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The Southeast Asian Cyber-Self: A Study of Internet Identity and Educational Activity among University Pupils

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Abstract- This paper analyzes the conception of the cyber-self, online identity and educational activity in a group of Taiwanese and Indonesian university students. In this work, pupil commentary is focused on, rather than statistical findings, as it is believed that such numerical data may not be entirely reliable and/or consistent. Areas investigated include research and study; entertainment, video and games; music and arts; communicating with others (local and international); "trolling" or investigating others; social networks; news; shopping and banking; and other personal activities. These areas and student identities were all studied. How the online self is being used to supplement offline identity was an important area of research. Another important area was the conception of "real" versus "not real" activity and behavior in on- and offline communication. Students view of themselves in both positive and negative ways is looked at. Human agency and the degree to which individuals shape, or are shaped by the structures and constraints of the virtual world are studied.

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I. Introduction

The "cyber-self," also known as the techno-self, are the online identities of those using, communicating, articulating and interacting using technology and the Internet. This is a field "dealing with all aspects of human identity in a technological society, focusing on the changing nature of relationships between the human and technology" (Wikipedia, "Technoself studies"). Other studies have examined how individuals contemplate the identity of themselves and others online, how they use technology to develop and project identity, and how digital life can alter "real life" connotation and identity. This study will take a comparable approach, examining the various qualities of online identity, and the advantages and disadvantages of online life and digital identity construction. We will look at the online life, behavior and identity of a group of 25 Taiwanese students (a group well-known for their active online lives) at National Taiwan University of Science and Technology (NTUST) and National Taipei University of Business (NTUB), as well as a small group of Indonesian students studying at NTUST. The essential thrust is an investigation into how students describe and present themselves in technological terms on various platforms, and from there how they shape and employ their identities online. Note in the following that although I will present report certain statistical findings, I will not focus on these. Instead I will concentrate on student's remarks and accounts of their actual online conduct. I do this because it is problematic to guarantee that reported behaviors, in terms of time spent online, may not always be accurate. I knew from the beginning that when I asked students to report the time spent online in various areas, it would be very difficult for them to report this with concrete accuracy. It is simply too difficult to actually monitor one's online usage every minute of every day, and report this precisely and completely. Thus, as noted, I will rely more on their commentary, which is in effect more illuminating. With that said, here I will report the statistical numbers that I compiled in various areas:

Table 1

Activity	Time Spent (% of whole, on average)
Research and study	20
Entertainment, video and games	13
Music and arts	14
Communicating with others: Local	14
Communicating with others: International	1

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"Trolling" or investigating others	1
Blogs, Line, Twitter, social networks	19
Reading news	14
Shopping, banking, other personal activities	3

Even above it can be seen that students spend most of their online time with research and study, and thus a given pragmatic style is seen-somewhat different from what is commonly understood as the frivolous, lighthearted online activity seen in students. I would guess this is relatively similar to students anywhere in the world. Student comments show this, as when one student commented that his online life was composed of "YouTube-Facebook(Instagram)-NTUST-RESEARCH AND STUDY." A number of other students also reported that they spend most of their online time with school activities and study. I should at the same time note that "Blogs, Line, Twitter, and social networks" are not far behind at 19%, and this should probably be expected of university students. Many a student has told me that Line is THE platform nowadays (far more than Facebook), and it is widely used ("Line is my primary connection with my close friends and family" one student said, "because Line is the social media I trust to protect user info, compared with Facebook"). Student comments show how this is true, with one saying simply "in addition to my studies online, I spend most of my time on social networks in Taiwan and China."

