THE IMPACT OF BIRTH ORDER ON DIGITAL IDENTITY FORMATION AND ONLINE BEHAVIOR IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA.

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Abstract
*　　　This qualitative study examines how birth order impacts digital identity and online behaviour among participants aged 15-25 years. Using thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews. The key themes that emerged are birth order's impact on digital self-presentation and sibling dynamics impact on online behaviour. Eldest children often create a genuine and mature online profile which reflects their responsibility. Middle children express their creativity through online profiles while often balance between sharing things and keeping things private. Youngest siblings usually have playful and imitative behaviour. Only children show a strong sense of independence, presenting themselves thoughtfully and carefully in the digital world. The study also points out how parents and family interactions significantly shape their digital self-expression, while social media serves as a platform for both creativity and a source of comparison and validation. The finding highlights a unique challenges and opportunities that are linked to birth order on digital identity in the age of social media.*
Key-words*: Birth Order; Digital Identity; Online Behaviour; Sibling Dynamics; Social Media.*

Introduction

In the present times, social media plays a big role in our daily lives and significantly shapes how we create and share our identities digitally. It's really important for individuals to share who they are, build relationships, and develop their own identity. Digital identity formation is all about how people shape and control their online presence, which is affected by things like their personal beliefs, cultural influences, and the connections they have with others (Boyd, 2014). The word **identity** comes from the Latin word '**idem**', which means "sameness" (Harper, n.d.). In social sciences, the idea of identity has several meanings. It can refer to how a person understands themselves on a deep level or it could simply be a term that indicates their membership in a certain group (Oyserman et al., 2012). This concept links our personal sense of self with the communities we belong to (Holland et al., 2001). Digital identity is how someone presents online and also covers everything from how they present themselves to their social connections and they leave digital marks behind (Boz, 2012). Social media works as a unique platform for people who want to share their thoughtful ideas and engage in other activities. It gives individuals the chance to show and explore different sides of themselves that might not relate to their real-life of a person (Ellison, 2006). Many researchers are studying how social media affects the way people see themselves. They look at how our online and offline life identities connect, how genuine our online personalities are and how this affects us as individuals and as a community (Papacharissi, 2010).

Social media platforms give quick responses like likes, comments, and shares. These quick responses can either help or challenge how people show themselves online. This cycle of feedback affects how people change what they do online because they usually want to be liked and accepted by their online friends (Boyd, 2014). Digital identity is not the same identity as you are in real-life because it can change depending on where you are and what you are doing. For instance, a person might behave professionally on LinkedIn, share their playful behaviour on Instagram, and express strong opinions on Twitter. This flexibility lets people manage different social roles at the same time (Livingstone, 2008). Digital identity is shaped by how we engage with one another. Our friends, family, and social circles help us determine how we present ourselves on the internet. This is especially true for younger users, who often build their online presence by copying trends or admiring their popular friends or their elder users.

Online behaviour is all about what people do and how they interact on digital platforms like social media, forums, and messaging apps. It includes everything from how individuals show themselves to

how they connect with others, look at content, and share their thoughts. This behaviour is influenced by various factors, such as personality traits, cultural background, social norms, and the unique characteristics of the digital environment (Ross et al., 2009).

Among the many factors, birth order is one of the factors that can affect who we are and how we act (Sulloway, 1996). It has become an important topic when we talk about how people develop their personalities, form relationships, and take roles in societal activities. Birth order theory suggests that an individual's position within their family whether they are the eldest, middle, youngest, or only child impacts their behaviour and personality traits including responsibility, creativity, and social adaptability (Sulloway, 1996). These traits also appear on the internet, influencing how people show themselves, interact with friends, and use social media. According to Marano (2017), Birth order plays an important role in shaping a person's experiences and how their personality develops later on. In today's world of social media, where how we present ourselves digitally and stay connected online is as important as the birth order has a bigger impact than ever. The eldest siblings usually take leadership roles and feel a strong responsible sense of duty. They create their online images to show maturity and trustworthiness. The middle children are often good at helping others getting along and coming up with new ideas. They might use social media to keep in touch with friends and share their thoughts. Youngest siblings, on the other hand, are usually seen as more friendly and playful. They tend to explore online platforms with a cheerful and adventurous attitude. Only children usually like being independent and think a lot. They may build their online profiles to stand out and pay attention to the little things (Sulloway, 1996).

