

Nakakapagpabagabag: Unveiling Paranoia Through the Lenses of Identity Theft Victims

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Date Submitted:

August 14, 2026

Date Accepted:

September 12, 2026

Date Published:

October 07, 2026

DOI:

10.5281/zenodo.23230046

ABSTRACT

This study explores the psychological and emotional effects of identity theft through the lived experiences of its victims, using documentary filmmaking as medium. Rooted in Moustaka's (1994) phenomenological approach, the study examines the manifestations of paranoia in Gen Z's living Cavite, providing perspectives on various aspects of this phenomenon that go beyond media representation and societal discussions. The documentary film serves as both a creative output and a means to showcase the experiences of the victims. This study is also shaped by the researcher's personal experiences with identity theft, which inspired using the combination of filmmaking and research to capture the victims' raw insights and genuinely depict the impact of this phenomenon. By focusing on victims' first-hand experiences, the research seeks to enhance the

understanding of the emotional and cognitive impact of identity theft, specifically paranoia and its continuous effects. Lastly, the study aims to raise public awareness and bring forth compassion towards those affected by identity theft, highlighting the necessity for continuous academic and social study of this evolving phenomenon.

Keywords: *Identity theft, Victims, Paranoia, Anxiety, Trauma. Documentary Film*

INTRODUCTION

Identity theft happens when an individual's personal information is stolen and used without permission, often leading to financial losses, reputational damage, and emotional distress (Kaspersky, 2022). It is a prevalent and evolving crime that affects victims in various ways and forms. According to (Newman & McNally, 2007), this phenomenon has three phases, the discovery of the incident, the misuse of stolen data, and accession. Individuals rely on technology to store personal data and use online transactions, which increases the risk of being victimized. Research revealed that emotional issues such as paranoia soon followed the incident. Paranoia, in this study, refers to a consistent feeling of heightened fear and distrust that victims experience because of identity theft, leaving them helpless and powerless. A study by (Irvin-Erickson, 2024) revealed that identity theft leads to various mental health issues such as paranoia triggered by anxiety in regaining control over lost data.

Studies that develop the Routine Activity Theory indicate that individuals have the tendency to believe that they may fall victim to identity thieves if they are within the vicinity of an offender. Identity theft and paranoia are connected in some ways in terms of the behavioral, social, and psychological aspects which create a loop of incidents related to being victimized by the phenomenon. There is a huge knowledge gap related to the experiences of the victims; each varies depending on several factors and elements involved. Incidents of identity theft on Facebook merely scratch the surface; these focus on statistics rather than personal experiences of the victims. Several studies, such as those of (Gross & Acquisti, 2005) suggest the dangers of disclosing private and sensitive information on social media platforms such as Facebook. Though several narratives exist, there is still a gap that needs to be addressed regarding the experiences of the victims.

The study will employ qualitative methods using semi-constructed interviews and video documentation such as on-cam interviews, B-rolls, and screenshots to record the lived experiences of the victims. Using the data collected, the study aims to identify patterns and themes involved in explaining this phenomenon. The study also helps illuminate the struggles of the victims and the emotional and psychological turmoil they undergo to provide a comprehensive narrative of the phenomenon using the victims' point of view.

METHODS

Research Design

The study will use Qualitative Research Design, using phenomenology as an approach specifically Clark Moustakas's (Moustakas, 1994) to understand the lived experiences of the participants using horizontalization to identify significant statements in the participants. This method will help explain the complexities of identity theft through the lived experiences of the victims. Each detail will be carefully identified alongside with themes related to identity theft. The study will use documentary filmmaking which serves as both data collection and representation. In communication research, it constitutes a visual approach that captures, narrates and bridges the gaps beyond what data representation can fully express. The techniques involved in the documentary film help in the interpretive process by guiding the audience through different perspectives in the narrative, transforming into experiences that adds depth to textual transcription.

Research Locale

The research was conducted in the province of Cavite, a rapidly urbanizing location with a digitally adept population, making it a suitable setting for understanding and studying identity theft. Its residence, particularly the Gen Z's are heavily invested into various forms of social media such as Facebook, increasing their exposure to being victimized by cybercrimes such as identity theft. Cavite was chosen because (a) for its large population base, mostly youths, providing an opportunity for access to Gen Z respondents ages 18-29; (b) its rapid urbanization and easy accessibility to internet providers which increases the chance of residents either encountering or being victimized by identity theft; and (c) the researcher's accessibility to the area, allowing for a more personal approach on the sampling techniques used in the study.

Sampling Technique

The researcher employed a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling to determine participants who could help the study through firsthand experiences related to identity theft which can be classified into various themes using horizontalization to identify significant statements using the victims' narratives (Moustakas, 1994).

