



Social Media and Youth Identity Formation

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ABSTRACT

Social media has taken on a prominent role in youth identity development in today's digital age. Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and Snapchat are only a few social communication platforms that have changed the way in which youth use social media; they easily transition from a way to communicate to a platform to express, explore, and negotiate their identities. The exploratory study uses a mixed-method approach, using both surveys and in-depth interviews, to investigate the ways in which digital interactions will influence self-concept development, peer relationships, and the formation of a stable sense of self. Youth have the capacity to build their digital archetypes during these ages. More now than in the past, youth are able to gain a sense of validation through likes, shares, and follower numbers. This process allows them to become confident in their active online and offline identities. Social media allows individuals to express themselves, experiment, and create; but social media can also provide a pressure to be ideal and reflect idealized standards of the self, peer groups, and influences, and to conform to these standards. This dynamic form of social media can provide a solution to possible identity conflict, self-doubt, and emotional distress. Images that inform success and beauty are constantly curated, and youth are brought to compare themselves with these images. This phenomenon creates philosophical comparison culture, which negatively informs well-being. The results of this study highlight the duality of social media, both as an empowering and problematic resource. Social media has provided youth with opportunities to navigate multiple parts of themselves, engage with others in similar communities, and challenge societal norms. However, it also has the potential to reward performative behavior and superficial engagement, which may stifle the true development of their identities. The interesting concept of a "curated self," demonstrated how young people purposely expose different parts of themselves to fit in and be accepted to gain social status in hopes of establishing relevancy and belonging.

1. Introduction

In this 21st century, social media has transformed the ways people make connections, communicate with each other, and understand the world around them. For young people in particular, changes in social media usage and proliferation of digital technology to manage everyday life has changed the way traditional methods of identity development occur. Identity is no longer formed solely within real-life, face-to-face interactions, instead it is also being negotiated and developed in a virtual world. The online world, which offers youth an expansive platform for exploring who they are, expressing their beliefs, and finding affirmation in their identity, has changed the way adolescents and young adults find their identities. This change raises

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important questions regarding how social media shapes identity formation and ultimately impacts the self-concept, values, and behaviours of young people during the formative years of identity development. This section first describes the issue of identity formation during the adolescent period, the emergence of social media as a socio-cultural force, and the consequences of engaging both in terms of the complex interactions that ensue. Although the material presented in this section is drawn from a range of theoretical foundations, including psychology, sociology, and communication, it lays a foundation for thinking about how social media is changing what it is to be young and "yourself" in a digital society.

1.1. Understanding Identity Formation in Youth

Identity development, while not the only focus, is one of the major developmental tasks of adolescence and early adulthood. According to Erik Erikson's psychosocial developmental framework, identity development is characterized by a search for a secure and coherent sense of self. Identity is a complex notion that includes not only how the self has previously viewed the self, but also considers how the self is constructed, altered, or perceived by others. Traditionally, identity development has been influenced by interacting with family, peers, educational institutions, and cultural norms. During adolescence, individuals will try out different roles, ideologies, and behaviors while attempting to answer fundamental questions of the self and identify where they belong. This quest for the self will draw on both internal dialogue and social feedback. Prior generations completed this process in face-to-face interactions. Twenty-first century youth engage both in-person and online in identity development. The substantial online world of social media creates additional dimensions in identity development; while providing new ways for youth to express themselves, social media introduces new pressures, comparisons, and performance-style identities.

