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Cultural Identity and Digital Media Representation: A Study of Dev Anderson and Willow Williams in Simone Soltani's *Cross the Line*

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Abstract

This study examines the role of digital media in identity construction as represented in Simone Soltani's *Cross the Line* (2024), analyzed through Stuart Hall's Cultural Identity Theory. Employing a qualitative descriptive design with a literary and cultural studies approach, the research addresses three questions: what forms of identity construction appear in the novel, what factors shape identity construction in the digital era, and what impacts identity construction produces on the characters. Data collection produced a structured tabulation of all 335 pages of the novel, organized into clusters recording quotations, meanings, and interpretations. The analysis confirms that all seven forms of identity synthesized from Hall's theory being, becoming, representation, discursive, multiple, fragmented, and constantly negotiated are represented through the experiences of the two protagonists, Dev Anderson and Willow Williams. Seven identity-shaping factors are likewise confirmed, with media and digital representation emerging as the most distinctive force in the narrative. The impacts of identity construction are categorized into psychological, professional, and relational-social dimensions. The findings suggest that in the digital era, a person's identity is no longer separable from how they are represented online, and that protecting one's digital representation has become inseparable from protecting who one is allowed to be.

Keywords: *cultural identity, digital media, identity construction, representation,*

1. INTRODUCTION

Identity construction is the active and ongoing process by which a person builds an understanding of who they are, not as a fixed or inherited quality but as a dynamic product of personal experience, social interaction, cultural membership, and external recognition (Green et al., 2025). Hall (1997) argues that identity is not a stable core within the individual but a continuous process of production, always constituted within and not outside representation. In its most complete form, identity construction brings together who individuals believe themselves to be, who others perceive them to be, and who they are becoming through the contexts they inhabit.

The emergence of the digital paradigm has added a transformative dimension to this process. Where identity was once shaped largely through face-to-face interaction, family ties, and physical presence in cultural spaces, individuals must now also manage a curated online presence visible to audiences far beyond their immediate communities. Digital identity is increasingly built through media visibility and self-representation on social platforms, producing a tension between the authentic self and the digitally performed self (Fernández Pedemonte, 2012). Social media has become a primary arena for identity construction and management, where individuals engage in deliberate acts of self-presentation for public consumption (Czakon et al., 2023), and digital media now functions as a social mirror that reflects, reinforces, and at times distorts individual identity, particularly for those navigating public-facing professional roles (Pérez-Torres, 2024).

Contemporary fiction has emerged as a productive site for examining the lived experience of this shift. Literary texts are social productions that reflect and reproduce the cultural conditions from which they emerge (Eagleton, 1983), and popular cultural texts are among the most significant sites where meaning about identity and power is produced and contested (Hall, 1997). A novel that places digital identity construction at the center of its narrative therefore offers genuine analytical value for examining how real-world identity processes are imagined and given meaning within popular culture (Storey, 2018).

Popular romance fiction has traditionally occupied a marginal position within literary scholarship, more often dismissed as commercially formulaic entertainment than examined as a serious site of cultural meaning-making (Storey, 2018). This marginalization, however, risks overlooking the genre's particular capacity to dramatize identity negotiation in emotionally legible and widely accessible form. Eagleton (1983) observes that no literary form stands outside ideology; a novel's structural choices, its narrative point of view, the interiority it grants its characters, and the terms on which it resolves conflict are themselves ideologically consequential ways of organizing how readers come to understand selfhood, legitimacy, and belonging. Read in this light, a contemporary romance novel that foregrounds digital reputation management as its central conflict is not merely borrowing topical subject matter for commercial appeal; it is staging,

through the conventions of the genre itself, the same questions of representation and recognition that occupy more canonical literary and sociological scholarship. Taking *Cross the Line* seriously as a text about identity, rather than reading it only as a love story, therefore also extends an ongoing effort within cultural studies to recover popular genres as legitimate objects of critical inquiry (Storey, 2018).

Simone Soltani's *Cross the Line* (2024) makes this dynamic its central conflict. The novel follows Dev Anderson, a British-Indian Formula 1 driver whose public image is destroyed by his former social media manager's sabotage, and Willow Williams, the sports marketing graduate hired to rebuild his digital identity. As Willow reconstructs Dev's online presence to reflect his authentic self rather than a managed corporate persona, the two negotiate the boundary between honest self-representation and public performance.

