

Deindividuation from an Islamic Perspective: Reconstructing Selfhood, Moral Agency, and Collective Behaviour

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ABSTRACT

Deindividuation is a psychological phenomenon in which individuals in a group lose their sense of personal identity and self-awareness. This process can lead people to engage in impulsive, deviant, and sometimes violent acts when they feel they cannot be personally identified. This paper observes deindividuation from an Islamic perspective by integrating contemporary social-psychological theory with the Qur'an and Sunnah, Islamic moral psychology, and the concepts of *nafs* (self), *taqwā* (God-consciousness), *taklīf* (moral responsibility), *muḥāsabah al-nafs* (self-accountability), and *ummah*. From an Islamic perspective, deindividuation is viewed as a dangerous lapse in moral agency (*taklīf*) and conscious intention (*niyyah*), where base impulses take precedence over spiritual accountability. This psychological state can impact many individuals, as it often drives behavior that people would not normally exhibit when alone. Instead, these actions tend to occur in group settings, making them difficult to control. Thus, Islam presents a balanced approach in which belonging to a community does not eliminate individual accountability. Understanding deindividuation through an Islamic framework may contribute to a more culturally and spiritually informed understanding of group behavior, identity, and moral decision-making.

Keywords: Deindividuation, personal identity, self-awareness, Islamic perspective, spiritual accountability

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever heard of deindividuation? Have you ever wondered why someone acts differently when they're alone compared to when they're in a group? Let's dive into deindividuation, as it offers valuable insights into human behavior. Social environments shape human behavior (Franklin, M. T., 2024). Individuals often behave differently alone than in groups, especially as personal identity becomes less prominent and group membership gains psychological significance (Lea, M. et al., 2001). Social psychology has examined this phenomenon through the concept of deindividuation, traditionally defined as a state in which individuals lose self-awareness within a group context (Postmes, T. & Turner, F., 2015). Both early and contemporary research associate deindividuation with anonymity, group immersion, reduced identifiability, and altered behavioral regulation (Spears, 2016; Villanova, F. et al., 2017). Recent scholarship challenges the assumption that deindividuation inevitably results in irrational or antisocial behavior. Instead, the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE) proposes that anonymity and group immersion can shift attention from personal identity toward social identity, thereby increasing conformity to the norms associated with the salient group (Spears & Postmes, 2015; Spears, 2017).

From an Islamic perspective, however, the relationship between individuals and groups cannot be understood solely through anonymity, social identity, or situational influences (Fatimah, 2011). Islamic thought places considerable emphasis on the individual's enduring moral significance. The concept of *nafs*, commonly translated as the self (al-Ghazali, 2008), is central to Islamic understandings of human behavior, moral agency, and spiritual development. The *nafs* is understood as capable of moral awareness, responsibility, and accountability, while also encouraging the individual to cultivate self-control and self-discipline (al-Ghazali, 2008). Recent scholarship in Islamic psychology describes the *nafs* as an important component of human

personality and emphasizes self-reflection, self-control, purification, and moral improvement. These principles suggest that individuals remain responsible for regulating their behavior even in a collective environment (Imran et al., 2025; Rassool & Keskin, 2023). This emphasis on individual moral agency provides an important point of comparison with conventional explanations of deindividuation. In some psychological accounts, reduced identifiability may weaken personal responsibility and make individuals more responsive to situational or group cues. In Islamic thought, by contrast, personal accountability does not depend on whether other people can identify the individual. An Islamic framework offers a distinctive interpretation of deindividuation. Instead of viewing immersion in a group as inherently leading to the disappearance of the self, this perspective emphasizes the importance of maintaining moral consciousness and personal responsibility within collective life (Rothman, A., 2021). At the same time, Islam does not reject collective identity. The concept of the ummah emphasizes belonging, solidarity, cooperation, and shared moral values (Zainul, 2023; Britton, J., 2024). This article explains how Islam can provide a moral and spiritual framework to prevent negative deindividuation while preserving the benefits of collective identity and social solidarity.

Problem Statement

The current conceptualization of deindividuation remains highly relevant in the digital age. Online spaces offer privacy, make it harder to be recognized, and increase the feeling of belonging to a group, causing people to view themselves mostly as members of certain social groups (Lin, H., et.al., 2025; Belentschikow, V. et al., 2022; Flanagan, A. J., 2020). Studies on social media indicate that anonymity strengthens group identification and encourages individuals to prioritize group norms over personal norms (Huang, G., & Li, K., 2016). Problems can occur when a group's norms conflict with society's moral values. For example, a social media group might encourage humiliation, cyberbullying, spreading slander, or hatred toward others. In these cases, people may feel less responsible for their actions because they see that everyone else is doing the same thing.

