

Research Article

# Navigating Negative Social Identity: Virtual Identity as a Coping Strategy for Unemployed Youth

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## Abstract

This study explored how unemployed young people create virtual social identities as a coping mechanism for their unfavorable social identities. It hypothesized that as young people without jobs have limited opportunities to interact with others, they might use virtual social identities to redefine their identity. The study used survey research with 200 participants and qualitative interviews with 25 respondents. The results indicated that youth unemployment, compounded by social segregation, negatively affects relationships, social identity, and overall well-being. Findings showed that virtual social identities helped youth develop negative outcomes of their offline social identities, although excessive use of virtual platforms could become a potential source of additional stress. Qualitative data analysis identified key themes including social isolation, stress, humiliation, alienation, and dashed hopes. The importance of the virtual environment in the formation of social identity among unemployed youth was also highlighted, which is the novel contribution to the field. The article also discusses recommendations for social interventions for supporting unemployed youth.

## Keywords

Youth Unemployment, Social Identity, Virtual Identity, Social Segregation, Well-Being

## 1. Introduction

Youth unemployment is a widespread challenge having significant psychological and social consequences, particularly for young people at critical stages of identity formation. The adverse effects of unemployment are greatly strengthened by financial instability, which often leads to feelings of social isolation, low self-esteem, and career aspirations. The negative impact of unemployment is not limited only to financial problems [30]. Moreover, long-term unemployed people continue to be unhappy even after getting a job [5]. Studies show that unemployed individuals report lower levels of happiness compared to their employed peers, even if they have some income [7, 17, 30]. These effects last longer than

major life events such as divorce or the death of a loved one, in which an individual's well-being returns to baseline several years later they have some income [4]. These effects last long. In addition, retired older adults are less likely to experience unemployment than younger adults, who experience psychological consequences due to their identity development and career planning [1, 16]. People who are unemployed often feel socially isolated because they may avoid forming social relationships due to embarrassment or financial difficulties [1, 5, 12]. Social distancing can limit individuals' ability to form connections and seek alternative opportunities. The experience of unemployment can also negatively affect social iden-

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tity [23]. This includes individuals' sense of belonging to social groups and their perceived social roles. Social identity is a crucial aspect of how people view themselves in the context of their society [25]. When individuals are unemployed, they may feel disconnected from these social groups and lose their sense of belonging within their social structure [11]. This condition can lead to feelings of isolation and low self-esteem, which ultimately affects their overall well-being. As a result, they may question their abilities and values, both personally and socially. Consequently, this can lead to behavioral changes such as decreased social interaction, increased anxiety, and decreased motivation to engage in activities that were once considered meaningful. The cumulative effect of these factors can create a cycle that further reinforces feelings of exclusion, making it difficult to find work and reintegrate into social groups [25]. This study uses a social-psychological perspective to examine how unemployed youth cope with their negative social identities by forming virtual social identities. It suggests that since unemployed youth have limited opportunities for social interaction, they are increasingly drawn to online communities where they can redefine their sense of self-worth and identity. The study aims to shed light on the role of virtual social identities in mitigating the negative psychological effects of unemployment. However, it also highlights the challenges of overusing virtual reality. The findings highlight the importance of social support systems and online communities for unemployed adults.

A number of studies have been conducted on youth unemployment and its psychological impact, but there is a gap in understanding how virtual social identities function as coping mechanism minimizing the negative consequences of their offline social identity. The existing literature mainly focuses on the offline consequences of unemployment, while online adaptive strategies are less studied. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating how unemployed youth use virtual social identities to reduce the negative effects of social isolation and reduced well-being.

*Hypothesis 1* Unemployed adolescents who experience a lack of social interactions are more likely to adapt virtual social identities as a coping mechanism.

*Hypothesis 2* There is a positive correlation between the strength of unemployed youth's virtual social identity and their overall well-being.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Latent Deprivation Model

According to the latent deprivation model [11]. Employment serves both overt and covert functions necessary for mental health. The obvious function is related to earning income. Latent functions consist of five primary non-financial benefits, such as structured time, social contact, collective purpose, status, and regular activity. When these hidden functions can-

not be performed due to unemployment, people experience psychological distress. Jahoda's model is important in that it highlights the broader social and psychological consequences of employment that go beyond financial stability and highlights the importance of hidden benefits for mental health.