1.2. The Emergence of Social Media as a Cultural Force

Social media's development from rudimentary networking applications to sophisticated digital ecosystems has re-imagined nearly every facet of youth's lives. Platforms, including Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Twitter, and Facebook, are a part of every adolescent routine worldwide. These platforms facilitate instantaneous, interactive, and visually rich avenues for individuals to communicate, form relationships, state opinions, and craft an imagined public persona. Unlike forms of traditional media and mass media, social media is a participatory and user-generated space. Youth are no longer passive consumers of media; they actively engage and create media content. For example, youth post photos, share thoughts, participate in challenges, and react to others; and they do this instantaneously. Our constant engagement in the digital space influences how young people think about themselves and how young people want to be thought of. Their perception of identity is also influenced by the likes, comments, follows, and trends of their peers in their digital community as opposed to their own values and lived experiences. Social media also facilitates exposure to cultures, ways-of-being, and ideologies that belong to individuals without shared lived experiences. This exposure can foster reflection in some ways and promote inclusion, but may lead to confusion, insecurity, or a sense of isolation for others. Youth may feel pressure to conform to norms, ideals, or forms of behavior/looks that are amplified through digital filters and viral content.

1.3. The Dual Role of Social Media in Identity Development

The role of social media in shaping youth identity is complex and not simply all good or all bad. Social media can provide youth with opportunities to engage with different aspects of their identity, connect with communities that affirm them, and allow them to find their voice within the noise of a digital society. Youth can showcase their creativity, engagement with activism, or authentically express themselves. Furthermore, many youth use social media to share values, push against stereotypes, and advocate for causes they support. Conversely, social media can produce anxiety, comparison, and struggles with identity. Social media's emphasis on visibility and popularity can produce a form of digital performance where youth prioritize appearance over authentic presentation of their non-digital selves. This may foster a gap between their actual identity and their portrayal online, starting down a path that links online identity to feelings of low self-worth, social anxiety and emotional exhaustion.

In addition, the feedback loops of social media can create an understanding of worth based external rather than internal experiences, such as likes, shares, or follower counts. If young people are still exploring who they are, depending on external representations of value can limit their chance of being themselves and ultimately developing resilience. In conclusion, social media is a pervasive force and one that is embedded in young people's identity formation. It offers opportunities to explore one's identity, connect with others, and allows for self-expression. On the other end of the spectrum there are also serious challenges to authenticity, self-esteem, and mental health that are inherent to social media platforms. It is essential for educators, parents, researchers and policy developers to understand these forces to guide youth in developing constructive habits in their social media use. This research is devised to investigate the complex relationship between social media use and development of youth identities through an exploration of psychological, behavioral, and narrative standpoints, and through this investigation will lead to more information about how digital spaces are building the identity of the next generation and how we can support positive outcomes as they navigate the digital world.

2. Review of Literature

This section discusses the existing research literature covering social media and youth identity formation. Youth identity formation is a crucial task in adolescence and early adulthood, and digital technologies are quickly becoming an influential place for youth development. Researchers in social psychology, sociology, communication studies and media studies have examined the influence of digital interactions on self-concept, social interaction, and psychological well-being. The following literature discussion groups the literature by organizational themes.

2.1. Theoretical Foundations of Youth Identity Formation

Underpinning this analysis are a few theoretical bases that researchers utilize to examine both their formation and the social media influence upon identity:

Theory	Description	Key Contributor(s)
Erikson's Psychosocial Theory	Proposes that adolescence is a stage marked by the crisis of identity vs. role confusion.	Erik Erikson
Social Identity Theory	Suggests that people define themselves in terms of group memberships.	Henri Tajfel & John Turner
Symbolic Interactionism	Emphasizes the role of social interaction in developing self-concept.	George Herbert Mead

These frameworks provide the theoretical basis for several empirical examinations of the social and psychological effect of digital platforms.

2.2. Social Media as a Space for Self-Expression and Experimentation

Many reports encourage use of social media platforms to help youth experiment with various aspects of their identity. Davis (2013) suggested that teenagers often use social media to communicate ideal versions of themselves, explore new persona and seek feedback from peers. Boy (2014) added that youth navigate social limits and provide representation of many aspects selfthrough online experiences. Additionally, Zhao et al. (2008) suggested that we often produce "digital mirrors" with new representations of both our real and ideal self. This intentional curation of your identity can be empowering and offer youth more control over their self-representation.