II. The Techno-Self

Some say the online self is "being used to supplement and augment the offline identity," in order to bring the two personalities closer together (Kool, 231). This can be seen in that students in this study without question use their online identities (as students) to augment their offline identities (as students). In a larger sense, students see that their online identities bleeding over onto the offline, and back again, and again social networking may be the main area here. "I can express myself online in social networks," said one student, "and that shows people who I really am offline." Though students are using Facebook a lot less these days, the other main systems (Line, Instagram and the like) are a combination of that which is online and that which is offline for students. In other words, students see their online behavior as a normal extension of their real identities offline. This can be seen in the varied "online identities" that students choose, and how they are in effect usually linked real life offline. Students told me that they often had three and four e-mail addresses, manifold accounts on various social networking systems, more than one YouTube account, and the like. These accounts presented various "online selves," but these were often strongly linked to offline self. Such goings-on included school activities (of course), professional activities, personal activities, "other," arts activities, gaming, blogging and other similar communication, and certain "philosophical" and transcendental activities (often linked to religion). In a word, though these might all take on unique aspects of online identity for students, they in fact link back to their offline existence. "I use one email for school, one for my personal life, one for my dancing and band, and one for my family" said one student, and other replies were similar. In a word, students for the most part view their "identity" as just that—and whether on or offline, they are simply the people that they are (more on this in terms of "real life" communication below).

There is much interface that does take place online, but it is mostly with ordinary friends and family members. This can be seen in the statistics above, in which students reported that most of the online communication was "local" with those nearby, and more distant connections, or connections with strangers, was rare. "I have a great time connecting with my friends. Most of them are in different areas, and we seldom can meet," said one student, who also said that he deals with strangers such as agents or landlords by way of text.

Students tell me that a lack of face-to-face interaction influences their view of online communication, and in some senses yields a feeling of isolation and disaffection (conceivably this is true even with friends and family members). In answer to a question on the survey I submitted to students, "Do you feel online is "real" communication? Do you find it easier to communicate this way rather than 'real life?'" one student said that he rarely talks to strangers online, mostly with friends and family members, and "I think the real world is much better than online communication, because I will understand real emotion." This same student added, "with online identity, I can express myself more freely," but seemingly not so freely as to roam far outside of his actual self. One student said that he was "always myself" online, and adopted no false identities. He also noted that he can best make friends online, "with someone who has the same habits as me." He did not mention whether such habits were simply online communication and behavior. In any event, in the main we see the pragmatic approach to online communication I have commented on. ""I feel relaxed when chatting with people," said one student, "but

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still sometime have a feeling that is not quite well to express my opinions."

In these lights, some researchers see virtual milieus as communicative "bottlenecks"—milieu in which visual and oral cues, or well-developed (and in essence ordinary) relationships are wanting in true contact and connection. In these terms, we need to be aware of how students are in fact interacting, and how, or whether, they are actually establishing integrity, exchanging information, encouraging others, offering and receiving feedback, or appraising and evaluating evidence (see Reeder, Macfadyen, Roche, & Chase, 2004). In any case, I think that authentic (singular) identity construction and presentation online appears to support varied communicators' perceptions of the possibility for the construction of genuine community.

At the highest level, online identity can be described as an Internet or technological persona, a social/digital identity established via the technologies noted above. It is an actively "constructed" exhibition of the self (the same could be said for "real life" identity, and it may be that any given construction of self in the two worlds is not all that different; this research shows as much). This can be either one's authentic identity, as in the offline world, or a variety of created (and sometimes false, or simply anonymous or pseudonymous) online identities (but to repeat, these were relatively rare in this study). Users reveal varying amounts of identifiable information in these contexts (whether actual or not). In a word, at the highest level users are able to alter and alter their virtual identity to suit varying urges, and craft personas to their fancy (and again to repeat, this is often done in areas that are in essence connected to actual life). The flexibility of online identities allows users to create new virtual selves, and to change and modify their online selves in ways that would be almost impossible with their actual identities (though again, the two approaches may have many similarities). Users can edit and change their virtual selves' appearance and behavior, and control others' views of them. We will see how users can promote and improve themselves online, or if they prefer reduce and weaken themselves. Online anonymity allows users to present different versions of themselves to their audiences. Unconstrained by physical restrictions, users are free to choose and create their new identities. Virtual spaces foster such freedom, and anonymous spheres allow users to alter the expectations, standards, and behavior of daily, "real" life. "I feel I can be more than myself online," one student said, "and I sometimes try to convey myself as a 'superman.'" Others, as I have noted, feel a certain discontent online, and that the lack of true contact in effect weakens them. One student answered, "I feel that it is hard to find a real friend" online, and "this is true because I don't see people face to face." Another commented that "it's different with each feeling. It's totally up to the conversation. But when I post articles on social media, I prefer to be positive. No one likes to read a negative word."