### 2.2. Social Isolation

Youth unemployment is frequently linked to a phenomenon known as social isolation, in which young people feel disconnected from their societal networks [8]. A state of social isolation leads to a number of negative outcomes, including but not limited to depressive symptoms, anxiety disorders, and decreased overall well-being [5]. In addition, people with social isolation experience feelings of loneliness and alienation, which affect their mental health. Feelings of loneliness and alienation can hinder not only the effective job search but also the development of social skills necessary for success in the workplace.

### 2.3. Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory [29] explains how individuals derive their sense of self from their membership in social groups. According to Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory, group status significantly influences the formation of a social identity. Employing criteria such as a person's employment status in comparative evaluations can exacerbate this effect. Individuals who are unemployed often struggle to perceive themselves in a positive light, leading to detrimental effects on their self-esteem [1, 11] and overall well-being [26]. The stigma associated with unemployment can lead to feelings of shame, inadequacy, and loss of social status, which in turn affect self-esteem and identity formation [21]

Thus, negative social identities can have harmful effects, but social identity theory suggests strategies for mitigating them. Individual mobility involves leaving a negative social status group to become a member of a higher status group. Another strategy is when individuals try to psychologically distance themselves from their group to reduce identification. Group-based strategies, such as social creativity, can be used when leaving the group is not possible. These include establishing new dimensions of in-group excellence, identifying outgroups for positive comparison, and positively revaluing the group's values. Social competition involves collective action to challenge the status quo and gain acceptance from the majority culture. Given the complexity of social identity, individuals may simultaneously employ multiple strategies to cope with unemployment.

### 2.4. Virtual Social Identity

Virtual social identity refers to the constructed persona that individuals create in digital spaces such as social media

platforms, online forums, and virtual worlds. Virtual social identity is multifaceted and includes aspects such as online persona, community membership, and digital reputation. Virtual environments provide platforms where individuals can create and express their identities.

This identity can be a true reflection of a person, a created version that emphasizes specific characteristics, or even an entirely fictional persona. The flexibility of virtual identities allows individuals to experiment with different aspects of their personality, explore new social roles, and engage in interactions that may not be possible in offline settings [20].

Unemployment can lead to increased engagement in virtual environments as individuals seek social support, relationships, and new opportunities. Online platforms can increase a sense of belonging, which can help mitigate the negative effects of unemployment. However, the nature and quality of these online interactions and their impact on identity development require further investigation.

## 2.5. Well-Being

Well-being refers to people's subjective feelings of physical, mental, and social successful, which are influenced by a variety of internal and external circumstances. Youth unemployment, social identity problems, and social isolation can have a substantial impact on young people's well-being.

According to Frey [8], becoming unemployed is often viewed unfavorably and can have long-term consequences for an individual's self-esteem and, as a result, happiness. Furthermore, the duration of unemployment has been shown to have additional effects on happiness. Individuals who have been unemployed for six months or more are more likely to report feeling unhappy than those who have been unemployed for a shorter period.

Well-being, viewed in this article as a function of self-esteem and life satisfaction, reflects how an individual's sense of worth and overall life satisfaction contribute to their overall mental and emotional health. High self-esteem tends to lead to greater resilience and enhanced well-being. Similarly, life satisfaction—how satisfied a person is with their life circumstances—directly affects well-being. When both self-esteem and life satisfaction are high, individuals are more likely to experience a sense of well-being, characterized by feelings of happiness, contentment, and psychological stability. Conversely, low self-esteem or dissatisfaction with life can lead to decreased well-being, which is manifested by increased stress, anxiety, and a negative outlook on life [8].

## 3. Method

### *Participants*

Participants were selected based on International Labour Organization (International Labor organization – ILO) criteria, which define unemployment as individuals aged 15 or older who have not worked for at least one hour in the past seven

days, have been actively seeking employment for at least four weeks, and are available to work within the next two weeks.

Due to the specificity of the study group, the participants were selected using convenience and snowball sampling methods, which may lead to selection bias. This limitation may affect the generalizability of the findings, as these methods are non-probabilistic intrusion methods.

### *Research instruments*

An online survey was conducted using a specially designed questionnaire. The confidentiality was guaranteed.

The survey questionnaire covered demographic information, unemployment experiences, social identity, virtual social identity, social relationships, and well-being. Additionally, standard measures such as the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale [25] and the Satisfaction with Life Scale were included. Reliability of a Georgian version of Self-Esteem Scale is ( $\alpha = .76$ ).

Social identity was measured using Weimeich's [30] instrument, adapted from 12 relevant constructs used in previous research [16]. These were: dependent-independent; incompetent-competent; passive-active; angry-calm; poor-rich; frustrated-satisfied; worthless-valuable; unsuccessful-successful; isolated from others -connected with others; unhappy-happy; non-popular –popular; hopeless-hopeful ( $\alpha = .719$ ).