In Islam, this perspective contradicts the principles of *taklif* (religious obligation) and individual responsibility. Religious beliefs, self-development, self-regard, and spiritual orientation can shape how Muslims understand themselves and regulate their behavior. The Quran also emphasizes that every individual is responsible for their own actions. Thus, Islam provides an ethical framework that guides individual behavior toward social and moral purposes, aligning with the fundamental Islamic ethical principle that views human beings as moral and responsible.

The intersection of deindividuation and Islamic psychology therefore presents an important area for interdisciplinary inquiry. Psychological theories explain how anonymity, group identification, and social norms can influence behavior, in contrast, Islamic perspectives introduce concepts such as *nafs*, moral accountability, self-discipline, spiritual consciousness, and collective responsibility. Examining deindividuation through an Islamic lens may therefore broaden the understanding of how individuals respond to group pressures, particularly in contemporary environments such as social media, religious communities, student groups, and other collective settings. This paper explores deindividuation from an Islamic perspective, focusing on the relationship between individual identity and collective identity and considering whether Islamic principles of self-awareness, accountability, and moral self-regulation may provide a framework for mitigating the potentially harmful consequences of deindividuation.

Research Objectives

This article has five main objectives:

RO1: To explain deindividuation from a contemporary psychology perspective.

RO2: To analyze Islamic concepts regarding individual and collective identity.

RO3: To identify Quranic concepts regarding the *nafs* (self/soul), *taqwa* (God-consciousness), accountability, and collective responsibility that explain deindividuation.

RO4: To construct an Islamic framework that connects individual identity, social identity, *taqwa* (God-consciousness), and collective behavior.

RO5: To propose practical ways to encourage group behavior that is based on ethics and responsibility.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Deindividuation Concept

According to Postmes and Turner (2015), deindividuation is traditionally defined as a state in which individuals lose self-awareness within a group context. Research has long focused on factors such as anonymity, behavioral changes, and reduced self-awareness, as Spears (2016) describes. However, theoretical developments indicate that deindividuation cannot simply be equated with a loss of self-control. Research by Spears (2017) shows that individuals in a state of deindividuation can become more responsive to situational norms. In other words, the real question isn't just whether "do individuals lose control?" but rather "whose norms shape how they act?" The implication is that deindividuation can result in either positive or negative behavior, depending on the dominant group norms, as examined by Levine and Hogg (2010) and Jackson II and Hogg (2010).

B. Main Causes of Deindividuation

Deindividuation does not automatically produce irrational or antisocial behavior. Instead, Levine & Hogg (2010) and Jackson II & Hogg (2010) stated that people who experience deindividuation may become particularly responsive to the norms and identity of the group to which they belong. According to Postmes and Turner (2015), this distinction is important because deindividuation can produce both negative and positive outcomes. In some circumstances, it may contribute to aggression, cyberbullying, trolling, mob behavior, and other forms of antisocial conduct. In other circumstances, it can strengthen cooperation, solidarity, collective action, and adherence to positive group norms. It's important to examine the main causes and effects of deindividuation in both social and technological settings.

According to Sammons and Cross (2017), anonymity is one of the most important conditions associated with deindividuation. When people believe somebody cannot recognize their personal identity, they may experience a reduced sense of personal accountability. This can occur in physical crowds, masked demonstrations, online communities, gaming environments, and social media platforms. Lowry et al. (2016), for example, found that anonymity combined with heavy social-media use could facilitate cyberbullying by supporting social learning processes.

Another major cause is reduced self-awareness, as Spears (2016) and Villanova et al. (2017) examined. Deindividuation involves shifting attention away from the individual self and toward the surrounding group or situation. When people pay less attention to their own values, standards, and potential consequences, their self-regulation may weaken. However, evidence for a universal loss of self-awareness is limited. Therefore, Spears (2017) highlights that social identity and group norms play a key role in shaping self-awareness.

High group immersion can also contribute to deindividuation, according to Densley & Peterson (2018). Individuals may begin to define themselves primarily as members of a crowd, organization, movement, online community, or social group rather than as separate individuals. For example, people attending a political demonstration may behave according to the protest group's norms. Similarly, football supporters may become strongly identified with their team and behave in line with fellow supporters' expectations.