The theoretical framework applied to this negotiation is Stuart Hall's Cultural Identity Theory, which proposes two linked positions: identity as "being," a shared cultural essence rooted in collective history and heritage, and identity as "becoming," a continuous process shaped through representation, history, and social power (Hall, 1990). Building on this distinction, Williams and Chrisman (2020) show that identity is never formed in a neutral space but is always constructed within structures of power and representation. A previous thesis by Aurora (2024) examined cultural identity conflict through inherited cultural expectations in a single protagonist; the present study extends this line of inquiry by analyzing two characters whose identities are shaped simultaneously by traditional and digital forces, incorporating online visibility and media representation as forces largely absent from earlier identity-focused literary research. Recent scholarship reinforces the relevance of this focus: Masiero (2023) demonstrates that digital identity is shaped and surveilled by the platforms through which it is expressed, while Hnit and Almanna (2025) argue that narrative identity operates across personal, social, and digital dimensions simultaneously.

These three studies, read together, mark out the specific gap this research addresses. Aurora's (2024) thesis demonstrates the productivity of Hall's framework for literary analysis but confines its object to a single protagonist negotiating inherited cultural expectations, leaving open the question of how identity construction proceeds when two characters' processes unfold in relation to one another rather than in isolation. Masiero (2023) approaches digital identity from a platform-studies perspective external to literary analysis, showing that digital identity is never simply self-authored but is continuously shaped, and surveilled, by the technical and institutional architecture of the platforms through which it circulates; this insight is directly relevant to *Cross the Line*, in which the same social media apparatus that enables Jani's sabotage also enables Willow's reconstruction, but it has not previously been tested against a literary narrative. Hnit and Almanna (2025) argue that narrative identity is constituted simultaneously across personal, social, and digital dimensions, a claim that implies these dimensions cannot be studied in isolation from one another, yet their analysis does not extend to popular fiction as a narrative form in its own right. The present study draws together these three lines of inquiry, applying a platform-aware, multi-

dimensional understanding of digital identity to a two-protagonist popular romance narrative, a combination that has not, to the researcher's knowledge, previously been examined.

This study therefore investigates the role of digital media in identity construction in *Cross the Line* through three research questions: (1) what forms of identity construction are represented in the novel; (2) what factors define identity construction in the digital era as depicted through the characters' experiences; and (3) what impacts identity construction has on the characters' personal, professional, and social lives. By applying Hall's framework to a contemporary popular novel, the study aims to demonstrate that *Cross the Line* is a culturally significant text reflecting the lived complexities of identity formation in an age where the struggle to control one's own representation is, ultimately, a struggle for selfhood.

The significance of this study is therefore twofold. Theoretically, it tests whether Hall's Cultural Identity Theory, developed originally to account for diasporic and postcolonial identity, retains its explanatory power when extended to the specifically digital forms of representation that now mediate most public identities. Practically, it offers a close, textually grounded account of how the loss and recovery of control over one's own digital representation can be understood not as a matter of reputation management alone but as a matter of selfhood, a distinction with implications for how public-facing professionals, and the institutions that employ them, might think about digital identity governance. The remainder of this article proceeds as follows: Section 2 outlines the qualitative descriptive methodology and the procedures used to collect and analyze textual data from the novel; Section 3 presents the findings organized around the three research questions and discusses their theoretical implications; Section 4 concludes with a summary of the study's contribution and its limitations.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design with a literary and cultural studies approach, treating the novel not as a self-contained aesthetic object but as a cultural document embedded within the historical and ideological conditions of the digital era (Storey, 2018). Cultural studies asks not only what a text says but how it says it and what ideological assumptions it reflects (Hall, 1980), combining close textual reading with contextual and theoretical analysis (During, 2007).

To strengthen the trustworthiness of this interpretation, the study follows several safeguards common to qualitative literary analysis. First, investigator triangulation was approximated by cross-checking each candidate passage against the specific theoretical criterion it was claimed to instantiate, discarding passages that fit a category only loosely. Second, negative case analysis was used throughout: where a passage appeared to contradict an emerging category, for instance moments where Dev's public and private selves appeared to align rather than fracture, these were retained and discussed rather than excluded, so that the seven analytical categories describe genuine patterns in the text rather than a confirmatory selection of evidence. Third, an audit trail was maintained through the structured tabulation described below, allowing the interpretive path from raw textual data to final categorization to be traced and, in principle, checked by another reader applying the same framework.