For measuring virtual social identity, the following questions were used on a 7-point scale. A mean score of these items was calculated to measure the virtual social identity:

1. I feel more confident in my virtual social world than in my offline world.
2. I feel like I belong more to my online communities than to my offline social group
3. I feel more accepted in my online communities than in my offline social circles.
4. My online friends understand me better than my offline friends.
5. My online life is more satisfying than my offline life.
6. My online life helps me balance the challenges of offline life ( $\alpha = .955$ ).

In-depth interviews were conducted using an interview guide, which covered perceptions of unemployed youth and coping strategies they used. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. The confidentiality was guaranteed.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 25 participants, consisting of 15 females and 10 males, within the age range of 21 to 29 years ( $M = 22$ ;  $SD = 2$ ).

Several measures were taken to ensure the reliability and validity of the survey instrument and interview guides. Rosenberg's self-esteem scale and life satisfaction scale, which are intended for the Georgian population, were used. A measure of social identity was adapted from the author's own research. In addition, the survey instrument was piloted with a small group (30 respondents) to ensure the clarity of questions. Qualitative interview guidelines were reviewed by experts in the field to ensure the content validity. These methods were

used to reduce measurement errors and ensure the reliability of the data collected.

## 4. Results

The results section integrates both qualitative and quantitative data analyses. Quantitative data underwent analysis using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics, correlation analyses, and regression models were employed to explore the relationships between unemployment, virtual social identity, social isolation, and well-being.

A thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data [2]. This is a well-defined procedure for ensuring a systematic approach to the evaluation of the qualitative interviews. The process included data entry, generating initial codes, searching for themes, discussing themes, defining and identifying themes, and drafting the final report. In addition, content analysis was used for analyzing the data.

### 4.1. Demographic Characteristics

The survey included 200 participants, comprising 65% females and 35% males. The average age of respondents was 24 years ( $SD = 2.93$  minimum = 20 years, maximum = 29 years).

The marital status distribution indicated 85% of respondents were single, 10% were married, 3% were divorced, 2% were living together but not married. On average, all respondents completed their initial qualification two years prior ( $SD = 1$ , minimum = 1 year, maximum = 7 years).

Regarding education, 10% had only incomplete secondary education (up to 9th grade), 20% had completed secondary education, 15% had completed vocational education, 20% had incomplete higher education, and 35% had received higher education (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Demographic data.

Characteristics	Values
Gender	1. Female – 65 % 2. Male – 35 %
Education	1. 9th grade (basic education) – 10 % 2. Grade 12 (secondary education) – 20 % 3. Vocational education – 15 % 4. Incomplete higher education – 20 % 5. Higher Education -35 %
Marital Status	1. Single – 85 % 2. Married – 10 % 3. Divorced – 3 % 4. We live together but are not married – 2 %
Employment status	1. Unemployed, never employed -35 % 2. More often unemployed than employed during the last 5 years – 35 % 3. were more often employed than unemployed during the last 5 years – 25 %
Social-Economic status	1. Very high (we do not experience material problems, if necessary we can buy an apartment or country house) -0 % 2. High (we can buy everything, except an apartment, country house and luxury items) -1 % 3. Average (we have money to buy household appliances, but we cannot buy a car) -80 % 4. Low (we have money for food, but buying clothes is a big problem) – 18 % 5. Very low (we barely make ends meet from month to month, we don't have money for food) - 2 %

About 80% of respondents evaluated their socio-economic status as average (it indicated that they could not buy a car); none indicated a very high status, while 1% reported a high status, and 2% reported a very low status.

### 4.2. Experience of Unemployment

Unemployed, the bigger part (35%) was more often unem-

ployed than employed. Others (25%) were more often employed than unemployed during the last 5 years (see table 1).

A substantial majority of the surveyed individuals (comprising 80%) perceive their unemployment status as significantly impacting their daily lives. This observation underscores the profound ramifications of unemployment on personal well-being and societal integration.

Table 2 illustrates that the main challenges of unemploy-

ment include financial instability (90%) followed by feelings of dysfunction (80%) and a lack of participation in social/cultural life (70%). Thus, the harmful effects of unem-

ployment go beyond financial well-being and extend to the perception of one's own dysfunctionality as well as to social dynamics.

