Scientia Moralitas International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research
ISSN 2472-5331 (Print) | ISSN 2472-5358 (Online) | Vol. 10, No. 2, 2025
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18040957

A Cyberpsychology and Mental Health Dialogue About Digital Personhood

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ABSTRACT: Digital environments have become central to how individuals negotiate identity and personhood. Yet these environments also generate pervasive pressures to curate success, happiness, and desirability in ways that strain mental health. Building on Derakhshan, Soundararajan, Agarwal, and Crane's (2024) theorization of personhood limbo among undocumented workers, this commentary introduces the notion of digital personhood limbo to conceptualize the unstable, contingent, and psychologically taxing nature of personhood in online contexts. Within digital personhood limbo, users must continuously manage representations of self, projecting false success, fabricating emotional well-being, exaggerating accomplishments, seeking validation, and sometimes constructing fictive identities, to secure recognition within algorithmically mediated attention economies. These strategies function as a form of personhood anchoring work, analogous to the relational, spatial, temporal, and moral anchoring undertaken by individuals in other liminal contexts. However, they also create significant cognitive and emotional burdens, including stress, anxiety, affective dissonance, and fatigue associated with sustained deception and impression management. Integrating personhood theory, this article argues that digital personhood is increasingly constituted as a precarious and mentally costly condition.

KEYWORDS: personhood limbo, personhood, cyberpsychology, on-line behavior, on-line identity, impression management, perception, mental health risks

JEL Codes: D9, D83, L83, 033, K38

Introduction

Derakhshan et al. (2024) conceptualize personhood as an ongoing, fragile condition shaped by the extent to which individuals are socially acknowledged as full human beings. In their research, undocumented workers frequently encounter personhood limbo; a state of partial or unstable recognition where their humanity is neither fully denied nor fully affirmed. To cope with this instability, individuals engage in personhood anchoring work, practices through which they attempt to

stabilize or reclaim aspects of their personhood. In their framework, relational anchoring refers to the ways individuals reaffirm their humanity through social ties. Personhood is strengthened when one is cared for, listened to, or emotionally supported. Even small gestures, shared meals, empathetic conversations, or humor, become buffers that reinforce one's worth and identity.

Spatial anchoring involves securing or creating physical or symbolic spaces where one feels safe, respected, and free to express oneself. These spaces act as containers for identity, offering protection from environments that undermine one's dignity or value.

Temporal anchoring refers to the stabilizing effect of connecting one's past and imagined future to the present. Drawing on memories, accomplishments, or aspirations helps individuals maintain continuity of self when current circumstances are constraining or dehumanizing.

Finally, moral anchoring entails affirming one's values, integrity, and ethical commitments despite external narratives that diminish one's standing. Behaviors such as supporting family, upholding cultural traditions, or acting responsibly serve as ways of preserving one's moral self even in adverse contexts.

When applied to online environments, these same elements help explain why people use filters, AI-enhanced images, curated digital spaces, and, even more drastically, stolen photos to be more desirable, admired, or romantically appealing. In digital contexts, the struggle is not defined by immigration status but by visibility, desirability, and the fragile currency of social recognition.

Relational anchoring becomes evident when individuals use enhanced or perfected images to seek emotional connection. For example, a user on a dating app may apply AI filters that refine facial symmetry, lighten skin, or slim features before sending photos to potential partners. Their goal is not simply vanity: it is the pursuit of relational acknowledgment; someone will see me, want me, or love me. The edited image becomes an instrument for securing that acknowledgment, much like undocumented workers rely on trusted relationships to affirm their personhood. Spatial anchoring surfaces when individuals curate online profiles as aesthetic or emotionally safe spaces. An Instagram feed filled with carefully edited images, consistent lighting, flawless skin, idealized body proportions which function as a digital sanctuary where the person feels more in control of how they are seen. Just as migrants invest in physical or symbolic safety zones, online users create "beautiful spaces" in which their identity feels less vulnerable to judgment.