The primary data source is *Cross the Line* by Simone Soltani (2024), a 335-page contemporary romance novel narrated in alternating first-person perspectives by its two protagonists. This dual-perspective structure was central to the novel's selection, as it grants direct access to both characters' internal processes of identity negotiation. The novel was chosen because it treats digital identity, social media management, and the tension between authentic selfhood and constructed persona as central narrative concerns rather than background elements, and because its two-character structure supports a comparative analysis of how identity construction unfolds differently for Dev and Willow.

The novel's dual first-person structure also carries a methodological advantage specific to this study's comparative aim: because each chapter is explicitly attributed to either Dev's or Willow's narrating voice, coded passages could be reliably attributed to a specific character's perspective without inference, reducing the risk of misattributing an event's meaning to the wrong protagonist. As the primary data source is a published, publicly available literary work rather than data collected from human participants, no ethical clearance was required for this study; the analysis engages solely with the published text and does not involve interviews, surveys, or any interaction with the author or with real individuals resembling the characters.

Because qualitative research relies on the researcher's ability to interpret and select data (Bazen et al., 2021), the study uses two instruments in sequence: Hall's Cultural Identity Theory, which

supplies the conceptual lens (being, becoming, representation, discourse, multiplicity, fragmentation, and negotiation), and textual analysis, the practical technique used to identify narrative events, dialogue, and internal monologue reflecting identity formation across the novel's 335 pages.

Data collection proceeded in five steps: reading the novel in full; tabulating every page into a structured table; categorizing the data into clusters of character, event, meaning, and interpretation; identifying digital media and identity as the two core analytical topics; and classifying all recorded events accordingly. Data analysis then proceeded through close reading to answer Research Question 1 by locating narrative moments instantiating each of Hall's seven forms of identity, followed by thematic analysis to group these moments into the broader factors and impacts addressed by Research Questions 2 and 3.

The tabulation instrument recorded, for every page of the novel, four columns: the page number, a verbatim quotation illustrating an identity-relevant event, a brief description of the narrative event itself, and the researcher's interpretation of its significance for identity construction. This structure was chosen because it keeps the primary textual evidence, the descriptive account of what happens, and the interpretive claim about what it means visibly separate, allowing the interpretation to be checked against the quotation rather than accepted on the researcher's authority alone. Once the full 335-page tabulation was complete, entries were re-read and grouped first by which of Hall's seven forms of identity they most clearly instantiated, then, in a second coding pass, by which of the seven identity-shaping factors and which of the three impact categories they illustrated. Because a single passage can carry more than one theoretical significance, for instance illustrating both a shaping factor and a resulting impact simultaneously, entries were permitted to receive more than one code, consistent with the non-mutually-exclusive character of Hall's categories themselves.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The following analysis addresses three questions: (1) what forms of identity construction are represented in *Cross the Line*; (2) what factors shape that construction in the digital era; and (3) what impacts identity construction produces for the characters.

3.1 Forms of Identity Construction

3.1.1 Identity as Being and Becoming

Identity as "being," the stable cultural essence rooted in heritage, is grounded in Dev and Willow's respective cultural inheritances Dev's British-Indian background and Willow's family history intertwined with the Andersons' across decades of shared neighbourhood life. Identity as "becoming," by contrast, is visible in the characters' continuous development: Dev's transformation from a driver whose public identity has been fabricated by others into one who authors his own image, and his eventual arrival, after "five years in Formula 1, over one hundred race starts," at his first Grand Prix victory (Soltani, 2024, p. 315). The moment materializes an identity he had long been "trying to become" rather than confirming one he already possessed, illustrating Hall's (1990) claim that cultural identity is a matter of "becoming" as much as "being."

This finding is significant because it shows the two poles of Hall's (1990) theory operating not in sequence but simultaneously throughout the narrative. Dev's British-Indian heritage and Willow's decades-long entanglement with the Anderson family are never treated by the novel as settled facts that simply explain the characters' actions; rather, they function as a stable ground against which the more turbulent process of becoming is measured. This pairing supports Hall's broader argument, developed originally in relation to Caribbean diasporic identity but evidently transferable to other contexts of public visibility, that cultural identity is neither a fixed essence to be discovered nor a purely fluid construction with no ground at all, but a production always positioned in relation to a real, if selectively remembered, history (Hall, 1997). The novel's insistence on returning to childhood memory even as it tracks Dev's very contemporary crisis of digital reputation therefore dramatizes, in narrative form, the theoretical claim that being and becoming are mutually constitutive rather than opposed stages.