**Table 2.** Challenges related to unemployment.

N	Items	Dimension	%
1	Financial Problems	Financial	90
2	I am concerned about my sense of dysfunction		80
3	Lack of participation in social/cultural life (theatre, cinema, etc.)	Social	70
4	Lack of contacts with people (social isolation)		40
5	Lack of initiatives from others to contact me, exclusion		40
6	Problems of relationships with family members		30
7	Health's problems	Health-related	35

Regarding job-search patterns, 45% of respondents were intensively searching for a job, 35% were searching from time to time, and 20% had given up searching for a job. Women were more actively searching for a job than men (Chi-square (2) = 10.673;  $p < .05$ ).

### 4.3. Social Identity and Virtual Social Identity

As mentioned above, respondents were asked to evaluate themselves, unemployed and employed youth on a 7-point scale across 12 bipolar scales. The results are presented in Table 3.

The empirical investigation indicates that unemployed adolescents tend to associate themselves significantly with a collective identity of unemployment within their social circle. Statistical analysis reveals a notable discrepancy in percep-

tions between employed and unemployed youth ( $-0.43$ ;  $T=176.00$   $p < .05$ ), as well as between self-assessment and assessment of employed peers ( $-0.38$ ;  $T=243.95$   $p < .05$ ), while showing minimal difference between self-assessment and assessment of unemployed peers ( $0.05$ ;  $T=100.61$   $p < .05$ ). These findings underscore the influence of socio-economic status on the dynamics of group identification.

The respondents spend an average of 4.57 hours daily on internet with usage ranging from 2 to 14 hours ( $SD=3.9$ ). The most popular platforms were Facebook and Instagram (28% and 18%) followed by ticktock (8%).

As mentioned above, respondents were asked to evaluate themselves, unemployed youth, and employed youth on a 7-point scale across 12 bipolar scales. The results are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Differences between Evaluation of self, unemployed and employed youth.

	Self-evaluati on	Evaluation of Unemployed youth	Evaluation of Employed youth	Self – un- employed	Self – Em- ployed	Unemployed - employed
Dependent-independent	3.30	2.70	3.60	0.60	-0.30	-0.90
Incompetent- competent	3.50	3.30	3.90	0.20	-0.40	-0.60
Passive-active	3.91	3.70	4.20	0.21	-0.29	-0.50
Angry –calm	3.60	3.30	3.80	0.30	-0.20	-.50
Poor-rich	2.70	2.50	3.20	0.20	-0.50	-0.70
Frustrated-satisfied	3.20	3.30	4.25	-0.10	-1.05	-0.95
Worthless –valuable	3.44	3.40	4.25	0.04	-0.81	-0.85
Unsuccessful- successful	2.90	2.50	3.45	0.40	-0.55	-0.95



	Self-evaluation	Evaluation of Unemployed youth	Evaluation of Employed youth	Self – unemployed	Self – Employed	Unemployed - employed
Isolated from others-connected with others	2.30	2.10	3.60	0.20	-1.30	-1.50
Unhappy-happy	3.40	3.40	3.50	0	-0.10	-0.10
Non-popular –popular	2.60	2.00	2.70	0.60	-0.10	-0.70
Hopeless- hopeful	3.60	3.50	3.80	0.10	-0.20	-0.30
Average score for all dimensions	3.19	3.14	3.57	0.05	-0.38	-0.43

The empirical investigation indicates that unemployed adolescents tend to strongly associate themselves with a collective identity of unemployment within their social circle. Statistical analysis revealed a notable discrepancy in perceptions between employed and unemployed youth ( $-0.43$ ;  $T=17.60$ ,  $p<.05$ ), as well as between self-assessment and assessment of employed peers ( $-0.38$ ;  $T=24.39$ ,  $p<.05$ ), while showing minimal difference between self-assessment and assessment of unemployed peers ( $0.05$ ;  $T=10.61$ ,  $p<.05$ ). These findings underscore the influence of socio-economic status on the dynamics of group identification.

Individuals who were unemployed frequently used a

number of strategic techniques to cope with their situation. According to the study, 45% of respondents were actively seeking work opportunities, 35% did so intermittently, and 20% had completely given up.

Curriculum vitae (CV) submission was the most common job search method, accounting for 57.5% of respondents' activities. Other methods included asking relatives and acquaintances to help in employment (20.0%), attending job fairs (7.5%), and taking proactive tactics, such as direct visits to prospective businesses (2.5%). Additionally, 12.5% of respondents reported doing nothing except scrolling on their phones, being on internet, and chatting (see Table 4).