Deindividuation may also involve diffusion of responsibility, as Villanova et al. (2017) showed. This mechanism is particularly visible online. In social media environments, individuals may see themselves as one participant among thousands of users. Consequently, responsibility for harmful comments or collective harassment may seem to belong to the group rather than the individual. In such situations, an individual might feel they are not at fault because "everyone is doing it."

Effect of Deindividuation

One of the most frequently discussed effects of deindividuation is aggression. The study recognizes a gap in research on the peer review process and its specific strategies. Postmes and Turner (2015) state that individuals in anonymous crowds may lose their normal restraints and become more willing to engage in aggressive

behavior. However, Costa et al. (2023), who studied social movements and collective behavior, found that anonymity, larger group sizes, and reduced public self-awareness can be associated with aggression or deviant behavior under specific conditions. Importantly, aggressive behavior becomes more likely when group norms support aggression. Drury (2026), Hossain et al. (2025), and Lowry et al. (2016) also mention other negative effects, such as cyberbullying, online trolling and harassment, destructive mob behavior, hostile comments, diffusion of responsibility, and increased conformity to harmful group norms. If the group norms support the opposite course of action, the aforementioned negative effects might not occur, as people typically become bolder when they are part of a large group.

Therefore, Makin (2025) says that deindividuation should not be viewed exclusively as a negative psychological phenomenon. Reicher et al. (2018) showed that people in crowds can develop a shared identity that promotes solidarity and collective action. Drury (2026) and Alhajri et al. (2023) emphasize that collective identity can shape collective behavior during protests, emergencies, mass gatherings, and other events. On the positive side, individuals may develop a stronger sense of “we,” demonstrating that collective behavior can have consequences beyond the environment. Other positive effects include social solidarity, cooperation, collective support, participation in social movements, conformity to prosocial group norms, and stronger collective identity. The central factor, therefore, is not simply whether an individual becomes anonymous. Instead, the crucial question is which group identities and social norms individuals adopt when in large crowds. This point is important for understanding deindividuation.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach that integrates concepts and disciplines spanning contemporary social psychology, social identity theory, deindividuation literature, Quranic analysis, Islamic psychology, and contemporary scholarly studies on the Islamic concepts of *nafs* (self/soul), *taqwa* (God-consciousness/piety), and *muhasabah* (self-reflection). Rather than treating Islamic sources as subjects for empirical psychological experiments, the study utilizes them as a normative and anthropological framework to formulate theories regarding human behavior. Psychological literature provides models of group behavior, while Islamic sources offer an ethical ontology concerning the human being, accountability, identity, responsibility, and collective life. Consequently, this approach does not claim that modern psychology has scientifically surpassed the Quran, nor does it seek to replace empirical psychology with theology. Instead, the objective is theoretical integration: identifying points of convergence between contemporary psychological models and Islamic concepts, noting areas of divergence, and exploring how Islamic psychology can potentially generate additional hypotheses for future empirical research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From an Islamic perspective, deindividuation can be examined through the concepts of *nafs* (self), *taqwa* (God-consciousness), *amanah* (trust and responsibility), *muhasabah al-nafs* (self-accountability), and individual responsibility before Allah (Imran et al., 2025). Although the Qur’an and Sunnah do not use the modern psychological term deindividuation, Islamic teachings offer principles that help people understand and address psychological and moral issues. In particular, Islam emphasizes that group membership does not remove personal moral responsibility. Individuals are accountable for their actions, even when acting as part of a crowd, community, organization, or online group (Wisconsin, 2024; Engku, 2021; Khairul Azhar, 2000). This shows that responsibility is a key component in shaping the identity of a Muslim who is both moral and faithful.