3.1.2 Identity as Representation

The most narratively central form is identity as representation the process through which identity is produced and circulated through systems of meaning-making. This form drives the novel's entire conflict: Dev's public identity is destroyed not by anything he has done, but by how he is represented online by his former manager, Jani. Reflecting on the fallout, Dev observes that "the damage is already done... my reputation is in the shitter, my team is giving me the cold shoulder, and there are whispers that my sponsors believe I might not be the right person to represent

them" (Soltani, 2024, p. 22). None of this follows from his actual conduct; it follows entirely from what has been shown about him online. Willow's countervailing strategy is explicitly representational rather than corrective: "People should know the real him but only as much as he's willing to show" (Soltani, 2024, p. 149). Read through Hall's theory, there is no pre-existing "real Dev" that representation merely distorts or restores Dev's identity is constituted by whichever representation currently circulates, false when Jani controls it and honest when Willow does.

This finding carries a stronger implication than a simple contrast between a false and an honest portrayal of Dev. Because both the damaging and the restorative representations of Dev circulate through the identical social media infrastructure, the novel implicitly supports Masiero's (2023) argument that digital identity is always platform-mediated: the platform itself neither guarantees nor prevents authenticity, it simply amplifies whichever representation currently occupies it. What determines Dev's identity, in Hall's sense, is therefore not the platform but the relations of trust and intention behind whoever controls the account at a given moment, first Jani, later Willow. This also clarifies why Willow's stated strategy, allowing people to know Dev only as much as he is willing to show (Soltani, 2024, p. 149), does not amount to a return to some unmediated true self. It is itself a representational strategy, simply one aligned with Dev's own intentions rather than opposed to them, reinforcing Hall's (1997) claim that there is no meaning, and by extension no identity, outside of representation altogether.

3.1.3 Identity as Discursive

Identity as discursive produced through language, institutional power, and categorization appears in how Argonaut Racing constrains Dev's professional identity. He privately suspects the team signed him for "diversity points," a suspicion he calls "a conspiracy I'll never speak aloud" (Soltani, 2024, p. 211), revealing a category imposed on him by institutional interest rather than performance. This discursive construction is exposed fully when Dev learns his team ordered his car retired to sabotage his results, declaring "I can't stay here while they sabotage me over and over again... he set me up" (Soltani, 2024, p. 255). Institutional power, not competitive reality, determines what Dev's professional record and therefore his identity as a driver is permitted to show.

The discursive construction of Dev's professional identity also illustrates how institutional categorization can operate beneath the level of any single person's intention. Argonaut Racing's management does not need to state outright that Dev's value lies in the diversity narrative he represents for the team; the suspicion Dev voices privately, that he was signed for “diversity points” (Soltani, 2024, p. 211), is precisely the kind of category that Hall (1997) argues discourse produces without ever being spoken as an explicit rule. A parallel discursive pressure shapes Willow's professional identity: as a young woman managing a male athlete's public image, she must continually perform competence and boundary-setting simultaneously, aware that either a

personal or a professional misstep would be read differently for her than it would for a male colleague in the same role. Although the novel does not dwell on this parallel explicitly, its presence in Willow's repeated insistence on strictly professional conduct (Soltani, 2024, p. 111) suggests that discursive constraint in *Cross the Line* is gendered as well as racialized, extending Hall's framework to intersecting axes of institutional power.

3.1.4 Identity as Multiple, Fragmented, and Constantly Negotiated

Both protagonists inhabit several, sometimes contradictory subject positions simultaneously. Willow must manage the tension between her identity as Dev's employee and her long-suppressed romantic feelings for him, insisting to her friends that things "has to" stay professional (Soltani, 2024, p. 111) phrasing that describes a constraint rather than a simple preference. Dev's fragmentation is most visible in his account of a previous public persona: "I've given up control of my image and let them make the world believe I have the personality of a cardboard cutout... I wasn't allowed to share my opinions or honest thoughts" (Soltani, 2024, p. 27). The gap between this displayed self and his actual self-constitutes fragmentation in Hall's sense. Identity as constantly negotiated is confirmed in the climactic confrontation with Oakley, Willow's brother and Dev's closest friend, whose grudging acceptance "I still hate you... but I get it... it doesn't change anything between us" (Soltani, 2024, p. 498) demonstrates that social legitimacy for the couple's identities is achieved only through active struggle rather than granted automatically.