Temporal anchoring maps onto the use of AI-enhanced "glow-up" posts, throwback images, or re-edited older photos. A person might revisit pictures from years ago and generate improved versions with AI, posting them as evidence of personal growth or attractiveness. This creates continuity between past and future selves that is emotionally stabilizing: I can become the person in these images; this is who I was, or who I might be. In digital environments, where comparison and

self-doubt are amplified, these practices serve the same stabilizing purpose as the temporal grounding strategies observed in Derakhshan et al.'s (2024) study.

Moral anchoring becomes more complex online, especially in relation to beauty standards and desirability. While some users express their moral selves by rejecting filters or embracing "authentic" images, many others experience internal pressure to conform to beauty norms. This pressure can lead to extreme strategies, such as adopting heavily altered AI portraits or even stealing photos from more conventionally attractive individuals. Although deceptive, these acts often arise from a deep desire to reverse feelings of moralized inadequacy; I am worthy of attention; I deserve affection; I should not be dismissed because of my appearance. The altered or stolen image becomes a symbol of moral compensation, not unlike the value-asserting behaviors workers engage in to sustain a sense of dignity.

When viewed through Derakhshan et al.'s lens, these online behaviors are not superficial exaggerations but expressions of personhood anchoring under digital conditions of limbo. The digital landscape constantly destabilizes recognition in ways that explain how people may be widely visible yet emotionally unseen, present in feeds yet ignored in meaningful ways, attractive in one filtered image yet quickly forgotten in the next. The desire to be loved, respected, envied, or romantically desired is thus tied to stabilizing one's digital personhood in environments that make such recognition fleeting, conditional, and effortful.

By defining the personhood elements first and then mapping them onto digital practices, it becomes clear that filters, AI image enhancement, body modification apps, and even borrowed identities all stem from a fundamental human effort to be acknowledged as someone; to be visible in a world that too easily renders people invisible unless they perfect themselves for display.

Personhood has long been understood as a relational and processual phenomenon, emerging through recognition, social belonging, and the shared construction of meaning (Jackson & Karp, 1990; Riesman, 1992; Broom et al., 2021). In contemporary digital environments, however, the grounds of recognition have shifted decisively. Visibility is quantified through likes, shares, and views; social worth is inferred from metrics; and identity becomes a public, persistent, and algorithmically filtered performance. In this context, individuals are required not simply to be persons, but to continually produce and curate personhood in ways that satisfy diffuse audiences and platform logics. Derakhshan et al. (2024) conceptualize personhood limbo as a state in which undocumented workers are neither fully included nor fully excluded, existing in a precarious condition of "absence–presence" shaped by socio-legal constraints and hostile public discourses (see also Coutin, 2003; Kubal, 2013; McKanders, 2010; Rabin, 2021).

Although the legal and material stakes of undocumented migration differ profoundly from those of digital life, the underlying structure of liminality is strikingly resonant. In both settings, personhood must be actively anchored against

forces that unsettle it, whether those forces are immigration regimes, stigmatizing discourses, or algorithmic attention economies.

This commentary extends Derakhshan et al.'s (2024) framework to propose the concept of digital personhood limbo, which represents a condition in which online personhood is continuously at risk of fragmentation, erasure, or devaluation, and must therefore be stabilized through intensive self-presentation work. Within digital personhood limbo, individuals face an unstable economy of recognition, in which the self is validated today and ignored tomorrow, celebrated in one space and vilified in another (Burrell, 2024). The cumulative mental health effects, stress, cognitive overload, emotional exhaustion, and identity confusion, are substantial yet under-theorized.