The purpose of the study is to look into how being the eldest, middle, or youngest child affects how people create their digital identities and act online especially on social media. By studying how individuals from various birth orders behave, present themselves online, and interact digitally, we hope to find patterns that reveal how family dynamics shape online identities. The study also explores how these factors impact feelings of authenticity on the internet, the desire for validation, boundaries around privacy, and how people share information. This helps us better understand how we create our identities digitally in the age of social media.

Theoretical framework

Birth Order Theory

Birth Order Theory was developed by Alfred Adler in 1920; Adler's Birth Order theory suggests that a person's personality and behaviour are influenced by their position in the family. Adler believed that first born children often have higher expectations placed on them by parents and due to that they have developed a greater sense of responsibility and ambition to succeed. He proposed that later-born siblings, on the other hand, were often treated more leniently by their parents compared to firstborns, leading them to become more rebellious and independent. This theory is relevant to this study as it provides a framework for understanding how family roles affect how people create their online identities and behave on the internet. Traits like the eldest responsibility or the youngest independence can influence how people present themselves online, engage with others on social media, and manage their online images.

Social Comparison Theory

Social Comparison Theory was introduced by Leon Festinger in 1954; He proposed that people have a basic human need to evaluate themselves and that social comparison works as a way to satisfy their needs. The theory explains that individuals look at others who are similar to them, like those who are the same age, gender, or job. By looking at these comparisons, they can see how they are doing and identify their own strong and weak points. It explains how people look at their skills, views, and value by comparing themselves to others. This theory is relevant to this study it shows how people look at their online identity and actions by comparing themselves to others on social media. These comparisons affect how they show themselves, what they share, and how they interact. This is especially true when it comes to birth order, as the need for approval and the influence of friends can differ between siblings. This leads to unique online behaviours and identities.

Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory was first discovered by the psychologist Albert Bandura in 1977. According to him, individuals learn by observing others and imitating their actions by seeing models around them. Different factors, such as our level of attention, our motivation, our attitudes, and our feelings, play an important role in the process. The idea is that we learn by seeing what happens to others when they act a certain way. Bandura stated that we can observe behaviour directly through our interactions or indirectly through media. If we see someone being rewarded for their actions, we are more likely to imitate that behaviour, but if we see someone facing punishment, we tend to stay away from doing the same thing. This theory is relevant to this study as it shows how people create their digital identities and behave online by watching and copying others, especially on social media. Birth order can make a difference as younger siblings often look up to their elder siblings or online stars for guidance while the eldest child or only child might act as a different kind of example (Sulloway, 1996). This way of learning by watching others influences how people communicate, show themselves, and use online platforms.

Review of literature

The research aimed to investigate 'The Role of Digital Identity in the Age of Social Media: Literature Analysis on Self-Identity Construction and Online Social Interaction'. The researchers in this study conducted a study to examine how digital identity works in our social media world. This research looks into how we build our identities on social media and how that influences our interactions online. By reviewing existing literature, it explores important topics such as how we form our identities, how we present ourselves, the role of privacy, and the psychological effects involved. The results show that digital identity is a complex matter influenced by personal and social elements. It highlights the chances for self-expression, the difficulties in being authentic, and the importance of understanding digital tools and protecting our privacy (Rosana & Fauzi, 2024).

The research was conducted that involved finding the 'Impact of Social Media Use on Identity Formation among Adolescents'. This study explores how teens aged 14 to 21 use social media and how it affects their sense of self. By surveying 131 participants, the study shows that there is a clear link between comparing oneself to others online, the way they present themselves, and their self-esteem. Those who spend more time on social media often feel that others' responses affect how they see themselves. While social media can help young people explore their identities, it also makes them seek approval from others, which can impact their self-worth. The study emphasizes the need to be careful with social media use to avoid negative effects on mental health and to help develop a healthier sense of identity. These results suggest that we should find ways to support teens in handling their online interactions wisely (Pazer, 2024).