**Table 4.** Job searching strategies.

	Items	Often %
1	Send CVs	57.5
2	Ask my relatives and acquaintances to help in employment	20
3	Attend "job-fairs"	7.5
4	Visit employers	2.5
5	Other – doing nothing stays in internet	12.5

Furthermore, our data showed that 12.5% attended training, seminars, or workshops to improve their skills and knowledge, even if it did not directly lead to a job placement. Additionally, 10% were skills refined through internships. 5% pursued self-improvement, while 72.5% were not engaged in any such activities. Participants considered these activities as personally fulfilling and beneficial, which helps them feel good about themselves during periods of unemployment.

Respondents who were actively looking for a job were more involved in training and searching for internships (7.5% and 7.5%, respectively), while those who stopped searching

did not participate in any of these activities or did not pursue self-education (20.0%) ( $\text{Chi-square } (6) = 7.46$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

People who were searching for jobs intensively had a higher level of well-being, followed by those who were searching from time to time, and finally, those who had given up ( $F=3.331$ ,  $p<.05$ ).

People who gave up searching for jobs had a higher score on the virtual identity scale, followed by those who searched from time to time, and finally, those who were searching intensively ( $F=21.623$ ,  $p<.05$ ).

**Table 5.** Correlational analysis.

Variable			1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Self-esteem	27.53	4.10	—					
2. Life setisfuntion	4.13	1.06	.633**	—				
3. Social Identity	.05	.04	-.126	-.176	—			
4. Virtual Social Identity	3.87	1.83	.089	.192	-.309	—		
5. Well-being	111.80	39.96	.700**	.580**	-.135	.405**	—	
6. Optimism	3.45	1.08	.618**	.500**	-.310**	.314**	.599**	—
7. Isolation	5.0	2.12	-.001	.177	.392**	-.700**	.312	.249

\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$ .

#### 4.4. Unemployment and Well-Being

Self -esteem was 27.53 ( $SD= 4.10$ ) a bit lower than the norm in Georgia (29.54<sup>1</sup>).

The life satisfaction score was 3.45 ( $SD=1.28$ ) close to the average score.

The average score on social identity was .05 ( $SD=.043$ ) showing a high level of identification with unemployed youth. The virtual social identity score measured on a 7-point scale was above average ( $M=3.88$ ;  $SD=1.83$ ).

Well-being was calculated as a function of self-esteem and life satisfaction. The mean of well-being was 111.8 (calculated as  $29 \times 4.1$ ) out of a maximum score of 280 (the maximum possible score of self-esteem and life satisfaction was 40  $\times 7$ ). This shows that the well-being of the participants was lower than the average score.

The mean score of optimism of respondents was 3.35 on a 7-point scale showing lower than a medium level optimism ( $SD= 1.23$ ). Forty-five percent (37.5%) were satisfied, 32.5 % neither satisfied nor dissatisfied and 30.0% were unsatisfied with their lives. This was lower than the norm in Georgia where 82% were satisfied, 11.3% were neither satisfied nor unsatisfied, and 6.7% were dissatisfied. The lack of high indices of optimism is attributed to a variety of factors. It is vital to note that the majority of the interviewed respondents have been unemployed for two to five years. Furthermore, as evidenced by the data, the vast majority of them will never find employment. This is accompanied by financial troubles and a sense of self-inefficiency.

According to 65% of the respondents, everything will happen in their lives as it should. And 35% think that everything will be as they want. Most of the respondents do not have the perception of having self-control over their own lives.

The evaluation of the respondents on the 7-point scale of

isolation is higher than the average ( $M=5$ ;  $SD=2.12$ ).

The findings demonstrated the critical importance of virtual social identity in moderating the influence of unemployment on well-being. The correlation between isolation and social identity was negative (-.392) while with virtual social identity – positive (.700).

That is, the stronger the youth's identification with unemployed youth, the higher the isolation, and more involvement in virtual reality was associated with less isolation.

Well-being was positively correlated with self-esteem, life satisfaction, and virtual social identity (see Table 5).

Optimism was positively correlated with self-esteem, life satisfaction, virtual social identity, and well-being, while negatively with social identity.

Research findings indicated that participants had lower self-esteem and well-being compared to normative scores in Georgia. Life satisfaction was close to average, but optimism was below average, reflecting respondents' generally pessimistic attitudes. Most of the participants had limited sense of control over their lives.

The data also revealed a significant sense of isolation among respondents, which was negatively related to social identity but positively related to virtual social identity. This suggests that although stronger identification with unemployed youth leads to a greater sense of isolation, increased involvement in virtual reality helps mitigate this sense of isolation.

Overall, well-being was positively related to self-esteem, life satisfaction, and virtual social identity, highlighting the protective role that a strong virtual social identity can play in maintaining well-being despite the challenges of unemployment.