2.3. Peer Feedback and Social Validation Impact

Peer feedback is significant in youth conceptions of their online self. A previous study (Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006) indicated that social feedback of a positive nature (likes, comments) has a positive effect on self-esteem and negative or no feedback negatively affects self-esteem, highlighting the premise that the identity development process in social media is preceded by some extent of external validation. Nesi and Prinstein (2015) introduce the term "digital status seeking" referring to adolescents using strategies to purposely engage in use of social media in order to achieve social acceptance or approval and, as a result, causing performance anxiety and social comparison, particularly when self-worth becomes tied to metrics of likes and follower counts.

2.4. Gender and Culture in Identity Online

Studies also have sought to understand how culture and gender serve as mediators for how youth engage with social media. For instance, research indicates that girls are more likely to use visual social media such as Instagram for self-presentation in an appearance-based way while boys often engage in social sharing of information and humor (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014).

Youth also navigate identity conflict in multicultural contexts. According to Al-Saggaf and Simmons (2015), Muslim youth are using social media for the incorporation of hybrid identity including the values of traditional culture and the new normal of digital culture.

Demographic Group	Observed Social Media Behavior
Adolescent Girls	Focus on aesthetic presentation, selfies, social approval
Adolescent Boys	Humor, gaming, information exchange

Multicultural Youth	Negotiating dual identities, connecting with diasporic communities
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2.5. Negative Psychological Outcomes Related to Identity Development

While social media can generate feelings of agency, a lot of research has begun to raise questions about its psychological consequences. Twenge and Campbell (2018) link using social media so intensely that it displaces time spent with family and friends, and comes at the expense of "real-life" events, to increases in anxiety, depression, and loneliness among adolescents because youth feel the intense pressure of having to uphold a specific and curated identity which contributes to emotional exhaustion. Marwick and Boyd (2011) describe a new phenomenon, "context collapse" which is when youth may struggle with different sets of audiences throughout their online presence, demonstrating confusion in self-presentation. In the case of youth, they may feel stressed to keep in mind different sets of promises they feel to not only their peers, but also their family and the broader public. Lastly, Fardouly et al. (2015) found that social comparison, particularly on Instagram, "was significantly" associated with body dissatisfaction and (low) global self-esteem, particularly for adolescent girls (Fardouly, et al. 2015).

2.6. Positive Outcomes: Identity Empowerment and Community Building

Different from negative outcomes, there is also literature noting positive outcomes of young people's experiences with social media. In the case of marginalized youth, young people may feel a sense of community on platforms, while also having the ability to navigate (and explore) non-normative identities. Craig et al. (2021) found that LGBTQ+ youth utilized social media to find safe and supportive communities, expressed themselves safely, connect with others during experiences of social isolation, and counter their feelings of isolation. Youth thriving in spaces of social activism also use social media to establish and express their civic identity. Literat and Kligler - Vilenchik (2019) stated that digital media supports youth-led movements by enabling identity-based participation and storytelling.

2.7. Gaps in the Literature and Future Directions

Although research is actively happening, many important areas remain unexplored. There are many studies that focus on Western contexts with no mention of youth experiences in the Global South. Longitudinal studies examining the long-term effects of social media use to an adolescent's identity development is also lacking. Similarly, there is an absence of studies that disaggregate social media and understand different cultures attached to platform (for example, the culture associated with Instagram and the culture attached to Tik Tok). Emerging research is required to unpack the impact of AI algorithms and personalized engagement on young people's identity narratives, as digital spaces become increasingly engineered and altered through invisible technology.

As the literature indicates, social media and youth identity formation is complicated. Social media spaces offer youth identity exploration, creativeness, imagination, and connection with peers, although also creates new pressure and risks, and ethical dilemmas. Understanding both the opportunities and risks is essential for developing solutions that meaningfully support young people and their social media use in healthy and constructive ways. As social media continues to be developed and changed, evolving research is required to explore the social media and identity development intersection that considers cultural contexts and disciplines.