An investigation was conducted to examine 'Birth order and identity formation during emerging adulthood'. This study analyse the relationship between birth order and identity formation during early adulthood, using a tool called the Identity Development Dimensions Scale (DIDS). It shows that middle children tend to explore their identities less, both widely and deeply, when compared to their younger or elder siblings. The result of the study points out that middle children might struggle more with figuring out who they are. Without clear identity traits or roles, they could have a harder time carving out their place. The study suggests that more exploration is needed on other influences, like career paths, that shape identity development (Rządzka, 2024).

A study was conducted on the 'Impact of Birth Order on Identity Formation of Adolescents'. This study examines how birth order affects how teenagers develop their identities. It uses tools like the Ego Identity Process Questionnaire and Global Adjustment Inventory. The study involved 158 participants, split evenly between boys and girls. The results show a clear link between how people adjust and their identity, but there weren't any major differences based on gender or between those who were the first or third born. This suggests that while birth order can influence identity, there are likely other factors involved as well (Sardana et al., 2019).

An investigation was carried out on, 'Identity development in the digital context'. This study investigates how digital media affects the way we form our identities during our young adulthood

years and early adulthood, which are key times for figuring out who we are. It introduces a way to think about this with four mechanisms: Selection (choosing where we go online), Manipulation (changing those online spaces), Evocation (provoking reactions from others), and Application (using our online experiences in our real lives). The focus is on how identity and digital spaces interact with each other, showing that as people change, their online environments change too. The study points out that more research is needed to grasp the connection between digital platforms and how we develop our identities (Soh et al., 2024).

Objectives:
i.   To study the impact of birth order on digital identity formation;
ii.   To explore the role of sibling relationships in shaping digital identity;
iii.   To identify the challenges and opportunities that social media offers to individuals based on their birth order in developing their digital identity.

Research methodology
Research Design
The research method that will be used for this study is known as Thematic Analysis. It is a qualitative research method that focuses on analysing the data thematically that individual's share. The following study employs thematic analysis to measure the impact of birth order on digital identity formation and online behaviour as it is a tool that helps in capturing the subjective experiences of individuals which enables a deeper understanding of experiences and emotion. It also practically contextualizes the factors that influence the formation of identities and themes. The participant is given the power to explain their experiences while being entirely in control of their narrative. Thematic analysis is a flexible analysis method that allows researchers to construct themes, or meaning-based patterns, to report their interpretation of a data set. Thematic analysis is popularly used for qualitative data (Terry & Hayfield, 2021).

Population
The population consisted of children who were in different positions like the eldest, the middle, the youngest, and the only child in their family and were typically in the age range of 15-25 years in this study. The participant population was decided based on convenience sampling.

Sample
The sample consisted of 12 participants from Amity University of Bengaluru.

Sampling Method
The sampling methods that were used in this study are convenience sampling and the snowballing method.

Inclusion criteria
i.   Participants must be within a specific age between 15–25 years.
ii.   Participants must be using social media platforms.
iii.   Participants must come from families with at least three children.
iv.   Participants must provide informed consent and should be willing to participate in the study.

Exclusion criteria
i.   Participants who were not in the specified age range were excluded.
ii.   Participants who do not actively use social media platforms were excluded.
iii.   Participants from families with or more than three children were excluded.
iv.   Participants with cognitive impairments were excluded.

Data Collection
Data was collected in the form of in-depth and semi-structured interviews for this study. Apart from software used for recording and transcription, not much else was used for the process of data collection. Each interview lasted about 15-20 minutes and each participant underwent one interview. The interviews were collected in a comfortable, relaxed, and natural setting, which would allow the participant to lay back and open their thoughts.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is used in this research. Thematic analysis is a method to study data by looking for common patterns and themes. Researchers look carefully at the information they have gathered and code important parts so they can sort them into themes and sub-themes that highlight key points. This method helps in understanding and organizing the data, giving a clearer picture of the deeper meanings, experiences, or behaviours involved.