Problem Statement

Although research in cyberpsychology has examined online identity, self-presentation, and impression management, there is still limited understanding of how digital environments shape the deeper experience of personhood, the sense of existing as a coherent, valued, and recognizable human being. Much of the current literature focuses on behaviors such as curated profiles, on-line exploitation, risky on-line behaviors and deceptive self-presentation without fully addressing the psychological mechanisms that drive these practices or the mental health risks associated with them. As a result, the field lacks a clear framework to explain why digital spaces can make individuals feel simultaneously visible and invisible, affirmed and dismissed, or valued only when idealized. This gap creates a need for new conceptual work that clarifies how digital systems destabilize personhood and contribute to emotional strain, identity confusion, and cognitive fatigue.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this perspective paper is to highlight digital personhood as a critical yet under-examined concept and to encourage deeper scholarly engagement with how online environments influence individuals' sense of worth, continuity, and recognition. The paper aims to broaden the field's understanding of the psychological dynamics underlying online self-construction. Rather than offering empirical findings, this paper seeks to open a conceptual conversation, connect emerging patterns in the literature, and invite researchers to scrutinize digital personhood as an essential lens for understanding mental health challenges in contemporary digital life.

Significance Statement

This inquiry is significant because perspective papers play a vital role in shaping new areas of academic inquiry by synthesizing existing knowledge, identifying conceptual blind spots, and proposing directions for future research. By drawing attention to the understudied dynamics of digital personhood, this paper

contributes to the development of a more comprehensive understanding of how digital systems affect psychological well-being. Highlighting this gap encourages researchers to build on current theories and develop empirical studies that examine how digital personhood forms, collapses, or becomes strained. In doing so, the paper lays the groundwork for more robust, clinically relevant insights into how digital environments contribute to identity instability, emotional exhaustion, and the growing mental health concerns associated with online self-presentation.

Personhood, Liminality, and the Digital Condition

Personhood, as developed in philosophical, legal, and sociological traditions, is not a fixed property but a status negotiated through recognition, rights, and moral standing (Brożek, 2017; Hitlin & Andersson, 2023; Kurki & Pietrzykowski, 2017). Historically, the boundaries of personhood have been drawn to exclude certain categories of human beings, enslaved people, racialized groups, women, disabled people, migrants, thereby legitimizing graded forms of membership and rights (Kittay, 2005; McKanders, 2010; Schuck, 2013). In migration contexts, this exclusion often manifests through precarious legal statuses, temporary protections, and "semi-legality" (Kubal, 2013), which collectively produce what Rabin (2021) calls "legal limbo" and what Derakhshan et al. (2024) term "personhood limbo."

Within such limiting conditions, individuals experience their personhood as neither fully denied nor fully secured. Their rights, opportunities, and legitimacy remain contingent upon bureaucratic categories, public sentiment, and political decisions (Gibney, 2004; International Labour Organization, 2021; International Organization for Migration, 2022; Ipsos MORI, 2021). Research on asylum seekers, refugees, and undocumented migrants shows how socio-legal structures place people "inside" national territories but "outside" full membership, leaving them suspended between belonging and exclusion (Conlon, 2011; Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020; Devitt, 2023; Macías Gómez-Estern, 2013; UNHCR, 2011).

Digital environments reproduce a structurally similar, but psychologically mediated, form of liminality. Here, the axis of inclusion/exclusion is not formal citizenship, but algorithmic relevance and audience attention. Users may enjoy viral visibility in one moment and near-invisibility in the next. Their digital personhood is gradable and fluid in a manner reminiscent of "gradable legal personhood" (Wojtczak, 2022) where rather than rights being added or removed, it is visibility, credibility, and perceived worth that fluctuate.

Digital personhood limbo thus names a condition in which one's status as a recognized person in online spaces is never fully stable. The person is present as a data profile, content producer, or follower count, yet often absent from meaningful recognition. This "pervasive absence–presence" (Broom et al., 2021; Wylie, 2009) generates chronic uncertainty about how one is seen, whether one matters, and what one must do to remain legible.