Taken together, these instances of multiplicity, fragmentation, and negotiation suggest that *Cross the Line* resists offering either protagonist a single, stable identity even at the level of narrative resolution. Willow's romantic feelings and professional role are never fully reconciled into a seamless identity; rather, the novel resolves this tension through the couple's decision to renegotiate the boundary itself once Dev's reconstructed public identity no longer depends on strict professional distance. Similarly, Dev's fragmentation between his fabricated corporate persona and his private self is not resolved by simply discarding the public persona altogether, since a Formula 1 driver cannot function entirely outside public representation, but by aligning the two so that the public persona becomes a more honest, if still curated, extension of the private self. This pattern supports Hall's (1997) contention that identity resolution, where it occurs at all, takes the form of a more livable negotiation between competing positions rather than the recovery of a single authentic self standing behind them.

3.2 Factors Shaping Identity Construction in the Digital Era

Among the seven factors identified personal experiences, social roles and interaction, cultural background and heritage, social norms and expectations, media and digital representation, historical and collective memory, and power/ideology/discourse media and digital representation emerges as the most distinctive to the contemporary setting. It is the structural core of the novel's conflict: the same platform through which Jani's false posts destroyed Dev's reputation is the

platform through which Willow's authentic strategy rebuilds it, framed by Willow as offering Dev "a fresh start... slate brushed clean" (Soltani, 2024, p. 145).

This centrality of media and digital representation as a shaping factor is consistent with broader scholarship on digital identity construction. Czakon et al. (2023) describe social media as an arena of deliberate, ongoing self-presentation rather than a neutral channel for reporting an already-formed identity, a description that fits Willow's strategy precisely: she does not simply report the truth about Dev online, she deliberately curates which truths to show and in what sequence, in order to produce a specific effect on public perception. Pérez-Torres (2024) similarly argues that social media functions as a social mirror that can distort as easily as it reflects; in *Cross the Line*, this mirror function operates literally, since the same feed that once reflected a distorted, fabricated version of Dev is later used to reflect a more accurate one, without any change to the underlying platform itself.

Personal experience also functions as a distinct shaping factor, evident in how each protagonist's private history conditions their response to public events that would otherwise appear identical. Dev's own account of losing control of his image, that he had been made to seem like he possessed “the personality of a cardboard cutout” (Soltani, 2024, p. 27), reflects not only an externally imposed discursive category but a personally felt experience of alienation from his own public self, one that shapes his later insistence on authenticity in a way a driver without this specific history might not share. Willow's personal history performs a similarly conditioning role: her position as a girl who once cheered for Dev and Oakley from the stands (Soltani, 2024, p. 60) is not incidental biographical detail but the personal experiential ground from which her professional judgment about how to represent Dev subsequently develops, illustrating that identity-shaping factors in the novel rarely operate as isolated forces but instead compound across a character's personal history.

Social roles and interaction shape identity construction most visibly through the employer-employee relationship that structures Dev and Willow's interaction for much of the novel. The professional role Willow occupies requires her to manage Dev's public identity while suppressing aspects of her own private feelings, producing exactly the kind of role-based identity constraint that Green et al. (2025) describe as central to identity theory's account of how social roles organize behavior independently of personal preference. Willow's repeated insistence that the relationship “has to” remain professional (Soltani, 2024, p. 111) is best read, in this light, not as a simple statement of preference but as a role-based identity claim: she is defining herself, at that point in the narrative, primarily through the social role of employee rather than the personal role of childhood friend or romantic interest, even though the novel makes clear that this role-based self-definition is neither complete nor entirely comfortable.

