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The Cognitive Dissonance Singularity

Toward a Conceptual Model of Identity Saturation in the Digital Age

A Conceptual Research Paper in Psychology and Media Studies

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ABSTRACT

Festingers theory of cognitive dissonance (1957) described a tension between belief and behavior. In this paper we see that the conditions of contemporary digital life have changed both the means and the type of tension. Elaborating on Festinger's original framework, the social comparison theory (1954), stating people have a natural drive to evaluate their own abilities and worth by comparing themselves with other people. Here context collapse explains why social media creates an environment where many audiences are present. We observe a state we call the Cognitive Dissonance singularity (CDS): a proposed state in which the accumulation of simultaneous, non exclusive identities across digital, social and professional settings exceeds an individual's capacity to differentiate between them. We trace the variation from a unified self to a performative one, and propose three metrics; chronic dissonance, a threshold effect and identity entropy. We then examine the theoretical foundations and effects of CDS by using excerpts from neuroscience and sociology. Rather than treating chronic dissonance, threshold effects, and identity entropy as measurable variables. We see them as conceptual models for understanding how prolonged exposure to fragmented digital identities may affect self-identity. The model is situated with existing research on the brain and self-identity, default mode network and executive function while remaining distinct. Finally, we consider the implications of CDS for psychological wellbeing.



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Introduction

Festinger introduced cognitive dissonance in 1957 by describing it as something being bounded, the tension that occurs when a person's beliefs and behaviours conflict, and are followed by a conscious drive to restore consistency. In its original form, dissonance showed a clear structure. It came from inconsistency, showcasing itself as psychological discomfort, being resolved through a change in belief or modification of behaviour. This framework relies on one assumption, that the individual was a single coherent person whose internal consistency was disrupted periodically, instead of a collection of identities existing simultaneously.

The conditions producing dissonance today look structurally different from the ones Festinger was working with in the 1950s. This is the starting observation for the present paper. A person now sustains, often at the same time, an aesthetic identity on one platform, an ironic or confessional register on another, a curated professional identity on a third, and an offline identity at home and at work, each tied to its own audience and its own standard for what counts as authentic, and none of them protected from the others by the separations of time and place that used to keep a person's roles apart. What interests us is what happens when the number and simultaneity of these roles exceed an individual's capacity to differentiate between them, due to the growing contradictions.

We refer to this condition as the Cognitive Dissonance singularity (CDS): the point at which the person becomes unable to hold these multiple roles as one continuous identity, it is exceeded by number, simultaneity and intensity of the contradictions between the, the term is used to give shape to conceptual theories, not to describe a clinical disorder. CDS is a theoretical hypothesis, attempting to ask what cognitive dissonance becomes once it grows from being a temporary conflict into multiple identities.

Theoretical Lineage: from Festinger to the Present

How do people remain coherent when their beliefs, behaviour and social roles begin to conflict? Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance argued that inconsistency creates discomfort and pressure to restore consistency.

The person could change behaviours or reinterpret the conflict. What mattered was that the dissonance was treated as something that would be eventually resolved.

That model also assumes that a relatively stable person is experiencing the conflict. The contradiction occurs within the self, but the self remains intact. Bem's self-perception theory challenged the need for strong internal discomfort, but still assumed a person capable of observing and making sense of their own behaviour. Work by Stone and Cooper and Cooper and Hogg showed that dissonance also depends on social standards and group identity, thus the issue is seen as beyond a purely private belief conflict.

This is relevant because people now move through several identities at once, including: professional, familial, cultural. Intimate, political and digital. William James had recognised multiple social selves previously, while Freud and Jung treated internal conflict and integration as normal parts of psychological life. Goffman described identity as performance shaped by different audiences, but his model assumed that these performances could remain separate.

In the current age digital life weakens that separation. Context collapse is a major product as different people are brought together, so professional and private lives increasingly overlap. People have always had these different roles. But these roles are now increasingly visible and more difficult to keep separate.

Later Foucault and Baudrillard questioned whether identity should be understood as a stable inner core at all. Foucault highlighted the role of discourse and social power in shaping the self, Baudrillard raised the possibility that representation can become difficult to separate from reality. These ideas do not prove CDS, but they make the assumption of a single stable self-less secure.