Purposive sampling served as the primary strategy in recruiting participants for the study as it provides the researcher the freedom to choose victims who directly experienced identity theft to provide a variety of narratives with different backgrounds. This method is well suited for a phenomenological research as it ensures that victims have experienced and undergone effects of the phenomenon and will be able to provide textual and structural context related to the study. Participants were recruited through social media posts on Facebook, inviting the Gen Z population to take part in the research.

Snowball sampling was used to invite other participants through referrals from the recruited ones. This method provided the researcher access to individuals who wanted to participate in the study but hesitated because of various reasons, given the nature and sensitivity of the topic.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Emotional Distress and Paranoia

The study explored the effects of identity theft on Facebook on the victims' emotional experience. Through the documentary film, the victims felt violated and played as if their personal data and identities were used illegally on a platform that they used to connect and communicate with people. The victims shared feelings of anxiety and paranoia because of the way their identities were used, which led to the loss of trust in using digital platforms, specifically Facebook. The findings also align with media effects theory which postulates that repeated exposure to identity theft shapes the communication behaviors of individuals.

According to victim number 1 (Lo), a foreigner sent her a message, asking if she is the one in the photo, "in-approach nya po ako, sabi nya po sakin, are you this girl? Tapos nakita ko po yung picture, yung picture po is ako po, na nakahubad, pero hindi po ako yun. Pero yung pangalan ko po ay sakto din po yung pangalan ko na nakalagay don sa account na po na iyon pati sa picture po". She added, "simula po non, ah, nung una po nag-deactivate ako ng Facebook. Ayoko na pong gumamit ng Facebook, ayoko na pong ipakita yung muka ko sa Facebook. Kahit man lang po i-tag ako sa picture na ganito.

Victims also suffer from various emotional issues such as depression, shock, insecurity, anger, and fear (Agnew, 2002) (Boney-McCoy & Finkelhor, 1995) (Langton & Jennifer Truman, 2014) (Macmillan, 2001) (Norris & Kaniasty, 1997) (Shapland & Hall, 2007). Victim number 4' (Nelie) experienced emotional turmoil following the incident wherein her identity was used by a resort which made her feel anxious, she stated "yung naging impact nya sakin is siguro nagkaron ako ng slight, slight anxiety lang naman na tangina naman kasi alam mo yun pangalan mo kasi, tapos yung ID mo, na supposed to be, private di ba? supposed to be private tapos ilalantarang ipo-post or ipapakita kung kani kanino. Tangina naman di ba? ang hirap nun di ba? parang nakaka...nakakagalit, nakakainis, nakakaiyak". Repeated exposure to identity theft causes.

The film captured the emotional distress victims experience through personal stories of damaged reputations through posts made using the victim's name without consent. These emotional distresses include helplessness and mistrust, feeling of anger, unstable sleeping patterns and feeling vulnerable. The film also showed moments of embarrassment, shame, frustration, and anger, that led to personal struggles to recover their identities. Through various methods, victims tried to re-establish a sense of control over their digital self-representation.

Coping Mechanisms

It is imperative to include the negative effects of being a victim of identity theft (Jansen & Leukfeldt, 2017), though the most obvious consequence is that of financial loss, there are also emotional and psychological effects (Cross, Richards, & Smith, 2016). Individuals decide how to handle the situation once they get a hold of certain factors such as their vulnerability. The victims took immediate action by reporting Facebook profiles that used their identities illegally. They also informed their family and friends about the situation to avoid further damage by posting the incident on their Facebook accounts and other social media platforms. Victim number 2 (Osh) reported the incident to his family and friend asking them to report the profile using his details. "Sabi ko hanapin nyo tong Facebook na to, sinend ko yung link sa kanila tapos, paki-report, mass report, para kung sakali man, nagbabaka sakali ako na ma-disable yung account". Like Osh, victim number 3 (Tin) did the same thing, "once I found out, nagpost agad ako sa social media ko para mainform na din yung mga friends ko about it at nireport ko rin yung account nay un. After nun, eventually, it was deactivated. Pagtapos nun, binlock ko din yung account to prevent further issues na rin". This shows the efforts of the victims to take immediate control of the situation.

In addition, victim number 5 (Len) and victim number 4 (Nelie) also reported the incident by sending private messages to their families and friends. According to Len, "nag-PM na lang ako sa mga friends ko, na nakikiusap ako na baka pwedeng paki-report ng identity theft or kung ano mang message yung binigay ni FB for that, ayun, so talagang sinipagan ko lang sa pagpi-PM". While Nelie stated that "So ang ginawa ko na lang that time is screenshot ko yun tapos sinend ko kaagad sa GC ng relatives ko ganyan, sa mga pamilya ko na in case

kako na may magmessage sa inyo ganyan o makipag-transact kayo sa page na to tangina ID na to yung ginagamit ko, pangalan ko, ganyan”. The coping mechanisms found in the study demonstrate that the behaviors of the victims were distorted by the incident, particularly their social media activities and habits. Potentially altering their actions in the long run.