Social norms and expectations constrain both characters' self-expression: Willow's insistence that her relationship with Dev "has to" remain professional (Soltani, 2024, p. 112) reflects a real,

material cost attached to crossing that boundary, while Dev faces the parallel expectation that a Formula 1 driver project a commercially safe public image at all times. Historical and collective memory underpins the depth of the protagonists' bond Dev's decision to hire Willow rests less on her qualifications than on the memory that "this girl cheered for me and Oakley from the tiny stands at our karting races" (Soltani, 2024, p. 60) while cultural background and heritage surface in smaller, intimate moments, such as Willow's easy familiarity with the Bollywood films Dev grew up watching, inherited across the fence between their families' homes. Power, ideology, and discourse are confirmed through Argonaut's institutional control over Dev's career, demonstrating that identity construction always occurs within structures that determine whose identities receive recognition.

3.3 Impacts of Identity Construction

The impacts of identity construction fall into three categories. Psychologically, identity suppression produces measurable distress Dev notes that under the pressure to perform his public persona, "my voice hardly sounds like my own" (Soltani, 2024, p. 29) while authentic recognition restores emotional wholeness, evident in the unguarded release of his first Grand Prix victory. Professionally, the digital identity crisis initially collapses Dev's sponsorships and team standing, while its reconstruction leads directly to his first win and a contract with an elite team; Willow's own trajectory moves from unemployed graduate to independent professional with "two elite Formula 1 clients" (Soltani, 2024, p. 504), a reputation built entirely through her own work rather than family connection. Relationally and socially, mutual authentic recognition between the two protagonists affirmed when a mutual friend observes that "they make each other the best versions of themselves" (Soltani, 2024, p. 495) and Oakley's eventual acceptance together complete the arc of both characters' identity construction, confirming that authentic identities require social recognition from the surrounding community to become fully real.

These three categories of impact are not independent of one another but compound across the narrative. The psychological distress Dev experiences under a fabricated persona, voiced in his observation that “my voice hardly sounds like my own” (Soltani, 2024, p. 29), does not remain contained within his private emotional life; it directly precedes and arguably enables the professional collapse that follows, since a driver who feels alienated from his own public image is poorly positioned to manage the sponsors and team relationships that depend on that image. Conversely, the professional recovery marked by Dev's first Grand Prix victory (Soltani, 2024, p. 315) and Willow's establishment of an independent client base (Soltani, 2024, p. 504) both precede, rather than follow, the fullest relational and social recognition the couple receives from Oakley (Soltani, 2024, p. 498), suggesting that in the world of the novel, professional legitimacy achieved through authentic representation is a precondition for, rather than a consequence of, social acceptance.

The two protagonists also experience these impacts asymmetrically, in ways consistent with their different starting positions. Dev's psychological and professional impacts are the more visible in

the narrative because his crisis is public from the outset; Willow's impacts, by contrast, unfold more privately, through her transition from an unemployed graduate uncertain of her professional legitimacy to an independent professional with, by the novel's end, “two elite Formula 1 clients” (Soltani, 2024, p. 504), a trajectory that receives comparatively less narrative attention despite representing an equally significant identity transformation. This asymmetry is itself analytically significant: it suggests that whose identity crisis is treated as narratively central depends partly on whose public visibility was greatest to begin with, a pattern that mirrors Masiero's (2023) observation that digital visibility is unevenly distributed even among people who use the same platforms, with more visible figures bearing correspondingly greater reputational stakes.

3.4 Discussion

The analysis answers the three questions guiding this study. First, Odysseus-like transformation is not at stake here, but a comparable structural claim holds: Dev and Willow's heroism, or rather their claim to a coherent selfhood, is constructed and contested through the interlocking codes of being, becoming, representation, discourse, multiplicity, fragmentation, and negotiation. Second, of the seven identity-shaping factors confirmed, media and digital representation proves the most distinctive to the contemporary setting, functioning as both the instrument of Dev's destruction and his recovery. Third, the three categories of impact psychological, professional, and relational-social together demonstrate that in *Cross the Line*, identity in the digital age is simultaneously more visible and more vulnerable than in earlier periods of cultural production.

These findings extend beyond the single text examined. Existing discussions of digital identity have tended to treat online representation as an adjunct to a person's "real" identity rather than as constitutive of it. This study's reading of *Cross the Line* through Hall's framework suggests something stronger: a fabricated online representation produced real material consequences lost sponsorships, a damaged team relationship while an honest one produced a Formula 1 victory and career security. This indicates that managing one's digital representation functions less like public relations and more like a form of self-defense, since protecting how one is shown online has become inseparable from protecting who one is permitted to be.