Psychology has mainly asked how inconsistency is resolved, while philosophy has often asked whether the self-doing the resolving is as unified as psychology assumes. CDS asks what happens when contradiction appears across several identities being maintained at the same time, instead of between beliefs or behaviours.

The question is whether the number of different roles people have, simultaneity of them and the persistence can reach a point where they become harder to reconcile. At that point, dissonance may stop being temporary and become part of the person's identity.

The Conceptual Architecture of the Singularity

Three ideas organize the CDS framework: dissonance treated as a chronic condition rather than a single episode, a threshold past which integration gives way to something closer to collapse, and identity entropy as a way of describing how dispersed a person's self-presentation has become across contexts. We present each as a conceptual lens, not a measured quantity.

Chronic Dissonance as an Ecology

Festinger's model treated dissonance as a motivational engine: discomfort prompted realignment, and realignment resolved the discomfort. We suspect that under conditions of sustained digital multiplicity, dissonance can instead settle into something that is persistent, low in intensity, and recursive. A person may hold and act on contradictory commitments at the same time, endorsing rest while remaining constantly online, valuing authenticity while maintaining a curated persona, criticizing consumer culture while expressing identity through consumption, without any one contradiction rising to a level that demands resolution. Repeated across months and years, this pattern may stop functioning as a series of discrete conflicts and start producing something closer to dissonance fatigue: a general dampening of the motivation to resolve conflict at all, rather than a string of conflicts that got resolved. If this holds, coherence would erode gradually, through accumulation, rather than fail all at once through a single confrontation.

The Threshold Effect

An idea is that there may be a limit to how much contradiction a person can manage at once. People can usually handle different roles and still experience them as parts of the same self. This at times may take effort, but the roles can be reconciled. CDS suggests that this capacity is not unlimited. As contradictions increase and remain unresolved, eventually a point may be reached

where adding another role no longer leads to adjustment. Instead the person may begin to feel detached from their different identities or emotionally flat, leading to less certainty about which version of themselves feels real. It is not suggested that this threshold is the same for everyone, or that it can currently be given a fixed value. It is simply the point at which managing contradiction may begin to work differently from before.

Identity Entropy as a Conceptual Lens

Identity Entropy is used here as a loose way of describing how spread out a person's self-presentation becomes across different roles. Someone whose roles fit together would lie toward the low entropy end. Someone managing many separate personas, each with their own values and expectations would sit toward the high entropy end. The point of this study is not to assign a precise number in the context of the Identity Entropy Index, but to describe a shift toward identities that become less connected.

If this shift increases, three proposed consequences may follow. A person may find it harder to experience life as a continuous story, emotional investment may become spread across too many context reliant selves, and it may become less clear which version of the self feels most authentic. To restate these are hypotheses, not established and clinically tested findings.

These possible consequences suggest a progression. Dissonance builds over time, the ability to integrate it is limited, and beyond some threshold the problem may change. The issue is a weakening of the position from which the conflict can be judged and resolved. This is why the word singularity is used, to describe a point at which the usual way of describing the system no longer fits as well.

Context Collapse and the Multiplication of Selves

The most relevant idea here is context collapse, developed by Boyd and later with Marwick. It describes what happens when audiences that were once separate, namely family, friends, colleagues, acquaintances and strangers are brought together in the same space. In person, people have different roles through separation. Different audiences see

different versions of the person and those versions do not always have to be reconciled because the audiences rarely overlap. Social media weakens this separation. A single post may be visible across several social circles at once, and what is appropriate for one group may conflict with what another expects.

Brandtzaeg and Lüders add another problem through the idea of time collapse. Digital content does not disappear when the moment that produced it ends. Old posts, opinions, images and performances remain visible years later, placing the present self-beside earlier versions of the same person. Users of social media often create multiple accounts or private profiles thus restricting the audience that has access to it thus creating further separation. In this sense fragmentation can become a way to manage fragmentation.

This is where CDS proposes a more speculative claim. Context collapse research already shows that digital environments decrease the separation between audiences and preserve old identities thus making self-presentation harder to control. CDS asks what happens when this is not occasional but continuous, and when the same pressure extends over every sector of life. The question is whether yeses of overlapping roles and unresolved contradictions can eventually place more demand on identity integration than ordinary dissonance theory, which is based on temporary conflicts.