III. Taiwanese (and others): Online Identity

This research will focus on Taiwanese identity, particularly, though as noted students from other Asian countries are also included. Not unlike a number of other peoples, we see here how essentialist and nationalistic forms of identities are being deconstructed and cast-off in an increasingly divided, globalized world. Some say a universal hybrid is emerging, and these says online diasporas are taking place-without leaving their homes at all, people are seeing the rest of the world and communicating with its peoples first- (or perhaps we should say second-hand). My students are experiencing this to some extent, and they are exercising their nationalistic and ethnic selves online. "I often visit pro-Taiwan websites (such as Taiwan.gov, Pixnet and Plurk) to voice my opinions about how much I love Taiwan" said one student. "I also visit English language sites for foreigners in Taiwan, because they like to hear my views, and almost always support me." This view is quite everyday among students, and they also branch into more specific ethnic contexts. Some students are aboriginal Taiwanese, and a number of websites that focus on these peoples are popular. These students often feel a diverse identity, in that they are aboriginal, and generally recognized as such, but they are also often seen as simply "Taiwanese," and their aboriginal identity is masked. In any case, online behavior can break this down, and given them access to specific information that deals with their peoples ("The Council of Indigenous Peoples," "Digital Museum of Taiwan Indigenous Peoples," and "Academia Sinica: Formosan Language Archive" are three important sites in these respects).

In another ethnic approach, Taiwan's view onto China is essential. These days, most young Taiwanese people are not much attracted to China, and many are veritably anti-China. WeChat, Sina Weibo and Tencent are all sites that can be easily accessed, and some students use them to express their views. "Although you often get negative and hostile reactions from pro-China readers," said one student, "surprisingly they are often willing to listen to Taiwan students, and even have fairly positive views of the island."

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IV. The Social Online Self and Agency

Online identities are often determined by the user's association to social groups they are involved with offline. This may be most true in terms of students interacting with one another. Researchers have seen "the emergence of 'transcendent communities'-networks of participation that surpass collections of related but distinct communities" (Joseph). Most students at the same school are not of course "distant" from one another, but the idea holds true. As noted, many people connect their digital lives back into their real lives, and this provides a new focus (immigrants and diasporic peoples are often seen in these lights). This sort of community can be found among students, who frequently interact together online in their studies (and many such studies are online, using remote educational methods). I hoped to see elements of this with the foreign students from Indonesia, Malaysia and other countries in my classes, but they were for the most part silent, probably a normal reaction of shy, reticent students in Asia.

Dramaturgical analysis posits that elements of human interaction are dependent upon time, place, and audience, which indicates how we can view the contexts of online interaction. Goffman writes that "What is important is the sense [the person or actor] provides them [the audience] through his dealing with them of what sort of person he is behind the role he is in" (298). Also in terms of dramaturgy, Goffman describe an individual's "performance" as the presentation of self, and one's efforts to create specific impressions in the minds of others. This process is sometimes called "impression management." Goffman makes a distinction between "front stage" and "back stage" behavior, in which the first's actions are visible to the audience and part of the performance, while the second's are behaviors when no audience is present. We can view online selfhood in the same respect, with practitioners at times stepping to the front of the "stage" and at times lingering in the back. One student said "I sometimes speak up loudly, and move to the center of a conversation online, but other times I hang back, and keep silent." Yet further, Goffman writes of "secrets" that are kept in this style of performance, including dark secrets (those that represent information that could contradict the image presented to spectators; strategic secrets (those that allow the communicator to control the audience); inside secrets (those that are seen as something that is shared with others to increase bonding); entrusted secrets (those that have to be kept in order to maintain integrity); and free secrets (another's secret, not related to oneself, which can be disclosed while still maintaining one's role) (Wikipedia, "Dramaturgy"). Such secret-keeping is very much an aspect of online life and communication. Goffman also talks of specific roles that are played in the dramaturgic framework, as well the control of the image that is conveyed to others, and we will see this in our own examination.