Recovery Process

Support networks that address the repercussion of identity theft on victims are part of a victim’s journey towards recovery. In addition to emotional empathy, effective recovery involves forming protective boundaries to re-establish victims’ connections to support systems (Goff, Ruhlmann, Dekel, & Huxman, 2020). Victims took immediate action in recovering stolen identities by reporting the incident to the social media platform and to local authorities. Through interviews, the documentary film revealed the importance of support systems such as family and peers who helped the victims through emotional support and encouragement in rebuilding the victim’s confidence and trust. According to victim number 4 (Nelie) his husband comforted him during the incident, “so yung naramdaman ko talaga nun is parang naging balisa ako ganyan, the following days na, minsan sinsabi saakin ng husband ko na “Uy, mahal, ok ka lang ba? Ok lang yan, gagawan natin ng paraan, andito lang ako” ganyan, kino-comfort nya ako so parang naging ok din ako”.

The film also highlighted that the recovery process victims undergo is gradual process and not instantaneous, as some of them still feel the effects of the incident after years have passed. Some of the victims also sought the help of the local authorities to help aid in the situation. Victim number 1 (Lo) was also advised by her parents on how to deal with the situation, she stated “Nung time na po na yun, sabi po ng magulang ko na pumunta po kami sa pulis para po i-report po yung nangyari tapos para patunayan po na hindi po ako yun or baka may way po na ma-trace kung sino man po yung gumawa nung account nay un pati po kung sino man po yung nag-edit po or gumawa nung mga ganung pictures”. Victim number 2 (Osh) also reported the incident to the police, “Marami kasi akong mga kakilalang pulis sa lugar namin, mga ka-brad ko sa fraternity, ganyan mga pulis yun. Pumunta ako sa police station, siguro mga, sabihin na natng three days to a week after pumunta ako. Nireport ko”. The victims’ efforts to rebuild trust were facilitated by certain factors such as support systems including family and friends providing reassurance of the situation and postings on their social media pages to reduce the risks of dangers.

Patterns and Methods: Perpetrator’s Perspectives

According to a study by (Rebovich, 2015) identity thieves steal private information that leads to other criminal activities. They use a variety of techniques and methods centered on obtaining and exploiting victims’ personal information. In investigating the methods identity thieves use, the documentary film uncovered various tactics and strategies used by thieves to steal personal information on Facebook. According to perpetrator 1 (Luis), “I’ve done this type of stuff in sort of more open sort of social media, platforms, not just on Facebook where people just sort of make their own profile, they don’t really need to showcase their own actual name, they’re not required to, but they are so that they can just meet other people that share the same interest, sort of like a fandom sort of thing”. Thieves usually use certain tactics such as researching vulnerable individuals that can be victimized. They steal identities of individuals located within specific regions that are distant from their vicinities to avoid immediate suspicion. Perpetrator 2 (Vin) backed this tactic stating that, “so during that time kasi ang strategy namin, ang advice is ang mga iaad naming mga tao is from Cavite lang and yung mga kukunin na identity or account is from malayong lugar. And ang alam ko yung nakuha naming account nun is from Bulacan pa, so ang mga i-aadd naming mga account dun sa poser account na ginawa ko nung time na yun is from Cavite lang para hindi halata and walang makakilala sa account na yun”.

The lack of identifying factors for identity thieves has played a significant role in enabling them to operate without being caught (McNally & Newman, 2007). They create fake Facebook profiles using stolen identities to imitate the person and deceive friends and followers. The study also presented “account cloning” where stolen identities were used for scams and gain people’s trust on their social media platforms. According to perpetrator

2(Vin), “Yung sa part ko, dun sa poser account ko, mga kinuha ko lang talaga mostly is pictures lang nung babae and pictures yun lang ini-story ko yung mga pictures nung babae na yun tapos hindi lang sa Facebook account nya kundi sa IG na din, dun din ako kumukuha tapos inii-story ko para realistic din”. Perpetrator 1 (Luis) added, “you just need to set up what you think is realistic, set up a realistic place where people believe you live in, set up realistic standards, make up a fake identity of yourself, or if you really can try to procure some stuff where you can take something that already exist so that you can solidify the identity that you chose to make or if you could or if you shouldn’t or at least could just take exactly what other people ah, a readymade profile of themselves and then copy paste that onto yours and just be the person that they already are”.