Personhood Anchoring Work Online

Derakhshan et al. (2024) show that undocumented workers engage in personhood anchoring work which encompasses relational, spatial, temporal, and moral practices that stabilize aspects of their personhood in the face of invalidation, discrimination, and exclusion (see also Alkhaled & Sasaki, 2022; Daniel, 2022; Magalhaes et al., 2010). Rather than primarily resisting or transforming structures, these practices allow individuals to endure within the limbo.

Online, users similarly perform work to anchor their personhood in environments that constantly threaten to fragment it (Burrell, 2024). They cultivate networks, craft narratives, curate images, and perform moral identities to maintain a sense of self that feels coherent and socially acknowledged. Yet, because these practices often rely on distortion and idealization, they exert significant mental and emotional costs.

False Success and the Cognitive Burden of Upward Identity Performance

Identity work scholarship emphasizes that individuals engage in narrative construction to align who they are with who they aspire to be (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Bennett & Hennekam, 2018; Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014). In digital contexts, this often manifests as the projection of upwardly mobile, economically secure, and socially admired selves, even when offline realities are far more precarious.

A user, for instance, may present themselves as an independent entrepreneur with flourishing "projects," while in reality juggling unstable jobs and debt. The visual language, coworking spaces, laptops, travel shots, functions as symbolic capital that signals competence and success. This is not merely vanity; it is a strategy to anchor personhood in a crowded arena where perceived productivity and ambition are rewarded (Ashforth et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2019). However, the maintenance of such false success narratives is cognitively taxing. Deception research and qualitative work on complex identity management highlight the mental effort involved in sustaining consistent stories, suppressing conflicting information, and repairing narrative gaps (Campbell et al., 2020; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In digital personhood limbo, users must remember prior claims, calibrate new content to old narratives, and manage cross-platform coherence. Each embellishment becomes a commitment that must be honored in future performances. This continuous upward identity performance generates stress, anxiety about exposure, and cumulative cognitive fatigue. The individual is caught between the desire for recognition and the effort of maintaining a persona detached from their actual life (Burrell, 2024). Personhood, in this register, is less a grounded state than an ongoing, exhausting project.

Fabricated Happiness, Emotional Dissonance, and Mental Health

Another core feature of digital personhood limbo is the imperative to display emotional positivity. Platform cultures and algorithms disproportionately reward cheerful, inspirational, and aesthetically serene content. Negative effects that include sadness, fear, and anger may be tolerated but are seldom valorized. Users thus learn that the safest route to recognition is through the performance of happiness (Burrell, 2024).

Empirical and theoretical work on personhood underscores the significance of acknowledging pain and vulnerability as integral aspects of being a person (Broom et al., 2021; Hitlin & Andersson, 2023; Kittay, 2005). When distress is silenced, marginalized, or pathologized, the person's moral and emotional standing is undermined. Migrant and refugee research similarly documents how institutions and publics frequently discount migrants' suffering, treating their experiences as exaggerated or strategically constructed (Esses et al., 2017; Gibney, 2004; Lee et al., 2020).

In digital spaces, a parallel form of emotional invalidation emerges. Users may be going through grief, burnout, or mental health crises, yet feel compelled to post smiling photos, affirmations, or "productive" updates. The divergence between inner experience and online performance creates emotional dissonance that can aggravate anxiety and depression (Burrell, 2024). Over time, individuals may come to trust their curated feed more than their own feelings, interpreting their distress as a personal failure to match the happiness they display and see in others. This chronic suppression of negative affect, motivated by the need to remain visible, likable, and "on brand," constitutes a form of personhood anchoring that secures social recognition at the cost of psychological integrity. The person becomes legible as a cheerful subject precisely by disavowing integral aspects of their lived emotional life.

Exaggerated Accomplishments and the Anxiety of Narrative Coherence

Digital life intensifies the significance of achievement for personhood. Career milestones, educational credentials, activist engagements, and creative projects are all readily displayed and publicly evaluated. Within this environment, exaggerating accomplishments becomes a tempting strategy for securing recognition, and what might once have been a private embellishment in conversation becomes a persistent, documented feature of online identity (Burrell, 2024).