In a similar respect, "key theoretical arguments regarding identity in cyberspace revolve around questions of human agency: the degree to which individuals shape, or are shaped by the structures and constraints of the virtual world" (Macfadyen, 1-2). Much will be shown in these respects with student comments about their online lives. One student said "I sometimes feel 'contained' online, as I cannot truly say what I want, and I feel that others expect me to be certain ways and say certain things. This can be uncomfortable." Another student commented that "Online communities seem to always be changing, and I cannot keep up with all the new members that come online, and the things they say and feel," which echoes analysis that examines "alterations in the nature of identity and agency, the relation of self to other, and the structure of community and political representation by new technologies have resulted in a loss of political identity and agency for the individual" (Holmes, Virtual Politics: Identity and Community in Cyberspace, in Gaoui, 472).

In this respect, queries have been raised about whether public accord and lucid discourse can occur online, an environment populated by many identities (some altered and/or false), and the seemingly haphazard juxtapositions of detached communicators. In the same light as the student above, another said that "There are so many different people online, you often cannot tell who is who, and what they want to really say. It can be confusing." Zambrano (1998) typifies online identity as a "technological terminal," by way of which nation and state are immaterial, but he sees such disembodiment and "deterritorialization" of the individual as a strength, offering the possibility for "productive insertion in the world" beyond the usual geographically-bound notions of citizenship (from Macfadyen, 2). In spite of this seeming ambiguity, my students for the most part seemed comfortable with their national identities, and some students did comment on a firm national focus in their online interaction, such as when one wrote that "Taiwan is a free country with a free Internet. I think this is important." This student was remarking on a common belief about Taiwan as a free, democratic nation, in stark contrast to so many other nations in Asia. He was in essence expressing a strong nationalistic commentary in terms of his Internet identity. One student simply valued online service in Taiwan (which is to be extensive), saying "Taiwan has excellent, convenient Internet service, with many wi-Fi hotspots

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that supply residents. And also some of the info, such as public news and school courses, they are all put online."

V. Virtual Diasporas, Fragmented Identity, the Noeme

Virtual diasporas of itinerant and relocating individuals can be seen in these lights, and this is common in student life (though again the foreign students in my class did not comment broadly on this issue). "Virtual ethnicity" has been suggested, and, focusing on Taiwan and the People's Republic of China, Professor Jens Damm in this light writes that "Taiwanese nationalism is…creating its own version of Taiwanese cyber nationalism." One trend "claims that the Internet is helping to foster a global, postmodern and hybrid diaspora, which is leading to an identity formation beyond nationalist and nostalgic yearnings and beyond an ethnic and culturally narrowly defined…identity" (Damm, no page no.) As visiting students, I know that my foreign students had a sort of dual identity crossing Taiwan and their home nations, and some did express a feeling of being citizens of both nations at the same time (they often expressed this during class).

Turkle (1995) states that a model of decentered (or fragmented) self may be helpful for appreciating virtual identity, drawing from psychology, sociology, psychoanalysis, philosophy, aesthetics, and artificial intelligence. Poster (2001) recommends a new view onto online identity, such that it functions as a provisional and changeful link to evolving cultures and communities in cyberspace. Others are less eager to accept virtual identity as a disconnect with traditional conceptions of identity, and argue that virtual reality is simply a continuing "sophistication of virtualness that has always reflected the human, embodied experience" (Miah, 2000, 211). Virtual identity, in all of these respects, poses a challenge to accepted ideas of identity construction, and recent studies have scrutinized methods and stratagems that individuals employ when they are choosing or constructing online identity or personae. Jordan (1999) surveys "progressive identity construction" with the use of online names, online bios and self-descriptions—relatively simple tools that virtually everyone uses. As noted above, ethnicity comes into play, and "virtual ethnicity" is now seen as a likelihood with how individuals represent this in cyberspace (and I have advocated this in terms of the foreign students in my class). Poster asks whether ethnicity requires bodies for true representation. Contributors to the work edited by Smith and Kollock (1998) offer counter-arguments to the suggestion that as a site of disembodied identity, "cyberspace may eliminate consideration of racial identity" (Macfadyen, 2). Instead, they propose that cyber identity may simply be creating new measures for people to evaluate others—and in effect be more of one's own self, one's own nation, one's own ethnicity. In all of the above, we see that online identities may be multiple, fluid, manipulated and may have little to do with the "real lives" (or selves) of the persons behind them— but again this is not say that those real lives still have a very strong impact in one's life. I think we have seen elements of all of the above in the student comments I have shared thus far.