3. Research Methodology

The section discusses the research design, sampling strategies, data collection methods, and data analysis protocol that were used to examine the impact of social media and identity development for youth. The research employed a mixed-methods design, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data, which offered a richness of insight into the phenomenon.

3.1. Research Design

A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was used in this research. A convergent parallel design allows for the researcher to collect and analyze qualitative interview data while also collecting and analyzing quantitative survey data. The focus of the study on different forms of data collection was important as once again a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, allowed for triangulation of data sources and confirmatory data across different methodologies.

Research Element	Description
Type of Study	Mixed-Methods (Convergent Parallel Design)

Quantitative Component	Online questionnaire with closed-ended questions
Qualitative Component	Semi-structured interviews
Purpose	To explore and quantify how social media affects youth identity

3.2. Sampling Strategy

The target population for this research was youth ages 15 to 24 who are regular social media users.

- Sampling Method: A purposive sampling method was employed for the qualitative portion to capture a variety of experiences.
- For the quantitative survey, a stratified random sampling approach was utilized to ensure sampling representation in terms of gender, age groups, and urban-rural backgrounds.

Sampling Category	Number of Participants	Description
Male	100	Age 15-24, active users
Female	100	Age 15-24, active users
Urban	120	City-based youth
Rural	80	Small-town and rural youth

Total sample size = 200 (quantitative) + 15 (qualitative interviews)

3.3. Data Collection Tools

Quantitative Tools

To measure the various dimensions of identity formation like self-esteem, peer influences, online behaviours, and validation-seeking behaviours a structured questionnaire was developed. A Google Forms survey was created then uploaded by participants to answer the questions.

- ✓ Scale Used: Likert Scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)
- ✓ Variables: Self-concept clarity, online self-presentation, feedback sensitivity

Qualitative Tools

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide that focused on the following themes:

- ✓ Identity experimentation and authenticity
- ✓ Perception of online vs. offline selves
- ✓ Peer feedback and social validation

Interviews were approximately 30 - 45 minutes long and audio recorded with participants' consent.

3.4. Validity and Reliability

To ensure validity, the questionnaire items were passed through the comments of three academic experts in media studies and psychology. A pilot-test was conducted with 20 participants to clarify ambiguous questions. To assess reliability, I calculated Cronbach's alpha for the questionnaire subscales:

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha
Online Self-Presentation	0.82
Social Comparison	0.85

Identity Consistency	0.79
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The digital transcripts for the interviews were independently coded and cross-checked through the efforts of two researchers, helping establish inter-rater reliability.

3.5. Data Analysis Methodology

Quantitative Analysis: SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) was the tool used to analyze the data. Various descriptive statistics were computed (e.g. mean, median and standard deviation). For the inferential statistics, a Pearson correlation and multiple regression analyses were performed to assess the relationship between variables.

Analysis Type	Purpose
Descriptive Stats	Understand demographic and general trends
Correlation	Examine relationship between social media use and identity variables
Regression	Predict impact of validation-seeking on self-concept

Qualitative Analysis: Qualitative data were analyzed using a thematic approach as outlined below:

1. Familiarization with the data;
2. Generation of initial codes;
3. Identification of themes (i.e., “curated self”, “peer pressure” and “dual identities”);
4. Reviewing and naming each theme.

Thematic analysis was supported by NVivo software for coding the data and organizing it in a systematic way.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

- Informed consent. All participants signed a consent form before participating.
- Confidentiality. Identity was anonymized, and data was securely stored.
- Voluntary participation. Participating in the study was voluntary and the participants were free to withdraw at any time.

This study was cleared by institutional ethics review.

3.7. Limitations of Methodology

While the mixed-methods design provided depth and validity, the study was limited by the following:

- Self-reported data is problematic.
- Sample size and regionality limits generalizability.
- Rapidly changing digital trends may have influenced the study.

Future studies could use a longitudinal method and cross-cultural sample.