The study revealed that women reported greater life satisfaction than men ( $M=3.79$  ( $SD=1.13$ ) and 2.67 respectively ( $SD=1.03$ ) ( $F=7.488$ ;  $p<.05$ ), higher rates of well-being  $M=124.93$  ( $SD=32.25$ ) and 81.167 respectively ( $SD=40.07$ ) ( $F=13.233$ ;  $p<.05$ ) and stronger virtual social identity ( $M=4.67$  ( $SD=1.57$ ) and 2.04 ( $SD=.71$ ) respectively)

1 Sumbadze et al., (2012). Self-Descriptive Measures in Psychology. Methods of social research

( $F=30.198$ ;  $p<.05$ ).

The regression model explains approximately 68% of the variance in well-being among the respondents, indicating a good fit. Adjusted  $R^2$  0.66; F-statistic: 40.22; p-value: <0.001

Higher self-esteem was strongly associated with increased well-being. For every one-unit increase in self-esteem, well-being increases by 0.45 units ( $B = 0.45$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) (see table 6).

**Table 6.** Regression Analysis: Predicting Well-Being.

Independent Variables	Coefficient (B)	Standard Error (SE)	t-value	p
Self-esteem	0.45	0.12	3.75	<0.001
Life satisfaction	0.35	0.10	3.50	<0.001
Social identity	-0.25	0.09	-2.78	0.006
Virtual social identity	0.55	0.14	3.93	<0.001
Optimism	0.40	0.11	3.64	<0.001

Life satisfaction was also a significant predictor of well-being. As life satisfaction increases by one unit, well-being improves by 0.35 units ( $B = 0.35$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Interestingly, stronger identification with unemployed youth is negatively associated with well-being. For each one-unit increase in social identity, well-being decreases by 0.25 units ( $B = -0.25$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ).

Virtual social identity positively predicts well-being, with a one-unit increase leading to a 0.55 unit increase in well-being. This highlights the protective role of virtual social identity in maintaining well-being despite the challenges associated with unemployment ( $B = 0.55$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Optimism was another positive predictor of well-being. A higher level of optimism contributed to better well-being outcomes ( $B = 0.40$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

## 4.5. The Thematic Analysis

Respondents' interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, that revealed the main themes emerging from the respondents' narratives. The research aimed to shed light on the psychological, social and economic factors that contribute to their current situation. The thematic analysis not only provided an in-depth understanding of the challenges faced by unemployed youth, but also offered insight into the coping strategies they use to overcome these difficulties.

### 4.5.1. Reason for Unemployment

Respondents who have never been employed consider the incompatibility of their profession with the labor market needs, nepotism, as the reason for their unemployment, while they do not have the skills that would help them in employment. Additionally, a small part points to the lack of knowledge and practical skills, the lack of effective job-searching skills. Most of them think that their employ-

ment does not depend only on them.

Respondents who worked for a period of time and then lost their jobs mentioned bad financial decisions and unexpected events beyond their control as the main reasons, such as spousal debt, damage to an expensive car due to an accident, an illness of a family member that required care, trying to start their own business with no experience end etc.

### 4.5.2. Financial Challenges

Qualitative interviews revealed financial problems related to unemployment; Loss of income and stress lead to poor financial decisions, further exacerbating the financial challenge. The interviews highlighted how unemployment could lead to long-term financial instability, draining both resources and opportunities for recovery.

As a result, long-term unemployment has a negative impact on financial well-being; Respondents talk about how they have to struggle to re-enter the job market, social isolation and caring for their children and family members. The narratives clearly show how, after losing a stable job in banking, financial problems began to snowball due to poor financial decisions and external crises.

### 4.5.3. Psychological Impact

It can be seen from the interviews that the experience of unemployment has a significant impact on the respondents' well-being and happiness. The majority of respondents note that unemployment causes financial problems, which causes serious psychological burden and increases stress, leading to feelings of hopelessness. As one respondent noted,

*"When I couldn't overcome language barriers, I finally gave up," (25-year- old female)*

*Difficulties and challenges arising from unemployment affect self-esteem and optimism. The interviews show that the majority of respondents feel less optimistic about their*



future and often do not have the feeling that they will be able to improve their situation. As one respondent said: "The university didn't have the resources to get practical experience, and I couldn't do everything I needed on my own. Years go by, and when should I be able to realize it?" (25-year-old man)

Participants expressed feelings of embarrassment, shame, and stress due to their unemployment status. Unemployment was associated with failure, inability, incompetence, and clumsiness.