This reading also has implications for how Hall's Cultural Identity Theory itself might be extended. Hall's (1990, 1997) original formulation was developed primarily to account for diasporic identity negotiated across historical rupture and geographic displacement. *Cross the Line* suggests that the same theoretical architecture, being and becoming, representation, discourse, multiplicity, fragmentation, and negotiation, translates with little modification to identity negotiated across a different kind of rupture: not geographic displacement but the platform-mediated displacement between a person's lived self and their algorithmically circulated public image. This suggests that Hall's framework may be less specific to the postcolonial and diasporic contexts in which it was first developed than to a more general condition of identity formation under conditions of unequal control over one's own representation, a condition that

digital media has generalized far beyond diasporic populations to include any public-facing individual.

For fields concerned more directly with digital media practice, such as public relations, sports management, and platform governance, this analysis suggests a reframing of what digital identity management is actually for. If, as this reading suggests, a person's identity is genuinely constituted rather than merely reflected by their circulating public representation, then managing that representation is not best understood as an optional reputational service layered on top of an already-complete self. It is better understood as a condition of that self's ability to exist publicly at all. This has a direct bearing on how organizations that employ public-facing individuals, athletes, executives, and others, might think about the resources and authority granted to those responsible for digital representation: not as a communications function subordinate to the individual's "real" identity, but as a function with the practical power to determine which version of that individual's identity is permitted to circulate.

A further limitation concerns the genre-specific conventions of popular romance fiction, which typically requires a resolution in which both protagonists achieve reconciliation and social acceptance. It cannot be ruled out that the neat alignment this study finds between authentic representation and positive professional and relational outcomes is itself partly a function of the genre's conventional demand for a satisfying ending, rather than a claim the novel makes about digital identity in general. A reading of a text from a genre with less obligatory resolution, such as literary fiction or tragedy, might reveal a less tidy relationship between authentic self-representation and successful outcomes, an important direction for future comparative research.

Several limitations qualify these conclusions. The analysis is restricted to the two central protagonists rather than an exhaustive account of every character's identity in the novel, and it does not incorporate audience reception or comparison with the novel's screen or audio adaptations. Because the seven analytical categories were synthesized by the researcher from across Hall's writings rather than taken as a fixed list from a single source, other readers applying the same framework could reasonably foreground different passages or emphases. Future research could extend this cultural-code approach to other contemporary romance or popular fiction that foregrounds digital identity, to test whether the pattern identified here the collapse of the distinction between representation and identity itself holds as a broader feature of the genre.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of digital media in identity construction as represented in Simone Soltani's *Cross the Line* (2024), analyzed through Stuart Hall's Cultural Identity Theory. The findings confirm that all seven forms of identity synthesized from Hall's framework being, becoming, representation, discursive, multiple, fragmented, and constantly negotiated are represented through the experiences of Dev Anderson and Willow Williams, with identity as representation driving the novel's central conflict. All seven identity-shaping factors are likewise confirmed, with media and digital representation emerging as the most distinctive force in a contemporary setting. The impacts of identity construction fall into psychological, professional, and relational-social dimensions, together demonstrating that digital media has not merely added a new stage on which identity is performed but has changed what identity fundamentally is: a person's selfhood is no longer separable from how they are represented online. For literary and cultural studies, this study further demonstrates that a contemporary popular romance novel, rarely treated as a serious object of analysis, can render this theoretical claim in concrete, textually verifiable form. Future research may examine other contemporary popular fiction to explore how digital media continues to reshape literary representations of identity.

Beyond its specific findings, this study demonstrates the value of applying established cultural theory to emerging media contexts that the theory's original formulation could not have anticipated. Stuart Hall's account of cultural identity, developed to explain diasporic identity negotiated across historical and geographic rupture, proves equally capable of illuminating identity negotiated across the platform-mediated rupture between a person's lived experience and their circulating digital representation. This suggests that literary analysis grounded in established cultural theory retains explanatory relevance even as the media environment in which identity is constructed continues to change, provided the theory is applied with attention to the specific technological and institutional conditions of the text under study. For students and researchers in literary and cultural studies, *Cross the Line* further demonstrates that popular romance fiction, often excluded from serious critical attention, can render abstract theoretical claims about identity in concrete, textually verifiable form, supporting the case for its inclusion as a legitimate object of literary research.

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