Toward a Neurocognitive Account

A claim that chronic identity multiplicity carries a cost should, in principle, be visible somewhere in cognition or physiology, though current evidence does not yet establish this directly for CDS specifically. Two existing areas of neuroscience seem relevant to building a testable version of the hypothesis, and we treat both here as grounds for future inquiry rather than confirmed findings about CDS.

The first is the default mode network (DMN), a set of interconnected regions including the medial prefrontal cortex, posterior cingulate cortex, precuneus, and angular gyrus, which two decades of neuroimaging work have implicated in self-referential thought, autobiographical memory, and the construction of a coherent personal narrative across time. Reviews of this literature describe the network as integrating memory,

language, and self-relevant information into what Menon calls a coherent internal narrative. Because DMN engagement tracks closely with the sense of a continuous, narratable self, a natural question raised by the CDS framework, though not yet tested, is whether the rapid, frequent switching between incompatible self-presentations required by a high-entropy digital life places unusual demands on this network, in ways that might resemble, without being equivalent to, the DMN disruptions already documented in some clinical populations experiencing depersonalization or fragmented self-experience.

The second relevant area involves executive control, particularly prefrontal mechanisms tied to monitoring and resolving conflicting goals or self-representations, alongside the established literature on ego depletion and decision fatigue, which shows that acts of self-regulation draw on a limited resource that repeated use can temporarily exhaust. If maintaining a context-appropriate identity is itself a form of self-regulation, consistent with Goffman's account of performance as effortful impression management, then frequent, high-stakes switching between incompatible identity performances is at least a plausible candidate for additional executive load, layered on top of whatever cognitive demands the switching context itself already imposes.

Neither literature on its own establishes CDS as a neurobiological reality. No study to date has directly tested identity-switching load as an independent driver of DMN or prefrontal dysfunction outside clinical or trauma populations, and we want to be clear about that gap rather than paper over it. What these two areas offer is a plausible, falsifiable direction: if CDS describes something real, it should show up as measurable variation in self-referential network coherence and executive fatigue that tracks the degree of identity multiplicity a person sustains, independent of the clinical conditions with which such variation has traditionally been associated.

Distinguishing CDS from Adjacent Constructs

A conceptual model built around derealization, fragmentation, and affective flattening risks collapsing into constructs psychology and psychiatry already recognize. We think it is worth stating plainly how CDS is meant to differ from

its nearest neighbors, if only to keep the hypothesis falsifiable rather than a relabeling exercise.

- Depersonalization/derealization disorder is typically understood as a dissociative response to acute stress or trauma, with an episodic onset. CDS, as we propose it, would be structural and cumulative rather than a response to a discrete trigger, and would not presuppose a traumatic antecedent.
- Borderline personality disorder involves an unstable self-image tied to attachment difficulties and marked emotional volatility. CDS, in contrast, is hypothesized to present with flattened rather than volatile affect, numbing that comes from saturation rather than swings that come from dysregulated attachment.
- Schizophrenia-spectrum conditions involve a loss of reality testing and, frequently, psychosis. CDS as we describe it presupposes intact reality testing throughout; the person is not confused about what is real, only about which of several genuinely performed selves counts as them.
- Social anxiety disorder centers on a fear of negative evaluation paired with a wish for authentic connection that the fear thwarts. CDS, if it exists as proposed, involves no particular fear tied to any one audience; performance becomes the default mode of being, and resigned fluency displaces anxiety rather than amplifying it.

The Role of CDS Across Social Domains

If the CDS hypothesis is useful, it should appear not as a clear set of disguised cases, but as a pattern of pressure across the main areas where people manage different versions of themselves.

Social Media

Different platforms encourage different ways of presenting the self: professionalism on LinkedIn, visual curation on Instagram, opinions on X, and more anonymous or less filtered expression or pseudonymous platforms. These identities are not expected to fit together. Influencers show the pressure in an extreme form, balancing a commercial self, a private life, and a curated public image at the same time.

Education

Students move through several roles in a single day: learner, friend, exam candidate, among others. This happens during adolescence, when identity is still developing and social evaluation matters strongly. If constant switching between these roles demands attention and self-control, packed with academic strain from the workload, the effort of maintaining different selves across different settings will cause further strain and difficulties.

Work and the Professions

Research on emotional labour has long shown that it can be tiring to display emotions that do not match how a person actually feels. CDS suggests that this pressure may become greater when the professional role is only one of several identities being managed at the same time. The issue is not workplace performance alone, but how it interacts with the other selves a person has to maintain outside work.

