

AVATARSCAPE NETNOGRAPHY OF VIRTUAL IDENTITY ON ROBLOX

Rino Andreas¹, Hasan Ashari², Lintang Mahendra³
{rinoandreas@staff.uns.ac.id, hasan.uns@staff.uns.ac.id}

Universitas Sebelas Maret, Jalan Ir. Sutami 36A, Kentingan, Jebres, Surakarta, Indonesia

Abstract. This study investigates how identity is constructed, reproduced, and represented on the online gaming platform Roblox through a focused netnographic approach. Data were gathered over one month of participant netnographic fieldwork and via systematic analysis of digital artifacts, including avatars, user profiles, virtual marketplaces, and community events. Sustained immersion in players' virtual experiences enabled collection of representative avatar configurations and interaction practices that shape identity work. Findings reveal four interrelated dynamics: (1) diversity, users experiment with multiple virtual identities; (2) representation, avatars encode values, aspirations, and socially meaningful positions; (3) fluidity, identity constructions shift over time, across game contexts, and within social ties; and (4) performativity, identity emerges through interactive practices and symbolic consumption. Crucially, the data show that virtual identities on Roblox can extend beyond and reproduce differently from offline personalities, yielding layered and at times divergent self-presentations in simulated spaces.

Keywords: Roblox, virtual identity, avatar, netnography, performativity

INTRODUCTION

The rise of multiplayer online gaming platforms such as Roblox has reshaped how users construct, negotiate, and represent identities in digital spaces. As a prominent platform, Roblox attracts millions of young users and empowers them not only to play, but also to design their own game environments and customize their avatars (Fu et al., 2025). This creative freedom and configurability enable players to express and develop digital identities in varied and often novel ways.

Roblox is an online platform that functions can create their own experiences and play content developed by others. The platform supports avatar customization, social interaction, and a virtual economy based on the currency "Robux" (Syas & Yahsy, 2022). Users may purchase in-game items or access premium features, and developers on Roblox can generate income when their creations gain popularity.

From a user perspective, Roblox is large and rapidly expanding. Monthly active users number roughly 380 million worldwide, with about 111.8 million daily active users. Over 3 million active developers produce content for the platform, resulting in millions of user-created experiences and gamified games. Platform engagement is substantial. In Q2 2025 users logged approximately 27.4 billion hours of play. The majority of users are under the age of 16, and there is a slightly higher proportion of male users compared to female users. Roblox was developed beginning in 2004 by Roblox Corporation, founded by David Baszucki and Erik Cassel, and was officially launched to the public on September 1, 2006 (Chawki, 2025). Indonesian players predominantly use Roblox for leisure; social drivers like friends' participation and accessibility, also matter. Together these motives point to Roblox serving chiefly as a recreational and casual social platform, supported by its social features and creative affordances.

In Roblox, avatars function as more than graphical representations. they act as mediums of self-expression, laboratories for identity experimentation, and richly layered arenas of social interaction. This study conducts a systematic netnographic investigation to examine how virtual identities are constructed, sustained, negotiated, and transformed within Roblox's avatar ecosystem. Avatarscape, a social experience on Roblox, positions avatars at the core of expression and interaction. Players can design and customize avatars, selecting clothing, accessories, animations, and facial features and then enter a dynamic virtual metaverse populated by diverse activities. These spaces range from

natural landscapes and fashion shopping centers to role-play cafés, photo studios, mini-game arenas, and so on.

Another interesting aspect of Roblox is the platform's internal economy. Users can create, sell, and purchase virtual goods, as noted by Andreas and Arymami (2022). This opens up opportunities for e-commerce within the Metaverse. "Robux" is used to buy in-game content and virtual objects that can carry real-world value. The game's economic system enables item trading and participation in themed events, offering chances to collect rare items and boost one's aesthetic status. Creative mode provides access to personal-space design tools (room/house builder), allowing players to showcase their styles. In addition, light quests and competitions encourage teamwork and creativity. The platform is designed to be child- and teen-friendly.