We can see that virtual identities can be viewed in manifold ways, in various aspects and/or contexts. One such conception is the Noeme, a very useful conception. The Noeme, by Marios Kyriazi, denotes "a combination of a distinct physical brain function and that of an 'outsourced' virtual one" (2011, 28). It is "the intellectual 'networked presence' of an individual within the Global Brain, a meaningful synergy between each individual human, their social interactions and artificial agents, globally connected to other Noemes through digital communications technology (and, perhaps soon, through direct brain to brain interfaces)." This may be reminiscent of the "post human" or possibly "trans-human" identity, in which human intellect and physiology are enhanced by way of technology, or individuals have both biological and artificial parts. When a person has bridged that which is human and potentially "non-human," it gives rise to questions of ethics, justice, language, trans-species communication, social systems, and associative, synthesized intellectuality. The post human is seen as an almost-new species of human, which, again, is augmented by technology, enabling qualities and capabilities that exceed current human traits, a "conception of human identity in the face of human-technological integration" (from Luppicini; techno-human is also used in these respects).

I refrain from using the term "cyborg" here, or to refer to actual human beings in these lights, but admittedly we might view humans interacting online in these ways—simultaneously "human" and "technological," almost half-human and half-machine in their connection to technology, with the enhancements that technological connection provides. I think we are seeing something parallel to these ideas in the crossings and interactivity of students from different countries, creating a sort of new consensus, and globalized social systems amid digitized communication. One student commented that "I feel like I am almost a machine when I interact online—partly because I know others cannot see me, and the feeling is less real. I become part of the computer, and I enjoy this feeling of otherness."

In some senses, all of the above is an effort to emerge out of a given materialism and perhaps

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utilitarianism in human existence, into a new field of life and behavior that is more counterbalanced in its view of all that is underwriting humanness (but, and yet again, the given pragmatic/realistic world view that I seem to see in my students may work against this; though to be sure they are in their interactions contributing to an enhanced humanness). In a word, at their best the above concepts indicate how "The human species can, if it wishes, transcend itself—not just sporadically, an individual here in one way, an individual there in another way, but in its entirety, as humanity" (Huxley, 15). "Though I feel disconnected sometimes online," one student said, "I know that I am actually connecting more widely, often with people all around the world."

Human beings are taking on new roles and identities by way of their interaction with and use of technology. We can see here that online life gives rise to sober questions about the advantages and disadvantages of online communities and communication, and the rewards and downsides of online identity creation. Luppicini notes the negative influence of the "impersonality of virtual communities on offline interaction and the consequence of Internet addiction" (Wikipedia, "Technoself studies"). I will share questions of the advantages and disadvantages of the tech-self, as well as a questionnaire I submitted to students, below.

Sherry Turkle defines all of our concerns well. Many digital personas now live a fully networked life (just look at all the people glued to their smart phones; and oh how true this usually is during any class in Taiwan!), traveling in a seemingly infinite technological landscape—but there are costs. "These days, insecure in our relationships and anxious about intimacy, we look to technology for ways to be in relationships and protect ourselves from them at the same time" writes Turkle (xii). "We seem determined to give human qualities to objects and content to treat each other as things" (xiv). "Technology is seductive when what it offers meets our human vulnerabilities. And as it turns out, we are very vulnerable indeed. We are lonely but fearful of intimacy. Digital connections and the sociable robot may offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship" (1). Students have expressed such disadvantages to online life, and the lack of the real online.

VI. My Questionnaire: Benefits and Concerns

With the above said, I submitted a questionnaire to students, a shortened version of which I will include here:

1. How many "friends" or other contacts do you have on the main social media platforms that you use? Think about friends, family and strangers. How much do you interact with your family online? Your friends? With strangers?
2. Define your interaction and communication online. Do you feel it is "real" communication, or do you feel you are communicating behind a mask? Do you find it easier to communicate this way rather than "real life"?
3. Is your online identity and presence "positive," happy, contented, confident, or "negative," angry, hostile, or aggressive? If you do both, how and when do you decide which personality to show?
4. Are there any features to your nationality or ethnicity (Taiwanese, Eastern, Asian, world citizen) that are important to you online?
5. Is sex or sensual contact with others important to you online?
6. One's "digital footprint" refers to one's distinctive set of traceable digital activities, actions, offerings and communications manifested on the Internet or digital platforms and devices. What does your "digital footprint" look like?