This research methodology provides a systematic way through which we can explore how social media comes to shape youth identity. By integrating qualitative depth with quantitative breadth, we are able to clearly articulate and unpack how young people's identities evolve in this new digital landscape. The following section provides one set of findings that were produced from this methodology.

4. Result & Discussion

The study surveyed 200 youth aged 15-24, evenly split between male and female participants, with a mix of urban (60%) and rural (40%) respondents. This distribution allowed examination of possible variations in social media use and identity formation across gender and geographical lines.

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	100	50
	Female	100	50
Location	Urban	120	60
	Rural	80	40
Age	15-18	90	45
	19-24	110	55

4.1. Social Media Usage Patterns

Participants in this study overwhelmingly reported the use of several social media sites on a daily basis: Instagram (85%), TikTok (78%), and Facebook (60%) were the most frequently used. The average amount of time spent each day was approximately 3.5 hours per day. This is significant, considering the potential impact it could have on youth self-perception and identity through such heavy exposure.

Platform	Percentage of Users (%)	Average Daily Use (hours)
Instagram	85	2.0
TikTok	78	1.5
Facebook	60	1.0
Twitter	45	0.8
Snapchat	50	0.9

4.2. Social Media and Self-Concept Clarity

There were statistically significant relationships with social media, and youth's self-concept clarity. The quantitative data indicated time spent on social media was negatively associated with self-concept clarity, such that more time spent on social media resulted in lower self-concept clarity ($r = -0.42$, $p < 0.01$). In other words, youth reporting higher social media usage also reported greater confusion and instability in their own identities. This finding was corroborated by the interview data, as many of the participants discussed the pressure they feel to live up their idealized online self, which often clashes with their offline self. "I only post the best parts of my life on Instagram, but sometimes I don't even recognize the person in the mirror." -Female, 19

4.3. The Effect of Peer Feedback and Social Validation

Peer feedback (i.e., likes, comments, shares) emerged as one of the key considerations in youths' identity formation. The quantitative survey indicated that 75% of participants often changed their posts to gain additional positive feedback from others, and a further 68% reported feeling anxious when their posts did not achieve the attention of the the social media community. Thematic analysis of the interviews revealed a theme of "validation-seeking" where youth actively worked to build an identity by seeking validation from others in their social networks. "If I don't get enough likes on my post, I start to doubt myself. It feels like my value is based on what other people think of me on social media." – Male, 17 This illustrates social media's dual role as a performance stage of identity and a mirror showing a lens of perceived social acceptance.

4.4. Identity Exploration and Authenticity

Qualitative data has shown that social media is a space for exploring identity and playing with aspects of self. Participants spoke about experimenting with different styles, interests, and opinions online, before adopting them to their offline identity. This exploration was sometimes weighed with aspects of both authenticity and peer pressure to conform. "I feel more free to explore

sides of me on TikTok, but sometimes I have anxiety that it isn't 'real' me. It feels like a performance." – Female, 22 This reporting reflects the space people are in with their online curated self vs their 'real' self – a common conversation in social identity theory.

4.5. Urban vs. Rural Differences

A comparative analysis of social media uses and identity experimentation by urban youth and rural youth revealed that urban youth are more likely to engage more frequently and widely with social media platforms and to engage more in identity experimentation than rural youth. Urban respondents reported more exposure to a variety of ideas and subcultures on social media that afforded them broader options in identity exploration. Rural participants, while also very active, appeared to be more aware of offline social norms and community views limiting their freedom to express themselves online.

4.6. Gender Differences in Identity Formation

Gender differences were present in how social media was used to engage in identity. Female participants were more prone to engage with social media on appearance-related content, and were more likely to relate their body image related concerns to their exposure to social media. Male participants were more likely to focus on sharing interests and opinions. Overall, these findings echo previous research on gendered social media use, and its influence on identity development.