Avatarscape is a communicative tool that represents users' selves in the virtual world. In this context, the representation of virtual identity holds an important position. Stuart Hall (2020) views representation not merely as a mapping or mirror of reality, but as a social practice that produces constructive meaning. For Hall, objects, events, or people do not possess fixed meanings; rather, meaning is formed when an object is "represented" through language, images, symbols, or discursive practices that employ signs and codes. He rejects the reflective model, which claims that language simply mirrors reality, and the intentional model, which holds that meaning resides solely in the speaker's intent, opting instead for a constructionist approach. According to this paradigm, meaning is constructed within a system of signs that is influenced by culture, history, and social context. Consequently, representation is always tied to power: those who control representation determine how groups or issues are seen, assessed, and treated. Media and cultural institutions play a central role because they disseminate the codes and narratives that shape identities, stereotypes, and norms. Therefore, Hall's analysis of representation focuses on how meaning is produced, who is given a voice, and how representational practices can reproduce or challenge power relations in society. In the context of Roblox, representation is displayed through users' avatars.

This point is also expressed by Erving Goffman (2023) in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. He explains that every individual, in effect, constructs themselves by performing their self-presentation; this presentation is shaped according to the desires of an audience, and the same holds true on the Internet as users attempt to construct their identities. Regarding gender, Judith Butler's theory of performativity states that gender is not a fixed identity that exists prior to action, but rather the result of repeated acts, gestures, and language that consolidate a category to appear 'natural.' In virtual spaces, this concept remains relevant: gender identity is reconstituted through avatars, usernames, word choices, and repeated behaviors that "cite" gender norms from both offline life and digital cultures. However, the digital medium alters the performative field, the absence or postponement of the physical body, the freedom to choose representations, and the ability to change signs quickly create opportunities to repeat acts in ways that deviate from norms, opening spaces for subversion. On the other hand, virtual spaces also reinforce regulation and power through algorithms, platform policies, and surveillance practices that shape which performances are promoted or censored. Performative practices online are situational and distributed, they can circulate across forums, be reiterated by communities, and become new norms through cut-and-paste digital citationality. Thus, virtual space is a dual arena: it enables identity experimentation and resistance to norms, while simultaneously placing performativity within networks of technical and social control that can constrain or reform the ways identities are produced.

Previous research on Roblox and the avatar phenomenon has been carried out by various scholars. Green et al. (2021) introduced the concept of "problematic gaming," showing that some game activities that offer customizable avatars enable players to fulfill identity needs. They found that identification with an avatar is positively correlated with tendencies toward problematic gaming and negatively correlated with self-concept clarity; in other words, a less stable self-concept may be a mechanism that reinforces excessive attachment to avatars. Jin (2012) proposed a new model of "virtual identity differentiation" as a framework for examining computer-mediated self-representation and interpersonal communication in avatar-based virtual environments (VEs). McKenna et al. (2024) highlighted the role of avatar customization for transgender and gender-diverse (TGD) adolescents, showing psychosocial benefits especially for those experiencing gender dysphoria, since avatars become a means of gender exploration and affirmation. Reay & Wanick

(2023) outlined how video games, combined with social media platforms, can promote creative expression and social networking through: (1) the construction of cross-semiotic game aesthetics, (2) curation of player experiences and accessibility, (3) cross-channel promotion strategies, and (4) stimulation of engagement and user-generated content production. Silva's (2025) review emphasizes the role of digital fashion in children's identity formation, the concept of "phygital" indicates an increasing interconnection between digital and physical identities. Meanwhile, Szolin et al. (2023) found that players often use avatars to realize virtual or ideal versions of themselves, sometimes incorporating fantasy elements. Games with higher difficulty levels and broader customization options tend to strengthen emotional attachment to characters.

Although the literature has examined the relationships among avatar customization, gender identity, and tendencies toward problematic gaming, few studies have investigated in depth how avatarscape practices that shape virtual identity are formed within the specific ecosystem of Roblox. The scarcity of research employing a netnographic approach on Roblox has left a gap in understanding how users negotiate identity through avatar-customization practices and how aesthetic narratives and the digital economy (e.g., microtransactions, limited items) influence that process. Netnography, with its capacity to capture online discourse, multimodal artifacts (avatars, items, virtual spaces), and users' participatory practices, is particularly well suited to address this gap.