Ethical Considerations

The anonymity would make the participants more comfortable. Participants can withdraw from the study at any given time. The participants will be debriefed about the study and their rights. They are also free to impart as much information as they wish to; their identities will be protected while explaining the collected data.

Results

Theme 1: Birth Order and its Impact on Digital Self-Presentation.

The analysis of responses from participants in this study revealed a notable relationship between birth order and the way individuals formed their digital identities. The study showed that a person's place in the family whether they are the eldest, middle, youngest, or the only child demonstrated distinct patterns in their online behaviour, identity formation, and self-presentation on social media platforms. The following sub-themes were identified from the data.

Self-Expression and Authenticity Online.

Participants from various birth order groups (eldest, middle, youngest, and only child) shared different amounts of openness and realness on social media. However, they all seemed to share a common theme to be authentic and reveal their true selves online.

"…………I try to show myself as real as possible on Instagram. There's no point in showing a fake version of myself. What I post reflects who I really am......" (Participant1, Eldest).

Analysis- BG response shows that the eldest siblings try to be authentic online because they feel a sense of responsibility. As the first born they want to set a good example for their sibling which is why they focus on being genuine in how they present themselves online.

"……....I show what I'm comfortable sharing, but I don't overexpose myself. My profile is not all about personal stuff but also about fun and creative posts……."(Participant 2, Middle).

Analysis- MR Response shows how middle children usually find a thoughtful way to balance their online lives. They love to post fun and creative things that let them show who they are and bond with others. However, they are careful about what they reveal, avoiding too many personal details. It shows how they work to stay close to friends while also keeping their personal lives protected.

"………I'm more carefree online. I post things that I think are fun, but there's a line I don't cross in terms of what's too personal......" (Participant 3, Youngest).

Analysis- HS response shows that youngest children often have a relaxed and carefree attitude when sharing online, and posting fun and playful content. They are also careful about sharing a post that keeps some aspects of their lives private.

"……..I don't hide much. If I'm proud of something I've done, I'll post about it. But there's also a lot I don't share……."(Participant 4, Only Child).

Analysis- RT response reveals her thoughts in a way that highlights how only children can be open about certain topics while also being mindful of what they keep to themselves. This result shows their independent spirit and how they thoughtfully choose what to reveal online.

Parental Influence and Family Dynamics.

Family Dynamics played a big role in how participants shaped their digital identities especially the kind of support and freedom parents provided. The result shows that individuals from nuclear families or those with more independence (such as only children), seemed they have more say in their online presence.

"…………My parents let me be myself. I share what I feel like and don't worry about their opinions much. They trust me………..."(Participant 5, Youngest).

Analysis- DT response shows that youngest children often have more freedom to share things online because their parents trust them and believe they are mature enough to handle it. This trust allows them to explore and express themselves openly without feeling overly restricted or judged by their family. Perhaps because of the way they raised their elder siblings, they now give younger siblings more freedom.

"…………..My family is very open about what I post, and I'm encouraged to be honest about myself. My mom has always told me to be real and not care about judgment……….."(Participant 6, Only Child).

Analysis- CN response revealed that Parents usually encourage their only children to be true to themselves when they are online which has a strong impact on how they form their digital identities. This support helps them feel confident in their choices and gives them the freedom to carefully decide what to share.

Social Validation and Peer Comparison.

Many participants talked about how they look for social validation and how often they compare their online presence with others especially with their friends. Middle and youngest children were more likely to seek validation from others compared to eldest siblings or only children.

"………I look at what my friends post and sometimes compare. I guess I post things to get likes, but it's also about showing my creative side…….."(Participant 7, Middle).

Analysis- SG response revealed that middle children often find themselves comparing themselves to their friends on social media. They share posts hoping to get likes and comments seeking validation and connection from their peers.

"……….I really don't care about what others think about my posts. I share what I like and feel proud of…….."(Participant 4, Only Child).

Analysis- RT response revealed that the only child, in contrast to those in the middle children does not rely as much on validation from others when posting online. Instead, they often focus more on what makes them happy or proud, sharing content that feels meaningful to them personally.

Privacy and Boundaries in Sharing Personal Information.