Politics and Public Life

Public figures have always presented themselves differently to different audiences, but digital media has made those audiences harder to keep separate. These various identities may pull in different directions, especially when personal values do not match the behaviour of the system a person belongs to.

Technology and Artificial Intelligence

Deepfakes, avatars and AI generated personas make it possible for digital versions of a person to exist and circulate with growing independence from the person themselves. This makes the question of which version counts as authoritative more difficult, further creating doubts in identity and trust between people. The same technologies could also be used in the opposite way. As Reflective tools or journaling systems. AI could help people notice changes in how they present themselves over time, provided these systems support self-understanding rather than judging or exploiting different identities.

Why Existing Therapeutic and Diagnostic Paradigms May Struggle

Diagnostic systems such as the DSM-5 and ICD-11 are organized around deviation from a

presumed normative, continuous self. Cognitive-behavioral therapy generally assumes a single reasoning perspective whose distorted thoughts can be identified and corrected. Psychoanalytic approaches assume a buried, authentic self that excavation can recover. Humanistic and existential therapies assume a stable value system, or at least a continuous narrative, that a person can be helped to reconnect with.

The CDS hypothesis implies that each of these assumptions may be exactly what is under strain in the condition it describes. If a person genuinely inhabits several non-integrating selves rather than one self-observed by distortion, trauma, or inauthenticity, approaches oriented around restoring a single prior self may be aimed at the wrong target. This points, tentatively, toward a shift in therapeutic orientation, from restoration toward something closer to self-synthesis: helping a person build a workable relationship among their multiple selves rather than assuming one of them is the real one waiting to be uncovered. We offer this as a direction for clinical theorizing, not a validated protocol; turning it into practice would require the same empirical scrutiny we are asking for throughout this paper.

Ethical and Policy Considerations

All conceptual frameworks that attempt to describe the changing structure of identity carry risks, that should be acknowledged. The most prevalent is the possibility of confusing healthy social activity with psychological fragmentation. Human identity has never been singular. People deal with different situations and contexts including cultural, familial, professional and social roles without experiencing distress, many individuals living through multiple cultures demonstrate great flexibility in adapting to different expectations. This variation is not evidence of dysfunction but often reflects psychological competence. CDS should not be understood as a critique of multiplicity itself. The distinction is between identities that remain voluntarily integrated despite their diversity and identities whose contradictions become persistent and increasingly resistant to reconciliation. The concern is the condition in which multiple selves can be experienced as belonging to one person.

A second concern arises from the possibility of

translating theoretical ideas into systems of measurement. Concepts such as identity entropy and dissonance overload lead to attempts at quantification, particularly within digital environments where behavioral data are continuously collected. Such measures may help individuals understand patterns of identity management or recognize periods of psychological strain, but when used incorrectly, they can act as surveillance or behavioral manipulation. Technologies capable of inferring the level to which a person presents differently across social contexts could easily serve institutional or commercial interests rather than the interests of the individual being inserted. Therefore, any future work with CDS must proceed with caution. Measures should remain voluntary and directed toward self-understanding.

If the pressures described throughout this paper prove to have empirical support, their implications extend beyond the individual. So, the response cannot be reliant on personal resilience or digital self-discipline. Platforms that warrant visibility and performance may require reconsideration. If CDS is to contribute beyond theory, it is perhaps the suggestion that preserving psychological coherence may be a collective responsibility.

Conclusion

Cognitive Dissonance Singularity has been proposed as a bridge between Festinger's account of episodic belief-behaviour conflict and a question about whether a continuous self-survives sustained multiplicity. The model is incomplete. It borrows from established literature, including: dissonance and consistency theory, context collapse research, default mode network neuroscience and ego depletion.

Without direct empirical testing CDS remains a theoretical proposition. Future research should test whether sustained identity switching produces accumulating rather than temporary dissonance. And whether chronic dissonance, threshold effects, and identity entropy can be observed and measured independently.

CDS does not assume that multiplicity itself is harmful or that psychological health requires a return to a single authentic self. The question is whether contemporary digital life can produce more simultaneous contradiction than the self can

continuously reconcile. Whether CDS describes this remains to be tested.

Conflict of Interest

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