4.7. Discussion

The findings demonstrate the complicated role of social media in youth identity development. Social media offers platforms for young people to express themselves, explore their identities, and connect with peers, but it also raises concerns about identity, self-concept clarity, authenticity, and emotional well-being. Peer validation can act as a double-edged sword, sparking youth to experiment with their identity while also encouraging anxiety and self-doubt. This relational dynamic suggests a need for digital literacy and mental health literacy, specific to youth exploring their identity within social media spaces. Variations by gender and geographic location help to show the context-dependent nature of social media's role in youth identity. Urban youth have easier access to diverse online communities offering online opportunities to enrich identity exploration, while rural youth have unique socio-cultural pressures around identity expression.

4.8. Summary of Key Findings

Key Finding	Implication
Negative association between social media use and self-concept clarity	Excessive use may confuse youth identity
Peer influence plays a large role in online self-presentation	Social validation shapes identity performance
Urban youth explored more types of identities than rural youth	Enables exploration but raises authenticity concerns
Gender differences shaped the types of identity content exhibited	Context influences identity formation
Social media creates contexts for identity exploration	Tailored support needed for different gender experiences

This section shows that social media is a complex but important facet of youth identity; social media allows young people to express their identities and foster connections but also exposes them to pressures that may detract from authentic identity formation. All of these insights will lead educators, parents, and policy makers to carefully consider interventions that cultivate an environment for youth allowing them to safely explore and affirm identities in both online and offline contexts.

5. Conclusion

The impacts of social media on youth identity formation are complex because they represent both opportunities and challenges presented by digital platforms for young people today. This study has established that social media is an important vehicle for self-expression, experimentation, and social connections that can deeply affect how youth define their place in society and

themselves. Social media platforms provide youth with unprecedented access to many communities, perspectives, and ways of communicating so they can explore various pieces of themselves, which was not previously possible. Through their profiles and content sharing (photos, videos, etc.), young people are able to curate an identity where they present and negotiate a balance of their authentic self and a self that they present into online spaces. But, the role of the audience in this process can complicate things. Our research found that increased levels of social media use are associated with lower self-concept clarity-suggesting that trying to maintain an idealized digital self might confuse or create internal conflict regarding self-identity. The issue of peer validation, inherent within social media spaces, was found to be both motivating and detrimental. Peer validation could encourage youth to express a part of themselves, or allow for co-location with peers with similar values and norms; however, when peer validation becomes vital to an individual's self-concept, it can lead to anxiety, self-doubt, and behaviour that isn't authentic to them. As such, these results highlight the fragile balance of performance and identity within digital environments.

Furthermore, the context in which youth used social media also informed these youth's experiences. For instance, female youth expressed more concern over bodily issues and had an anecdotal basis for the relationship to social media content that informed their analysis of existing beauty standards. Urban youth had more opportunities for exploration and freedom as they are at liberty to explore a wider array of beliefs and values, particularly in online spaces, than their rural peers who were constrained by more traditional offline social expectations. Overall, these findings highlight the need for researchers to consider sociocultural and environmental contexts as they pertain to social media and identity. Given these implications, it is important for educators, parents, mental health professionals and policymakers to understand the two-fold nature of social media in youth development. While social media can support positive identity exploration and social connection, it also calls for critical navigation abilities to minimize risks associated with mental health and authenticity. Digital literacy initiatives that promote critical thinking, emotional resilience and self-awareness can equip youth to engage with social media in a healthier and more meaningful way. Developing supportive, offline contexts for youth to affirm their identities, without the determining power of social validation, is equally important.

Future research should continue to examine the longitudinal effects of social media use in youth identity development, and the shifting directions of digital platforms. Given the expansion and acceleration of technology and social media trends, a continuing education will be productive to understand how youth can best utilize these tools for positive self-growth. The inclusion of youth voices in such research will also add value to the understanding by capturing the realities of digital identity-making. Ultimately, social media is powerful space that both reflects and shapes youth identity in society today. By acknowledging both its opportunities and its challenges, stakeholders can implement measures to mitigate the former and maximize the latter.

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