Research on narrative identity work shows how individuals use stories about their past and future to make sense of transitions, disruptions, and aspirations (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Jones Christensen & Newman, 2024). In precarious or liminal contexts, such narratives can stabilize a sense of self that feels under threat (Chandrachud, 2022; Conlon, 2011; Macías Gómez-Estern, 2013). Yet when these narratives are exaggerated or fictive, their maintenance produces

anxiety. Every new post must be weighed against the existing storyline; every new biographical detail must be harmonized with prior claims.

This form of temporal anchoring resembles the strategies by which migrants and displaced persons make sense of disrupted life courses, drawing on selective memories and imagined futures to assert continuity (Alkhaled & Sasaki, 2022; Daniel, 2022; Kodeih et al., 2023). Online, however, the archive of past claims is visible, searchable, and subject to scrutiny. A single inconsistency can undermine the credibility of the entire narrative. The result is a heightened sense of vulnerability and a continuous mental load dedicated to narrative risk management.

Validation-Seeking and the Stress of Quantified Recognition

A central feature of digital personhood limbo is the quantification of recognition. Where relational personhood traditionally depends on qualitative acknowledgment, being seen, heard, and treated as a morally significant other (Jackson & Karp, 1990; McCarthy, 2012), digital environments translate recognition into metrics that often include follower counts, engagement rates, and page views. This quantified recognition creates cycles of anticipation, evaluation, and self-judgment. A user may post content and then repeatedly check for feedback, interpreting low engagement as a sign of personal inadequacy rather than algorithmic behavior or audience fatigue. The psychological volatility resembles the structured uncertainty that shapes migrants' experiences of pending legal decisions or conditional protections (Busetta et al., 2021; Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020; Rabin, 2021). In both cases, external systems allocate value in ways that feel opaque, unstable, and existentially consequential.

The pursuit of validation online becomes a form of relational anchoring work; a way to confirm that one's personhood matters to others (Burrell, 2024). Yet precisely because the metrics are unstable and publicly visible, they also generate shame, envy, and anxiety. Individuals may delete posts that underperform, obsessively optimize content for engagement, or compulsively compare themselves to more "successful" peers. The relational fabric of personhood is thus woven through an infrastructure that fosters stress and self-surveillance (Burrell, 2024).

Digital Companionship, Overextension, and Fragile Belonging

For many, digital communities provide crucial relational support in contexts of geographic displacement, social isolation, or stigmatization. Work on relational personhood underscores how family, community, and intimate relationality underpin a sense of being someone to others (Joseph, 2018; McCarthy, 2012; Lepani, 2015; Zeyen & Branzei, 2023). Online groups, fandoms, activist circles, hobby communities, support networks, can play analogous roles, particularly for

those who find limited acceptance offline (Lee et al., 2020; Kangas-Müller et al., 2023). Yet digital companionship also has distinctive vulnerabilities (Burrell, 2024). Belonging often depends on sustained availability: being responsive in chats, participating in group projects, maintaining a visible presence on feeds. The same infrastructures that enable contact also intensify expectations of immediacy and constant interaction. Members may fear that withdrawing, even temporarily, to protect their mental health will be interpreted as disloyalty or indifference.

Moreover, digital communities can dissolve abruptly due to interpersonal conflicts, platform changes, or simple attrition. This mirrors displacement experiences in which communities are fragmented by policy, violence, or economic pressures (Coutin, 2003; Dessa case studies in migration: Alkhaled & Sasaki, 2022; Jones Christensen & Newman, 2024). For those whose sense of personhood is deeply entangled with online communities, such dissolutions can be destabilizing, triggering grief, loneliness, or renewed identity uncertainty.