Based on the foregoing, this study poses the following focused, reflective questions: How is the virtual identity of Roblox players constructed? How do identities form, and what are the socio-cultural implications of identity formation among Roblox users when examined from a netnographic perspective? The research intends to contribute theoretical insights and practical recommendations for platform policy and digital-literacy interventions

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using netnography to analyze the construction of virtual identity among users on the Roblox platform. Netnography was chosen for its suitability in capturing cultural practices, social interactions, and visual artifacts that emerge naturally within online gaming ecosystems. Netnography, an evolution of ethnography for digital environments, involves observing and analyzing online traces of activity to interpret meaning within online communities (Kozinets, 2015). This methodology enables an in-depth understanding of how avatars, customization, and community practices shape identity performativity. Grounded in a constructivist paradigm, the research combines participatory observation, documentation of digital artifacts, and public interactions to examine how Roblox users' identities are constructed. The study locus comprises virtual spaces within the Roblox platform, with a focus on several sub-communities relevant to identity research, such as fashion groups, fashion shows, role-play servers, item marketplaces, and popular social games. Community selection was purposive, based on criteria of high activity, data diversity, and observational accessibility.

Data were collected through iterative participatory observation in which the researcher entered public spaces on Roblox using the research account "titipabsen" for one month. Digital artifacts were gathered, screenshots of avatars, user profiles, marketplace listings, and event documentation, and each artifact was annotated with date and contextual metadata. Data analysis followed a systematic procedure centered on thematic analysis. Research ethics were a key concern, especially because a large proportion of Roblox users are underage. The study yielded an empirical, systematic, and contextualized understanding of how avatars and cultural practices on Roblox produce meanings of digital identity.

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

This results chapter presents the main findings of a qualitative communication and media study on how identity is constructed by Roblox users. Analysis was conducted using netnography and content

analysis of digital artifacts, including avatars, profiles, group descriptions, public chat, and in-game consumption practices. The analytic process produced four themes that form the sub-sections of this chapter: (1) Diversity and identity experimentation; (2) Avatar representation as a code of values, aspirations, and social position; (3) fluidity (identity as continual becoming); and (4) Performativity. Each theme is linked to identity theories from communication and media studies to explain the social and symbolic mechanisms observed in Roblox gameplay.

Diversity and Identity Experimentation

On the app's main interface users are presented with several primary menus, one of which is "Avatar." Within this menu there is a "Marketplace" option that allows users to purchase hundreds of limited virtual items using Robux. There is also a "Customize" option that enables users to select virtual body parts and features, head-body, clothing, accessories, emotes, and animations. The "Profile" menu displays the username, profile picture, followers, personal bio, and "Badges."

Our analysis shows that the spectrum of identities and narratives among Roblox users often referred to as Robloxians, is very wide. This is evident in avatars that are hyper-stylized and fashion-centric, in the use of high-end virtual items, and in deliberately low-fi or "glitchy" representations. Each user produces a distinctive aesthetic, signaled through varied combinations of visual items like clothing, accessories, visual effects, and profile descriptions. These create recognizable aesthetic "codes" within the community, which users reproduce either by purchasing items themselves or by trading virtual goods.

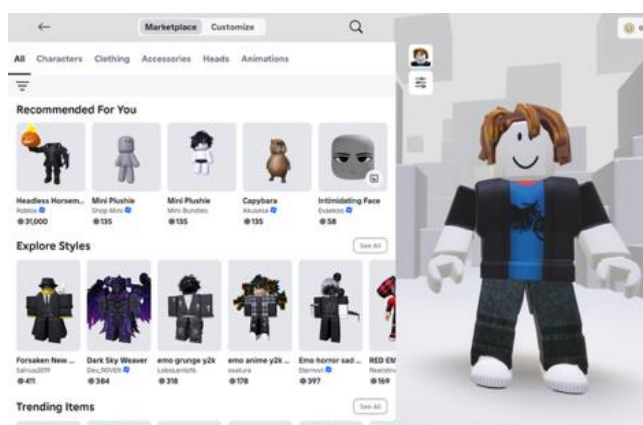


Fig. 1. Avatar Customization of "titipabsen"

This diversity reflects the plurality of virtual identities and demonstrates how platform affordances (item catalog, user-generated creations) provide users with tools to experiment in the formation of their identities. The diversity also marks subcultural segmentation within the Roblox ecosystem, with different intersectional positions. It gives users space to select contexts that align with their preferences, so identity readings are always contextual, layered, and heterogeneous. This is consistent with Andreas et al. (2025), who show that identity construction in virtual spaces can be manipulated and diversified so users represent themselves as "women" and/or "men," even transcending real-world identities.