I also talked to some students personally. To continue, let me list the set of benefits and concerns about online self and identity that I have referred to, and which I also shared with students. These questions and remarks reveal much that we will see students commenting on in this study.

a) Benefits

1. People can present themselves without fear of persecution.
2. It offers new opportunities for society, especially the ability for people to explore the roles of their own lives, hopes and dreams, behavior, gender and sexuality in a manner that can be safe.
3. Online identity has given people the opportunity to feel relaxed in various roles, some of which may be fundamental aspects of the user's life that he or she is unable to portray in the real world.
4. Online identity has a helpful effect for minority groups, people with disabilities, etc. Online identities may help eliminate prejudices created by stereotypes found in real life, and thus provide a greater sense of inclusion.
5. The flexibility of online media provides control over revelation of personal details, and can give users more modifiable and obliging identity construction. This is not typically available in real world social interactions.
6. "The good thing about online is that it is a devolved and inquiring means of communication. People can challenge one another in ways that may not be possible offline.
7. The online world delivers users a choice to determine which sex, sexual preference and identity they would like to portray.

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b) Concerns

1. Misrepresentation and predacious behavior online.
2. Online pornography and virtual sex and dating.
3. Concerns regarding the connection between on and offline lives are challenging the notions of what constitutes real experience. To toy with these ideas has resulted in a questioning of how online experience may affect one's offline emotions.
4. When projected online, mind, body and sense of self become manufactured constructs, "digitized" and not "real." This may create a fabricated sense of security and interaction with others.
5. The identities that people construct online and in social networks are not necessarily aspects of their true, real offline self. Fake identities can be created, and any identity may not be a reliable depiction of what is true.

As noted, it might not seem unusual that students most often employ identities online, and spend most of their time online, around studies and research. My research indicates that in general students spend about 20% of their time doing these activities, a reasonably substantive number. This might be part of a larger online education movement that has in some senses swept the globe. The computer supported learning approach legitimizes the use of computers as cognitive artifacts supporting collaborative knowledge construction and learning, among students learning at a distance (and indeed such online learning was about to be broadly introduced in Taiwan as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic; I myself was preparing online classrooms for a time this spring; this was in the end not needed in Taiwan). Learner's participation in the process of knowledge assembly and development, the evaluation of arguments, and reflective awareness is the principal goal of an effective online educational environment, and such collaboration encourages understanding from many views. Given that the majority of the students in this study were engineering students (with a few management students, and about four architecture students), this is the kind of study and learning that is encountered—and certainly it seems that computer-based learning and usage makes perfect sense for this sort of technological study. "We can learn a lot online, and all students really like and appreciate the chance to take online courses" one student said.

In spite of this more pragmatic approach, a variability of online identities and complexity of social negotiation is seen. My findings show how self and social identity are not static conceptions, but are negotiated through communication and discourse. Virtual environments allow participants to choose varied versions of self, and to travel along broad, context-driven localization. This becomes most clear during on-line interactions lacking face-to-face interaction. Deciding which "self" to reveal during the online interaction appears to be a problem defined within the social context wherein interaction occurs. To repeat, most of my students "online selves" are in fact relatively strongly connected to their "real selves," but these virtual contexts allow them to choose diverse versions of the self, and to involve themselves in quite extensive on-line interactions.

VII. Conclusion

Some investigation suggests that the individual is composed within a "multiple populated self" (Gergen, 1991), with many voices, not necessarily consistent with one another, and often in conflict. "Action and communication are at the base of the constructive and interpretative process of building identities and those processes are distributed into the context composed by other entities, cognitive artifacts, and relationships" (Perkins in Talamo, 15). Students in this study observed some of the uncertainties and difficulties they have in these respects, and the idea of the multiply-constituted self. This specifies much about the ways in which people perceive themselves in the modern day, and the inherent ambiguity of the modern, techno-enabled self. These avenues of study open new views on to just what students are, just how they think of themselves, and just how they communicate with each other and with others in modern ways. I hope this study has opened the reader's eyes to what Southeast Asian students are thinking and feeling today.

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