One participant stated, "I am still young! how I could I not find my place anywhere! I am incapable or illiterate? I didn't study very well, but sure I could do some simple work well" (28-year-old man)

#### 4.5.4. Social Relationships and Isolation

As a result of unemployment, respondents often felt that their social relationships were weakened, leading to feelings of isolation. The reason for this was that they didn't have enough finances to get into a relationship, they could not find someone to plan a relationship with them, or they have to escape the stigma of unemployment. One respondent noted that

"Unemployment not only brings financial problems, but also makes social life difficult. Not having a job limits my social connections, and it's hard when you can't participate in the events that the employees put on. Sometimes I don't even want to meet someone again if they don't ask me, "Still didn't you get a job?" (27-year-old woman).

This further exacerbates the stress experienced as a result of the lack of socialization. This situation made them financially dependent on family members, which was uncomfortable for them.

"My parents and my older sister always help me with money; I mean, I have money, but I don't like being dependent on others! I should give money to my family, not the other way around" (25-year-old man).

#### 4.5.5. Online Support

Unemployed youth significantly increased the time spent on the internet, and most used a phone while on the Internet. Most of them did not have their own internet; some shared the Internet of family members, while others used free internet from shops, cafes, or neighbors.

Online interactions increased self-esteem and provided emotional support, reducing feelings of isolation and loneliness. Young people often used virtual identities, to boost their self-esteem by presenting an idealized version of themselves.

"We are all equal here; there I am not labeled as unemployed; I present myself as I myself to be" (24-year-old woman).

Virtual interactions reduced feelings of isolation and loneliness, which were common among unemployed youth.

"I like relationships, and I stay at home all the time. Where should I meet people? I feel I am cut off from people and society. The Internet is a salvation for me, I'll go in and write comments on some posts, I'll follow or scroll. I scroll all day, and sometimes I think I just waste time! I wish someone would pay me money for this!" (28-year-old woman).

"I don't know what I would do without the Internet. My sister works, and she pays internet, otherwise I couldn't pay. I don't work, I stopped studying for a long time. Where can I see people? My neighbors and classmates only. I can no longer meet new people; That's why I prefer to stay at home all day and be on the Internet; read something, write something on Facebook! I know that I am a loser, and I don't want others to remind me again" (27-year-old man).

#### 4.5.6. Virtual Social Identity

Virtual social identities have been identified as a coping mechanism that allows unemployed youth to redefine their sense of worth and identity in online communities.

Social media was also used by young people to search for jobs. However, excessive time spent on the Internet reduced time spent on job searches or on face-to-face relationships.

A strong virtual identity can provide emotional support and coping mechanisms. However, negative online experiences or cyberbullying can exacerbate mental health problems.

"I spend a lot of time on Facebook. Good that I am busy with something, but it seems like you're getting hurt; so much aggression, negativity; I don't post, but there have been some comments I wrote, and they attacked me" (27-year-old man).

"I feel good on Facebook; I can be whoever I want, give the information I want; I don't give out all the information; I try not to open up too much so that they don't understand how unsuccessful I am" (26-year-old man).

#### 4.5.7. Coping Strategies with Unemployment

This analysis revealed a range of coping strategies that young people use to manage the stress and uncertainty associated with unemployment. These strategies include seeking social support, engaging in further education or skill development, being assertive, and continuing the job search without allowing discouragement to take hold. Additionally, some individuals turn to entrepreneurship, while others rely on family support to alleviate financial pressure.

### 5. Discussion

The results of this study highlight the multifaceted impact of unemployment on adolescents, particularly how it affects their psychological well-being, social identity, and coping mechanisms. Special emphasis is placed on the role of virtual social identity as a coping strategy among unemployed youth.

Most of the respondents had full or partial higher education. However, despite their educational background about 1/3 have never been employed, and the equal percentage have been unemployed more often than employed over the past 5 years. These results point to a significant mismatch between educational background and employment opportunities. These findings underscore the profound impact of unemployment on young adults, extending beyond mere financial difficulties. The majority of the participants reported that unemployment significantly affects their daily lives, with recurring themes of alienation and shattered aspirations. These findings align with previous research that showed the profound impact of unemployment on well-being and social integration of young people [16].

Unemployment has led to a range of challenges, notably financial instability, diminished self-esteem and resurrected social and cultural participation. The findings of this study are consistent with previous research highlighting the detrimental effects of youth unemployment on mental health [24]. However, study advances the literature by illustrating how the formation of virtual social identities can serve as an adaptive coping mechanism.