Participants from all birth order groups showed differently about sharing personal stuff online. Only children and eldest siblings were more careful, they clearly set boundaries on what they wanted to share. They often kept their private lives away from their online profiles. On the other hand, middle and youngest children were generally more open about sharing personal details on social media not being as strict with their boundaries.

"…….I'm not really shy about sharing my daily activities, but I don't put everything out there. I keep some things for myself…….."(Participant 3, Youngest).

Analysis- HS response revealed that the youngest child tends to be more willing to share on social media but they still hold back some things about their life. They might share fun or interesting moments but they understand that not everything is meant to be public. Even though they like to be open but they know where to set boundaries when it comes to personal details.

"……..I like to keep it fun and creative. If something personal happens, I might share it, but not all the details. I still keep some privacy…….." (Participant 2, Middle).

Analysis- MR response revealed that Middle children usually manage to strike a nice balance between sharing about their lives and keeping some things to themselves. They enjoy sharing fun or exciting experiences to catch their friends' attention but they're also mindful of how much they let others see.

"………..I like to keep my personal life separate from my public life. There's a lot I don't show…….."(Participant 6, Only Child).

Analysis- CN response revealed that only children often maintain a distinct separation between their personal and public lives. They are generally more cautious about what they post online as they have the freedom to choose what feels appropriate for them. Because they are accustomed to being on their own, they have a greater understanding of their privacy and like to keep their personal information apart from what they show to the public.

Theme 2: Sibling Dynamics and its Impact on Online Behaviour.

The result of the study analyzed that sibling relationships play a fundamental role in shaping how individuals behave online and what they choose to share. The order in which a person is born influences their interactions with siblings and this affects their online behavior and the content they post. The following sub-theme was identified from the data.

Role Modelling and Emulation.

Eldest siblings usually think they should be role models for their younger brothers and sisters who make them behave more maturely and responsibly when they're online. They try to show qualities like leadership and dependability. On the other hand, younger siblings often watch and copy what their elder siblings do online picking up lessons from their actions and how they use social media.

"……….I feel like I can't post random things online because my younger siblings follow me, and I don't want to set a bad example……….." (Participant 8, Eldest).

Analysis- MV response revealed that elder siblings usually see themselves as a leader believing it's their job to set a good example for their younger siblings. This feeling of duty shapes how they behave on social media, they strive to project an image of maturity and dependability making sure their online presence aligns with their role as role models. This is also because the elder sibling is the sibling's second parent after parents. '*My participant also stated that her younger sister is like a daughter to her and this gives her a motherly feeling as she has to take care of her sister'* that would be the reason that she makes an image of maturity and dependability online.

"………I like to post trends I see my elder siblings doing. It makes me feel connected to them and cooler……..."(Participant 3, Youngest).

Analysis- HS response revealed that younger siblings frequently admire their elder siblings and tend to copy what they do online. This could be their way of feeling more connected or winning their approval. By emulating their elder siblings' actions they pick up similar posting styles, ways of interacting, or how they use social media.

Discussion

This research showed that birth order has an important impact on how individuals form their digital identities. The study also explores how birth order affects the individual in how they show themselves the social media platforms, how they show their activities on the internet, and how they hold privacy by not sharing personal details. This research reveals that elder siblings usually take on a sense of responsibility, they try to create genuine and mature identities on online platforms, and they show their qualities like leadership and dependability, motivated by their positions as leaders and role models for their younger siblings (Participant 8, MV). They appear to aim at making a positive impact, displaying qualities such as trustworthiness and honesty in their online presence. On the other hand, the study revealed that younger siblings tend to have a more carefree, relaxed and playful way of behaving online. They frequently look up to their elder siblings, copying them to feel closer and earn their validation (Participant 3, HS). This imitation allows them to keep up with trends while adding something of their own; this highlights how they strike a balance between following and being themselves.

Middle children take a different route for behaving online, they try showing a thoughtful side of them as they balance between sharing themselves and guarding their privacy. They enjoy creative and engaging interactions on social media but are careful to keep their personal information safe (Participant 2, MR). The study examines that children who are the only child in their family often gain freedom from their family and this freedom leads them to share what they want because their parents trust them (Participant 4, RT & Participant 6, CN). These differences highlight how family relationships and the order in which children are born influence how they express themselves online and form their digital identities (Terry & Hayfield, 2021).