Avatar Representation: Codes of Values, Aspirations, and Social Position

Avatars are not merely visual forms but function as signifiers that communicate users' values and beliefs. As codes, avatars encode meanings that are read by other players and are reproduced through practices of display, interaction, and the virtual marketplace. These value-codes are manifestations of the users themselves. Meanwhile, as tools for projecting aspiration, avatars communicate users' ambitions and desires to be "pro players," "creators," or "collectors," and signal access to symbolic capital that is validated through visibility and community interaction. Therefore, what appears on the visual surface is not simply a matter of taste but a manifestation of socio-economic strategies aimed at securing recognition, networks, and opportunities within the platform ecosystem. This, in turn, locates users within specific social positions in the community. New and inexperienced users

(newbies) compete in the game to stand out through distinctive styling enabled by Roblox's gamification mechanics (see Figure 2).



Fig. 2. Avatar Representation in the “Musical Chairs” Arena

Ownership of branded or rare items is often accompanied by profile bios that assert statuses such as “amateur,” “collector,” or “pro designer.” Repeated use of particular item combinations emerges as a signal of aesthetic aspiration and marks users’ social positions within the Roblox ecosystem, prompting other players to grant virtual respect and recognition. These virtual items operate as symbolic capital: the accumulation and display of goods become practices that consolidate social status. The avatar thus functions as a “language” readable as a mediated self-representation shaped through customization processes (Andreas et al., 2024). It can be argued that the symbolic dimension of avatar consumption is not merely meaningless aesthetics, but also a mechanism of social stratification within the 3D virtual world.

Fluidity as “Becoming” Identity

Users identities on Roblox are fluid and dynamic: players frequently change avatars, switch styles, or move between subcommunities or maps according to interaction needs, mood, or social strategy. These changes may be rapid, driven by daily cosmetic swaps, or long-term, reflecting shifts from roleplayer to creator status.



Fig. 3. Users entering the “Combat Arena” map.

This dynamism is often influenced by new item updates or by identity shifts users undertake when rebranding themselves. Players may create different personas for competitive games than for casual spaces. This is evidenced by divergent identity goals when entering different arenas or maps (Bonales-Daimiel & Moreno-Albarracín, 2025). For example, appearances differ between players

in the “Fish It” map and those in the “Combat Arena” map. In other words, identity choice is not fixed but continuously “becoming” without a terminal point.

This process of becoming is marked by the ongoing turnover of items that are endlessly produced and circulated. Unlike identity in the physical world, where typically one body is associated with one identity, in the Roblox metaverse identities shift according to the Robloxian’s aims. They can be multiplied, deleted, and remolded. Platform affordances (the ease of swapping items) facilitate this fluidity.

Performativity: Interactive Practices and Symbolic Consumption

Robloxian identity is most vividly enacted within the metaverse. This is evidenced by in-game interactions such as use of the chat feature, role assignments in roleplay, participation in events, and the consumption and display of virtual goods. Performativity here is not merely the display of an avatar but the construction of meaning through social action. Collaborative activities, building together, fashion show runways, and roleplay events (see Figure 4) affirm both collective and individual identities.



Fig. 4. Mount Mono Expedition, illustrating users’ collaborative exploration within a themed virtual environment.

“Micro-performances” such as posing, using emotes, and custom animations function as rituals that confirm roles while also operating as practices of virtual consumption (Andreas & Arymami, 2022). Consequently, users perform a “front stage” in public game areas: identities are managed, displayed, and negotiated through interaction. In addition, symbolic consumption plays a crucial role in reinforcing identity narratives. This aligns with Judith Butler’s (2020) concept of performativity, which holds that identity is reproduced iteratively through the imitation of others.