The most important Islamic principle for understanding deindividuation is individual moral accountability. The Qur’an repeatedly emphasizes that every person is responsible for their own actions (Jabatan Mufti Negeri Selangor, 2023; Engku, 2021; Khairul, 2000). Surah al-Isra’ 17:15 states that whoever follows guidance benefits himself, while whoever goes astray harms himself, and that no bearer of burdens bears the burden of another. Similarly, Qur’an 53:38 states: “That no bearer of a burden will bear the burden of another.” This principle is highly relevant to deindividuation. In a crowd, individuals may psychologically feel that responsibility is shared among many people. Someone might think, whether they realize it or not, that everyone else is already doing it. As a result, they may see their own actions as unimportant. For example, a civil servant might post an incitement comment on social media. He thinks his actions are acceptable because he believes others do the

same, so he assumes they don't harm anyone. This is the "everyone does it" mentality. Islam rejects this notion because every *mukallaf* individual is accountable for every word spoken and action performed (Selangor State Mufti Department, 2023; Engku, 2021; Khairul, 2000). The Islamic perspective therefore provides an important corrective to the negative form of deindividuation: a person cannot transfer moral responsibility to the group. Even if an individual acts anonymously or as part of a large crowd, the action remains their own action (Norajila et al., 2017; Khairul Azhar, 2000).

Another important Islamic concept is *taqwa*, commonly understood as God-consciousness or awareness of one's responsibility before Allah (Zulkifli, 2024; Jabatan Mufti Wilayah Persekutuan, 2015). *Taqwa* can function as a form of spiritual control for human beings (al-Ghazali, 2008; Abu Bakar, 2003). Islam encourages individuals to remain aware of Allah regardless of whether others can see their behavior (Mohd Al-Dandarawi & Yusri, 2024). This principle matters because anonymity does not mean invisibility before Allah. Allah said in Surah Al-An'am (6:103): "He perceives [all] vision; and He is the Subtle, the Acquainted." Likewise, Surah Al-A'laq (96:14) states: "Does he not know that Allah sees?" Al-Qur'an 35:18 links personal purification and accountability to awareness of Allah, emphasizing that each person ultimately returns to Him. Consequently, an Islamic understanding of self-regulation does not depend exclusively on external surveillance (al-Ghazali, 2008). A Muslim is expected to behave ethically even when no human observer is present. This provides an important psychological and spiritual barrier against harmful forms of deindividuation.

The concept of *amanah* is also relevant. *Amanah* means a trust, responsibility, or obligation that must be fulfilled (Nabil, M., 2025; Al-Ghazali, 2008). This is significant when considering deindividuation. A person who possesses a strong sense of *amanah* may be less likely to interpret group participation as permission to abandon personal responsibility. Instead, group membership becomes an additional responsibility: the individual must consider whether their behavior benefits or harms others. Thus, Islam transforms the question from "Can I get away with this because nobody knows who I am?" to "Am I fulfilling my responsibility before Allah and other people?"

Islam also provides the concept of *muhasabah al-nafs*, or self-accountability. *Muhasabah* involves evaluating one's intentions, behavior, shortcomings, and relationship with Allah (Mrahorovic, S., 2025; Syed Mohsin, S.B et al., 2022). Allah said in Surah Al-Hasyr (59:18): "O you who have believed, fear Allah. And let every soul look to what it has put forth (from his deeds) for tomorrow (the Hereafter)." In fact, Sayyidina Umar bin al-Khattab once said: "Evaluate yourselves before you are evaluated, and weigh your deeds before they are weighed, for it will be easier for you on the Day of Reckoning if you account for yourselves today." (Nurman, 2026). Islam emphasizes self-accountability as a mechanism for moral development and personality refinement. Danish and Mustafa (2026), for example, describe *muhasabah al-nafs* as an important means of spiritual growth, moral purification, and practical self-reform. *Muhasabah* can be understood as the opposite of the psychological tendency to lose oneself in group behaviour (Mrahorovic, S., 2024; Syed Mohsin, S.B et al., 2022). The individual is encouraged to stop and evaluate: What am I doing? Why am I doing it? Is this action consistent with Islamic values? Could this action harm another person? Will Allah hold me responsible for this action? Reflecting in this way builds self-awareness and a sense of moral responsibility, guiding a person to become God-fearing in the eyes of Allah.

Islam does not reject group identity. On the contrary, Islam places considerable importance on *ummah*, brotherhood, cooperation, and social solidarity (Saddiqui, M., 2023; Moten, A. R., 1996). Islam does not regard every form of collective identity as dangerous. Research on peer-group behavior from an Islamic perspective found that group membership may be influenced by proximity, comfort, and personal needs (Khan Kichi, A. H., & Nosrati, M., 2016; Hafeez, M. A., 2010). The study also recommends positive religious education, association with righteous people, and constructive activities to address harmful peer influence. This is consistent with the broader Islamic principle that individuals should associate with people and communities that encourage righteous behavior (Al-Ghazali, 2008). A strong collective identity can therefore have positive consequences when it encourages *taqwa*, cooperation, justice, compassion, and service. Accordingly, Islam does not necessarily seek to eliminate group identity. Instead, it seeks to discipline group identity through moral and religious values.