This research also showed important factors that social media brings different challenges and opportunities for people depending on their birth order when it comes to building their digital identity. For eldest siblings, the pressure to appear responsible and mature can be tough but it also gives them opportunities to lead by setting a good example for their siblings. Younger siblings, on the other hand, enjoy social media as a way to express themselves freely and connect with others, yet

they sometimes struggle to form their own identity while looking up to their elder siblings. Meanwhile, only children take advantage of the freedom given by their parents to develop their own unique online identities, but they may find it hard to navigate comparisons with peers since they don't have siblings to influence them.

Limitations

The sample size used in this study is relatively small, comprising only 12 people, from one particular university. Since the sample size is relatively small, it may not exactly be representative of the opinions of the vast population in the country. Therefore there is a lack of diverse answers and opinions on the topic.

The study has a limited number of Themes and Sub themes, Though the study has brought up the key findings that influence people's opinions on the impact of birth order on digital identity formation and online behaviour, the study did not delve into other factors that could influence people's opinions on the impact of birth order on different aspects like Personality traits, Cultural Background, Self-Esteem, Academic and Career Aspirations, Technology use and online behaviour.

Conclusion

This qualitative study which was exploratory looked in depth at how birth order influences the way people form their digital identities and online behaviour in the age of social media. The study found that birth order plays a big role in how individuals behave online, how they present themselves, and how they interact with others. The study revealed through the analysis that eldest siblings often take more focus on responsibility, they tend to create genuine and mature profiles as they step into leadership roles within their families. Middle children tend to mix creativity with a mindful of keeping privacy, and expressing themselves thoughtfully online. The youngest siblings usually present themselves in a more playful and relaxed way on online platforms, they shaped their personality by copying their elder siblings. Only children, on the other hand, show a strong sense of independence and carefulness in how they present themselves reflecting their unique position.

Sibling dynamics and parental influence are key elements in this study that highlight how family life contributes to identity formation. While social media offers great opportunities for self-expression and connecting with others, it also brings challenges like managing privacy, seeking validation, and dealing with comparisons among peers. These factors make the relationship between personal and digital identities quite complex.

This study emphasises that there is a need for future research to consider longitudinal style and other elements that might influence digital identities, such as cultural background, Self-esteem, and personal traits. By looking into these areas, we can gain a clearer understanding of how the digital world is shaping identities as we move through different stages of life.

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Appendix

Research Questions.

1.　　Can you tell me about your position in the family? Are you the oldest one, in the middle, the youngest, or the only child?

2.　　How would you describe your relationship with your siblings, and how does this influence your personality?

3.　　How do you think your position in the family have influenced who you are now, if at all?

4.　　How do you think your personality is different from your siblings?

5.　　How would you describe your presence or identity on social media and on other online platforms?

6.　　How do you figure out what to post or share about yourself on the internet?

7.　　Do you show yourself in a different way online than you do when you're face to face? If yes, how?

8.　　How do your relationships with family and friends affect how you show yourself online? Can you share some examples of when these connections influenced your online identity?

9.　　What's the main reason you use social media or other online platforms? How does that reason influence the way you show yourself online?

10.　　How much do you think your online profile actually shows who you are in real life?

11.　　Are there any specific things you like to emphasize about yourself on social media?

12.　　Do you think your birth order have an effect on how you show yourself online or interact with other people digitally?

13.　　Do you notice any differences in how you and your siblings use social media?

14.　　Do you feel your birth order has impacted how comfortable you feel sharing things online?

15.   How do you think your position in your family affects your confidence or the way you express yourself online?

16.   Have your siblings/Family ever influenced the way you present yourself online? Can you give an example?

17.   Do you ever feel like competing or comparing with your siblings/Family about how you present yourself online?

18.   In what ways, if any, do you feel your family dynamics have shaped your digital identity?

19.   Have you ever felt like your family/Siblings are putting pressure on you about how you act or show yourself online?

20.   Is there anything you'd like to say about how your family or birth order has influenced your digital identity?