This situation fosters the development of identities that operate within the virtual world, where individuals communicate themselves through text, which in turn shapes how they represent themselves virtually. Face-to-face communication allows a person’s gender, race, appearance, and other embodied characteristics to be recognized; in virtual environments like Roblox, however, these markers can be manipulated, and a single person may enact multiple identities by maintaining multiple accounts. This is especially apparent when technology, the internet, and computers give users the means to conceal identity or manipulate data, creating what appears to be a ‘front stage’ and a ‘back stage’ as conceptualized by Goffman (2023). On the back stage, individuals hide their personal identities, while the front stage displays their social identities. Front-stage identities can be altered according to the desires of the Robloxian and, when translated into social identity in the virtual world, are modified via usernames and virtual self-presentations. These new forms of identity become genuinely separate and are not easily traceable to a single, original owner. Through these adopted identities, symbolic interaction takes place. In discussing the representation of virtual identity within social interaction on the Roblox community network, social interactions can be seen

as occurring between individuals, where one individual provides stimuli to another; in this study, those individuals are represented by accounts within the virtual world. The front-stage identity enacted by users can be changed at will. In this context, users do not show their real-life identities but operate under pseudonymity, causing identity to become blurred. Although traces of embodied form may still be reflected, naming and other signifiers can differ entirely from the user's original identity.

Roblox serves as a relevant case study for understanding how virtual identity is constructed and experienced within the metaverse. The metaverse itself is envisioned as an immersive digital world driven by virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and artificial intelligence (AI), enabling users to interact with one another and with digital objects through their avatars (Humayun, 2025). This environment produces complex dynamics of avatar formation and social engagement that can be explored effectively through a netnographic approach. The virtual world in Roblox is characterized by diverse, representative, fluid, and performative attributes. Roblox exemplifies these characteristics by allowing users to create their own games and virtual items, thereby fostering a dynamic creator-based economy.

Furthermore, the avatarscape becomes a symbolic arena of contestation for Roblox users through the interplay of visual artifacts, performative practices, platform economy, interaction, and gamification. Gamification refers to the application of game-design elements in non-game contexts to motivate users and enhance engagement. Roblox has integrated this concept into its platform, transforming shopping into an interactive and playful experience. This structure enables the commodification of virtual goods, an expression of digital capitalism as underscored by Baumann & Fauveaud (2024) and aligned with Andreas & Arymami (2022).

The creation of an avatar is a fundamental element of virtual identity on platforms like Roblox. Users can extensively customize their avatars through an array of clothing, accessories, and bodily features. This customization is central to self-representation in virtual worlds. AI technologies, in particular, increasingly support avatar personalization, making digital embodiments more realistic and deeply immersive. The freedom to design and portray oneself through an avatar enables the construction of a virtual identity that may align or diverge from the physical self, reflecting what Jin (2012) conceptualizes as the "virtual malleable self." This process of identity-making, enabled by immersion, embodiment, and presence, is a core affordance of the metaverse.

Ultimately, digital identity construction among Roblox players is not a superficial representation; it is deeply integrated with social interaction, community engagement, and personal expression within an evolving digital ecosystem. This ongoing process reflects the broader impact of digital media on identity in the modern era. These findings align with Fu et al. (2025), who demonstrate that avatar creation is driven by self-representation, alter ego experimentation, social needs, and performance enhancement in-game. The phenomenon of avatarscape also becomes a cultural catalyst for boundless virtual consumerism.

Studies by Gabarnet et al. (2025) support these findings, showing that user avatars produce the concept of a "virtual self" multiple identities expressible within virtual environments (Lin & Latoschik, 2022). These identities may serve different psychological roles, from representing the ideal self to enabling exploration of entirely different personas. Thus, the physical self, ideal self, and virtual self become interrelated. In this sense, Roblox is more than a gaming platform; it is a pioneer of V-Commerce (metaverse-based consumer culture) that redefines how users construct identity through virtual consumption. By combining gamification and virtuality, Roblox has revolutionized the user experience within the metaworld and has reshaped the representation of diverse virtual identities.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the avatarscape in Roblox through a netnographic lens, reveals a dynamic ecosystem in which virtual identities are continuously negotiated and expressed. This process is embedded within the broader framework of digital capitalism, enabling boundless virtual consumption and new forms of commodification. While the platform offers unprecedented opportunities for self-expression and community building, it also introduces significant challenges related to data privacy, user safety, and the ethical implications of digital personas.

Future research should explore the long-term psychological and social impacts of extensive virtual identity formation to ensure that virtual environments remain safe, inclusive, and developmentally responsible. The implications of this study are therefore crucial for scholars, users, and game developers as they navigate metaverse technologies with heightened awareness of ethics, responsibility, and sustainability.

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