Digital companionship thus operates as a form of spatial anchoring work in virtual space, creating "bubbles" of refuge analogous to material zones of safety in precarious contexts (Busse & Sharp, 2019; Kodeih et al., 2023; Rodner et al., 2020). But these bubbles require ongoing emotional labor and remain structurally fragile.

False Identity Construction and the Splintering of Personhood

The most extreme form of digital personhood anchoring is the deliberate construction of false identities, ranging from modest age or occupation adjustments to complete fabrications of name, nationality, and life history. In some cases, such practices emerge from playful experimentation; in others, they reflect deep-seated feelings of inadequacy, fear, or marginalization.

Research on marginalization and tiered personhood shows how people in precarious positions often adjust their self-presentation to navigate hostile systems, sometimes inhabiting contradictory personas across contexts (Charanpal, 2015; Chandrachud, 2022; McKanders, 2010; Sirriyeh, 2020). Online, this logic is amplified by anonymity, audience segmentation, and the ease of constructing multiple profiles.

Yet maintaining false identities is profoundly demanding. Individuals must remember which persona is active in which space, ensure internal consistency for each, and guard against accidental cross-contamination. The cognitive and emotional toll, hypervigilance, fear of exposure, chronic anxiety, is significant. Over time, the distinction between "real" and "staged" selves can blur, leading to feelings of fragmentation or disconnection from any stable sense of who one is (Hitlin & Andersson, 2023; Riesman, 1992).

From a personhood perspective, false identity construction is a paradoxical form of anchoring work because it seeks recognition and safety through strategies

that erode the coherence and integrity of personhood. The self becomes a cluster of performative fragments, each calibrated to different audiences, with no secure integrative core.

Digital Personhood Limbo as a Mental Health Problem

Taken together, these practices, false success, fabricated happiness, exaggerated accomplishments, intense validation-seeking, digital companionship, and false identity construction, reveal digital personhood limbo as a mental health problem, not merely a cultural or technological curiosity. The work required to sustain online personhood is structurally patterned because it arises from the interaction of human needs for recognition and belonging with platform architectures that reward visibility, optimism, novelty, and performance.

The analogy with migration and displacement is illuminating. Just as undocumented workers in personhood limbo must engage in relational, spatial, temporal, and moral anchoring to maintain a sense of self in the face of exclusion (Derakhshan et al., 2024; Alkhaled & Sasaki, 2022; Busetta et al., 2021; Magalhaes et al., 2010), digital users must do similar work to remain visible, valued, and coherent in online spaces. The key difference is that the primary currency in digital contexts is psychological rather than legal, and what is at stake is not formal status but mental health and the integrity of personhood.

Recognizing digital personhood limbo as such invites a shift in how we understand online life. Rather than framing problematic behaviors, obsessive posting, constant curation, superficial positivity, or identity fabrication, as individual failings, one might interpret them as adaptive responses to environments that structurally destabilize personhood. This framing also suggests that interventions should target not only individual coping strategies but also platform design, cultural expectations, and broader normative assumptions about visibility, success, and emotional display.

Darrell Burrell Digital Personhood Systems Framework (DPSF)

The Darrell Burrell Digital Personhood Systems Framework explains how people form and maintain their sense of identity online by looking at four interconnected parts which include, who they are when they enter the digital space (Input Identity), how they build their online image (Image Construction), how others respond to that image (Social Feedback), and how they internally process and reconcile all of this (Internal Integration). These parts work together like a loop. A person's insecurities or hopes shape ranging from, the kind of photos they post or edits they make. Those curated images then receive reactions, likes, comments, attention, or silence, which influence how the person feels about themselves. That emotional reaction feeds back into how they see themselves and what they do next online, shaping the next round of posts, edits, or interactions. When these

components stay in balance, digital identity can feel stable and supportive. But when they get out of sync, like when someone's edited photos get far more praise than their real ones, the system starts to strain.

