that may both facilitate and complicate adaptation depending on migrants’ opportunities for meaningful offline participation.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that virtual social identity is a significant component of early acculturation for young Georgian migrants in Quebec. Digital ties provide emotional anchoring and continuity when offline recognition, language competence, and stable employment are disrupted. Yet the same ties may unintentionally reduce motivation for local engagement by substituting for host-society relationships. Acculturation in contemporary migration therefore unfolds across digital and physical spheres simultaneously, requiring models and interventions that recognize both the protective and potentially constraining roles of online identity and connection.

Implications

The findings reveal several implications for policy and practice. Settlement and community organizations working with newcomers—particularly in linguistically demanding contexts such as Quebec—should treat digital life as part of adaptation rather than a distraction from it. Programs can harness online networks to disseminate accurate information, reduce isolation, and encourage participation in language learning and local events. At the same time, support strategies should aim to convert “bonding” online ties into “bridging” opportunities by pairing

online community spaces with structured offline contact (e.g., mentorship, conversation circles, newcomer–local pairing, and volunteer pathways).

For educators and service providers, early interventions should focus on reducing the offline barriers that intensify virtual dependence—especially language access, credential navigation, and employment pathways. Rather than viewing virtual social identity merely as an extension of communication practices, the findings suggest that it functions as a resource for maintaining recognition and continuity during periods when migrants experience diminished social validation offline. In this sense, acculturation appears to unfold across overlapping social arenas, where belonging and identity stability are negotiated simultaneously within digital and physical environments.

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