The importance of studying deindividuation has increased substantially with the development of social media.

This is particularly important from an Islamic perspective in relation to cyberbullying, online insults, humiliation, spreading rumors, and harmful comments, and the issue remains highly relevant in 2026. A study published in the Journal of Contemporary Islamic Law examined deindividuation behavior using a Maqasid al-Shariah framework (Ilias, N. S., & Omar, A. F., 2026). From this perspective, collective behavior should be assessed based on its impact on fundamental human interests. In the context of online behavior, the study highlights the relevance of protecting life, dignity, and intellect. For example:

TABLE 1: Maqasid Al-Shariah Framework In Relation To Deindividuation Behavior

	Deindividuated behavior	Islamic concern	Relevant objective
1	Cyberbullying	Harm and humiliation	Protection of life and dignity
2	Spreading false information	Deception and social harm	Protection of intellect and social welfare
3	Online harassment	Violation of dignity	Protection of honour
4	Group aggression	Physical and social harm	Protection of life
5	Positive online support	Compassion and cooperation	Social welfare
6	Collective charitable action	Helping others	Public benefit (maslahah)

Reference: Ilias, N. S., & Omar, A. F., 2026

This framework demonstrates that group behavior should not be judged simply because it is collective. The key question is whether this collective behavior is consistent with Islamic objectives that emphasize preserving religion, life, intellect, dignity, lineage, and property.

Finally, an Islamic perspective explains deindividuation using five connected dimensions. Firstly, identity. A Muslim holds both an individual identity and a role within broader communities. Group identity should not be prioritised over personal moral awareness (Wright, J. C., 2026; Amit, A., & Venzhik, E., 2025). Second, accountability. Every person remains individually accountable before Allah (Jabatan Mufti Negeri Selangor, 2023; Engku, 2021; Khairul, 2000). Group membership cannot erase personal responsibility (Smiley, M., 2025). Third. Self-regulation. *Taqwa* and *muhasabah al-nafs* encourage individuals to control their behavior even without external supervision (Naseer, S. S., 2026; Syed Mohsin, S. B et al., 2022). Fourth. Group norms. Islamic principles provide criteria for determining whether group norms are morally acceptable. Norms are morally acceptable if they promote justice, goodness, and public welfare, and unacceptable if they contradict the Quran and Sunnah or core Islamic values (Pakeeza, S. & Chishti, A. A., 2012).). Fifth. Consequences. Evaluate actions by their effects on individuals and society, including whether they preserve dignity, life, intellect, social harmony, and other Shariah objectives (Mahadi et al., 2025; Wanto, E et al., 2021). Therefore, Islam does not simply attempt to prevent individuals from becoming absorbed in groups. Rather, it seeks to ensure that individual identity, moral accountability, and collective identity remain integrated based on the teachings of the Quran and Sunnah.

CONCLUSION

Deindividuation provides a handful of psychological frameworks for understanding how anonymity, group immersion, reduced self-awareness, and collective identity can influence human behavior. From an Islamic perspective, however, the loss of personal accountability associated with harmful forms of deindividuation conflicts with fundamental Islamic teachings concerning individual responsibility, *taqwa*, *amanah*, and self-accountability. The Qur'anic principle that no person bears another's burden establishes that individuals remain morally responsible for their own actions. Islam offers several mechanisms to resist harmful deindividuation: *taqwa* fosters awareness of Allah; *amanah* reinforces responsibility; *muhasabah al-nafs* strengthens self-reflection; Islamic ethical teachings regulate communication; and Maqasid al-Shariah provides a framework for evaluating the consequences of collective behavior. Islam also values people coming together as a group. When good leaders guide a group, they can bring people together, help them work as a team, and encourage them to care for one another. So, when looking at how groups work in Islam, it's not just about losing who you are as an individual. It's about balancing what's right as a person with what's right as a group. To sum it up, in Islam, it's believed that you can't hide behind a crowd or use anonymity to excuse bad behavior. Whether you're alone,

in a group, or online, you're still responsible for your actions before Allah. In this context, Islam presents a distinctive concept: the most potent shield against deindividuation is not recognition by others, but moral recognition in the sight of Allah.

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