These strategies exploit vulnerabilities in victim’s technological abilities, raising awareness for a stronger skillset of social media platform’s security features and measures. The film also discussed the emotional and psychological causes of why thieves commit this crime. Themes such as lack of confidence, peer pressure and influence and sexual desires are some of the motivations showcased in the film. Supported by perpetrator 1’s (Luis) statement, “Motivations for me to participate in theft, usually as symbols to me doing stuff to satisfy needs more of the sexual kind, where I end up just becoming someone to procure something with them online” and backed by perpetrator 2 (Vin) stating that “Ah before kasi hindi ako confident sa sexuality ko and yung paggawa ng poser account dun ko nailalabas yung confidence ko. Nung time na yun, nakahelp din naman sya na maano ko, kasi may mga naniniwala naman din kasi na mga boys”.

Deception is the main proponent of the perpetrators to manipulate the audience in social media which becomes routinary in the communications systems confirming the RAT theory in terms of weak guardianship.

Psychological Risks

Victims of identity theft may experience consequences (Green, et al., 2020) (Irvin-Erickson, 2024) the illegal access of perpetrators to their personal and social identities created psychological impacts on the victims which created a sense of vulnerability and the need to regain control over their personal information. The film further stressed these psychological effects of identity theft on Facebook, highlighting how this can lead to stress, anxiety, and paranoia. The victims were subjected to fear, shame, anger, and social judgement because of the incident. According to an interview with a psychologist, this can lead to various conditions such as isolation, paranoia, and even post-traumatic stress disorder. Victims fall into a state of constant fear and distrust of the system. (Sharp, Shreve-Neiger, Fremouw, Kane, & Hutton, 2004) found out in their study about the psychological and somatic effects of identity theft that victims suffered from anxiety, depression, and stigmatization, while for unresolved cases, the effects remained over time.

Social Effects

The social effects of identity theft extend beyond financial matters; this involves affecting a victim’s relationship and a change to his/her social dynamics. Studies indicated that identity theft affects family ties and social relationship (DeLiema, Burnes, & Langton, 2021). Through the perpetrators’ viewpoint, the documentary film explored an interplay between technological vulnerabilities, human psychology, and social dynamics. Interviewees described their experiences manipulating the system for personal gain. Social relationships were affected because they employed tactics and strategies to manipulate personal connections and infiltrate social groups, which leads to the damage of relationships of the victims to their family and friends. Perpetrators were aware of the consequences of their actions to the lives of the victims, causing disruptions and distrust. This also highlighted how identity thieves harm social media platforms like Facebook but also raised awareness in terms of how individuals must protect and secure their personal data online.

CONCLUSION

The study sheds light on the phenomenon of identity theft and how it evolves. It has reached the point that it can no longer be tolerated or ignored. As reports of cases vary depending on the degree lies, the truth is that this phenomenon affects people negatively and causes ripples and struggles in their lives. The increasing dangers and risk of identity theft is a threat to the very fabric of individuals and our society. The victims lived experience in the study proved the effects of this phenomenon and how it involves certain aspects such as account cloning, child abuse in the case of victim number 3, given that during the incident, she was a minor and predatory behaviors of identity thieves. This showed that the victims experienced severe emotional suffering, including mistrust, anxiety, and paranoia after becoming victims, thus, affecting their behavior permanently. According to Routine Activity Theory, these encounters influence how they use Facebook daily and interfere with their routines given that, there is already mistrust in the platform which affected their daily use of Facebook.

The victims' coping strategies reflected a sense of struggles in regaining control over lost data and compromised identities. This revealed a continuous effort to face both the fact that sensitive data was stolen but also the emotional and psychological damage the incident caused. By reaching out to family and friends, the victims try to mitigate the situation and regain stability. Reporting to local authorities also became a critical step in managing the situation as victims transitioned from helpless to empowered individuals, creating a display of resilience amidst the incident. The recovery process revealed to be gradual and complex, involving emotional strength, psychological recovery and technical capability. Through the documentary, the study explained that the recovery is not linear, rather a meticulous process of balancing between the effects of the violation and the struggles to regain normality in their lives. Even when cases were solved such as cases of victims 1, 3, 4 and 5, the scars remain, shaping their relationships and their behaviors. This emphasizes how identity theft severely damages an individual's sense of security and trust, highlighting that the recovery process lingers and unnoticed.

The use of different strategies by identity thieves such as account cloning reveals a complex process of manipulation which highlights not only the technical capabilities involved, but the psychological component of deception. This stresses how identity theft continuously adapts to human vulnerabilities and exploits technological gaps, therefore, calling for the immediate attention and awareness of individuals and a re-evaluation of cybersecurity measures in place. Through the documentary film, the study offers a profound interpretation of the emotional and psychological effects of identity theft on victims, extending beyond financial harm, suggesting that anxiety and paranoia are not simply reactions, but rather crucial elements that form victims' psychological and emotional vulnerabilities.

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