This model helps explain why people sometimes rely on filters, AI-enhanced portraits, or even stolen photos to craft more attractive versions of themselves. These actions are not just attempts to deceive; they are efforts to stabilize a sense of worth in an environment where beauty, attention, and desirability carry enormous weight. When the digital identity becomes too different from the real one, the person may feel pressure to maintain that idealized version at all costs, leading to stress, fear of exposure, and emotional fatigue. The framework shows how digital personhood can become unstable not because someone "lied," but because the systems influencing their online identity, self-perception, image creation, feedback from others, and internal processing, fell out of alignment. By understanding the model as a system of moving parts, it becomes easier to recognize where digital identity struggles originate and how they can be addressed.

This model conceptualizes digital personhood as an emergent property of interacting systems, not a set of discrete anchoring tasks. It identifies four interdependent system components, Input Identity, Image Construction, Social Feedback, and Internal Integration, and describes how disruptions in these components create Digital Personhood Limbo, a state of unstable or eroded selfhood.

This framework departs from Derakhshan et al. (2024) by focusing not on anchoring work but on system flows, loops, and failure points that shape online personhood.

I. Four Core System Components of Digital Personhood

1. Input Identity System

The Input Identity System represents the raw materials from which digital identity is constructed. It includes:

- Actual self: personality, history, insecurities, physical attributes
- Aspirational self: desired attractiveness, success, and social acceptance
- Perceived societal expectations: beauty ideals, algorithmic preferences, community norms

Why this matters in digital personhood:

People rarely enter digital spaces as neutral actors; they bring a mixture of vulnerabilities and ambitions. These inputs heavily influence how dramatically they alter themselves online.

Practical examples:

- A teen entering social media with low self-esteem may immediately seek filters to "correct" perceived flaws.

- A recently divorced person might seek romantic reaffirmation and turn to AI-enhanced photos for confidence.
- Someone who receives few compliments offline may see digital platforms as their best chance at visibility.

Limbo risk:
When the difference between the actual and aspirational self becomes too wide, the system becomes unstable, increasing the likelihood of deceptive or extreme digital self-reconstruction.

2. Image Construction System

This system encompasses the tools, tactics, and decisions people use to create their digital persona. This model treats identity construction as a technologically mediated subsystem with its own pressures.

Key behaviors include:

- Heavy use of beauty filters, face-smoothing apps, body-slimming features
- AI-generated enhancements (e.g., perfect skin, modified facial symmetry, body reshaping)
- Hyper-curated aesthetic feeds resembling digital "showrooms"
- Fabrication through stolen photos or hybrid AI-human composite images

Why this matters:
This subsystem determines what version of a person gets projected into the digital world. If the constructed image is too idealized or disconnected from reality, the rest of the system strains under the mismatch.

Practical examples:

- A user who feels unattractive crafts flawless AI portraits for dating apps.
- A socially anxious person constructs a bubbly, energetic persona online that they cannot maintain offline.
- A lonely user adopts another person's images entirely, believing their own appearance "won't be enough."

Limbo risk:
System overload happens when maintaining the curated persona demands constant vigilance, deception, or emotional labor.

3. Social Feedback System

This subsystem processes the reactions to one's digital persona. In a systems-thinking model, feedback is a regulator; it stabilizes, destabilizes, or amplifies behavior.

Feedback signals include:

- Likes, shares, comments
- Romantic interest, flirtation, or admiration

- Silence, ghosting, rejection, or low engagement
- Negative comments or exposure

Why this matters:
Feedback calibrates self-worth and drives self-modification. Online recognition becomes a social currency that reinforces or undermines digital personhood.
Practical examples:

- A user receives more likes on an AI-edited photo than on natural ones, reinforcing further editing.
- Someone experiences silence on dating apps unless images are heavily altered, confirming the belief that the real self is "unacceptable."
- A misrepresentation that gains positive attention pushes the person into deeper inauthenticity.