These findings are consistent with the hypotheses put forward by deprivation theories which suggest that unemployed individuals face not only financial burdens but also significant psychosocial consequences [22]. Winkelman and Winkelman [31] suggest that the "intangible cost of unemployment" may be more important than its financial consequences, a perspective supported by other researchers [6, 7]. Additionally, the results are in concordance with the observations of Jahoda et al. [11] who noted a reduction in social interaction, decreased participation in community events, diminished social status, and the absence of regular activities among unemployed youth.

The study examined the self-evaluations and perceptions of unemployed and employed youth, which revealed significant differences. Unemployed teenagers rated themselves lower in competence, activity, and overall contentment than their employed counterparts. This reflects the stigmatization and internalized negative self-perceptions associated with unemployment. The minor difference between self-evaluation and evaluation of unemployed peers indicates a shared collective identity of the unemployed youth, shaped by their socio-economic status.

The findings of this study reveal that unemployed youth in the 21st century actively engage in the formation of virtual social identities as a coping mechanism to deal with negative social identities. Thus, the research Hypotheses were confirmed. Through various online platforms and communities, these individuals create and maintain an alternative identity that offers them a sense of belonging, purpose, and agency. Consistent with McKenna and Bargh's [20] findings, this study underscores that online platforms facilitate identity experimentation and offer virtual social support, which is particularly crucial for unemployed youth.

The role of virtual social identity has appeared as an essential factor in mitigating unemployment. The widespread use of social media and technologies have significantly contributed to the process of virtual social identity formation among unemployed youth. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn provide spaces for individuals to connect, network and showcase their skills and talents. The accessibility and anonymity of different digital spaces attract those seeking to escape offline identity constraints.

Furthermore, earlier research has demonstrated the importance of a positive social identity in boosting resilience and well-being among persons confronting adversity [15]. This is consistent with the current study's findings, which showed that virtual social identities serve as an important coping mechanism for unemployed youth, allowing them to overcome the stigma and social isolation associated with their situation. The study also underlines the value of supportive social situations and the impact of perceived group membership on life satisfaction and psychological well-being [15].

While online interactions provide social support and decrease feelings of isolation, overreliance on virtual identities for self-verification has been observed to negatively impact well-being. Coping mechanisms such as withdrawal and reduced job-seeking are observed, highlighting psychological complexities. This duality emphasizes the importance of balanced engagement with virtual communities. These findings suggest the need for long-term studies on youth unemployment to inform policies and support efforts.

## 6. Conclusion

The results of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of the effects of unemployment on young people, particularly in the context of social identity and well-being. This study highlights the multifaceted impact of unemployment on the lives of young people, which goes beyond just financial challenges and includes significant psychological and social dimensions.

A strong identification with the collective social identity of unemployment, together with low self-esteem and life satisfaction, contributed to a decrease in the respondents' sense of well-being. This situation is accompanied by a lack of optimism and a limited sense of control over one's life. The feelings of shame, stress and social isolation reported by many respondents highlight the pervasive impact of unemployment on their overall well-being.

Interestingly, virtual social identity is discussed in the article as a coping mechanism. Although a strong identification with unemployment was associated with increased isolation, involvement in virtual communities may represent a form of social support and an effective way to reduce feelings of loneliness. However, overreliance on a virtual identity, as noted in the interviews, can also lead to additional stress especially when online interactions are accompanied by negative experiences or cyberbullying.

The emergence of a virtual social identity as a coping strategy has important implications for the well-being of unemployed youth. Engaging in online communities and forming a virtual identity can provide individuals with a sense of social support, validation, and empowerment. These findings contribute to the present literature on unemployment and digital sociology by incorporating the concept of virtual social identities as adaptive coping mechanisms. Balancing online and offline activities is essential for maintaining psychological health.

Taking into account the research results, several important recommendations can be formulated. It is important that policymakers support the development of online support platforms that can help individuals use online resources more effectively. These initiatives can alleviate the negative psychological impact of unemployment on youth.

Future research should continue to examine the dynamics of virtual social identity formation and its impact on the well-being of unemployed youth to inform interventions and support services that address the root causes of social identity. Upcoming research should use a random sampling method, to ensure more representative findings. It is desirable to study the development of youth unemployment and social identity in a long-term perspective. This will help policy makers and practitioners design more effective interventions [13].

## Abbreviations

ILO International Labor Organization

## Author Contributions

Anastasia Kitiashvili is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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## Research Fields

**Anastasia Kitiashvili:** Social psychology, Social deidentity, well-being, social Inclusion, ageism, stereotypes and prejudices