Limbo risk:
Volatile feedback loops (fluctuating engagement, inconsistent validation) can destabilize identity, creating dependence on external affirmation.

4. Internal Integration System

The Internal Integration System determines whether a person can reconcile their input identity with their constructed digital persona and the feedback they receive.
When this system functions well:

- A person remains grounded
- Digital identity complements offline identity
- Recognition online supports psychological well-being

When it fails:

- Internal identity conflict grows
- Cognitive fatigue increases
- Self-worth becomes algorithmically tethered
- Personhood fragments

Practical examples:

- A person feels "fake" when compliments are directed at an edited or stolen image.
- An individual experiences panic when asked for a video call because their real appearance diverges too far from their curated images.
- Someone becomes addicted to maintaining their digital persona because their offline self feels inadequate by comparison.

Limbo risk:
The inability to integrate one's real and digital selves produces digital personhood limbo, a suspended state where the individual is both hyper-visible and fundamentally unseen.

II. The Digital Personhood Loop: How Systems Interact

The four systems create a continuous loop:

1. **I**nput Identity fuels
2. Image Construction, which receives
3. Social Feedback, which shapes
4. Internal Integration, which modifies
5. Input Identity for the next cycle.

This loop is recursive: each cycle can stabilize or destabilize personhood depending on how aligned or misaligned the systems are.

III. Digital Personhood Failure Points ("Risk Nodes")

A systems approach identifies specific failure points where digital personhood limbo is most likely to arise:

Risk Node 1: Identity Inflation

Occurs when the constructed image is drastically superior to the actual or felt identity.

Example: An AI "beautified" dating profile produces romantic interest the person feels unable to live up to.

Risk Node 2: Feedback Volatility

Erratic likes, comments, or romantic engagement destabilize self-esteem.

Example: A post goes viral one day and is ignored; that experience reinforces emotional oscillation.

Risk Node 3: Persona Maintenance Fatigue

The labor required to maintain an edited, curated, or stolen identity becomes unsustainable.

Example: Someone maintaining multiple personas across platforms becomes overwhelmed by contradictions.

Risk Node 4: Integration Breakdown

The constructed self and the lived self-become irreconcilable.

Example: Feeling alienated from one's unedited appearance because digital images gain so much more praise.

IV. Digital Personhood Outcomes

Depending on system health and alignment, individuals may experience:

1. Stabilized Digital Personhood

- Authentic or lightly curated identity
- Healthy feedback loops
- High integration between offline and online self
- Minimal cognitive strain

2. Inflated Digital Personhood

- Recognition is high but tied to unrealistic images
- Growing fear of exposure
- Dependence on digital desirability

3. Fragmented Digital Personhood

- Multiple conflicting personas
- Exhaustion, shame, or identity confusion
- Emotional strain from constant presentation work

4. Digital Personhood Limbo

- Core instability across system components
- Chronic insecurity ("seen but not known")

Conclusion

Digital environments do not merely provide a new stage on which pre-existing personhood is performed; they actively shape what it means to be a person. Through the concept of digital personhood limbo, this commentary draws attention to the unstable, contingent, and mentally burdensome nature of online personhood and connects it to a broader lineage of research on liminality, marginalization, and personhood work (Broom et al., 2021; Chandrachud, 2022; Jackson & Karp, 1990; Kittay, 2005; Rabin, 2021). The practices through which individuals attempt to stabilize their digital selves, curating success, performing happiness, exaggerating achievements, pursuing validation, cultivating fragile communities, and constructing false identities, can be understood as forms of personhood anchoring work. They allow users to endure digital personhood limbo but often at considerable cognitive and emotional cost.

If personhood is indeed, as Riesman (1992) suggests, an ongoing process of meaning-making, then digital environments have become crucial sites where that process is intensified, distorted, and at times endangered. Understanding digital personhood limbo as a structurally produced psychological condition is a necessary step toward imagining digital worlds in which personhood can be anchored with less strain and more dignity.

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