

## A MINI REVIEW ON ADOLESCENT IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AND IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON IT

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### ABSTRACT

A new setting for teenage identity development is social media. However, different definitions of social media involvement and different ideas of identity make it difficult to comprehend how social media use and identity formation are related. Research on the relationships between social media use, both in terms of quantity and quality, and several aspects of identity development, such as identity exploration and commitment, self-concept clarity, and identity distress, is summarized in this review. Twenty studies were included in the analysis after a database search. The results imply that increased identity exploration is linked to active social media use rather than time spent on the platform. Moreover, greater self-concept clarity is associated with authenticity in social media interactions rather than idealized self-presentation. Teens who compare themselves on social media also show higher degrees of identity discomfort and identity exploration. In general, the type of activities teenagers engage in on social media seems to have a greater impact on identity development than the length of time they spend using it.

**Keywords:** Adolescents, Identity development, Self-concept, Identity distress, Social media

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### INTRODUCTION

Social media have become an integral part of adolescents' daily lives, with many spending significant time online while taking on dual roles as both creators of self-generated content and consumers of others' content. This engagement has sparked considerable research interest, particularly regarding how online activity influences identity development. However, a comprehensive understanding of the

relationship between social media and identity development is hindered by the lack of a unified concept of social media engagement in research. Additionally, the variety of identity concepts studied complicates drawing straightforward conclusions about how social media engagement correlates with identity development [1-3]. By examining previous research on the connection between social

media usage and identity formation, this study seeks to integrate the body of knowledge by differentiating between the amount (such as time spent on social media) and quality (such as comparisons and self-presentation) of social media use. It methodically investigates how they relate to important facets of identity development, such as exploration, commitment, clarity of self-concept, and identity distress.

Through ongoing exchanges between exploration and commitment, adolescents form their identities. Identity certainty and a stable, cohesive self-concept are fostered by commitments, which are decisions regarding one's identity. A self that is shaped by devoted values, beliefs, objectives, and relationships—as well as how these commitments mesh across different spheres of life—is said to be self-concept clear [4]. The alignment and stability provided by these commitments are crucial for optimal adolescent development. For instance, commitments have been linked to lower levels of anxiety and depression, higher academic success, and higher self-concept clarity has been associated with greater relationship satisfaction, positive self-esteem, and open communication with parents. Additionally, if current commitments no longer adequately represent one's identity, this can undermine self-concept clarity, leading to distress and indicating a need for further identity exploration and revision [5-8].

Identity exploration involves critically assessing current commitments and questioning them to revise or replace them with new ones. Analyzing current commitments is believed to be beneficial for maintaining one's identity; however, reconsidering these commitments may lead to identity uncertainty, which can result in negative outcomes such as depressive and anxiety symptoms, lower academic achievement, and diminished self-esteem.

Furthermore, adolescents may experience identity distress, which can range from mild anxiety to severe symptoms across different life domains, including long-term goals, friendships, and moral values, stemming from uncertainty about the self [9]. Not surprisingly, individuals experiencing identity distress report higher levels of exploration and lower levels of commitment. Identity distress has also been linked to both internalizing and externalizing problems.

The process of identity development involves identity exploration and commitment, ideally leading to a stable self-concept, whereas identity distress represents a less favorable outcome. This development is influenced by relationships with family, peers, and school, which have traditionally been the focus of research. But thanks to social media, today's youth have expanded their social networks. With this addition, users can connect in a variety of ways, both one-way and multi-way, and create and consume material while also getting feedback. Additionally, users have some control over who can view their accounts or material [10].

Researchers that have looked at how social media affects teenage development have mostly focused on how much time youth spend on these sites. Social media use has been connected to a number of behavioral and emotional issues, depression, and decreased wellbeing.

Regarding identity development, excessive time on social media has been associated with low self-concept clarity and a disengagement from active identity exploration. However, findings are mixed, and not all studies find a correlation between time spent on social media and identity exploration and commitment. These inconsistent results raise questions about the relationship between time spent on social media and aspects of identity

development, as well as the adequacy of the current conceptualization of social media engagement [11].

Engagement with social media is diverse and may have varying associations with identity development, a nuance that is overlooked when only time spent on social media is considered. This diversity encompasses different modes of self-presentation, seeking feedback on one's persona, discussing specific topics, sharing everyday issues, and comparing abilities and opinions. Research has shown that certain forms of engagement are linked to identity development; for example, individuals who compare their abilities on social media tend to have lower self-concept clarity and higher identity distress. In contrast, activities such as editing profiles, sharing posts or blogs, and presenting oneself in various ways or as someone else indicate active identity exploration [11-16].

As of yet, no systematic review has explicitly looked at the ways in which various types of social media use affect the formation of teenage identities. According to earlier analyses, social media helps teenagers explore their identities and portray themselves in a variety of ways. The focus of our current research is solely on social media and identity development, however earlier assessments also took into account other online contexts and group identities. A recent systematic research also looked into the connection between identity development and social media use. However, because of their wide scope, which encompassed a number of social media-related themes, their findings might not adequately capture this association (e.g., cyberbullying, online communication) and identity development (e.g., body image, self-esteem, self-concept clarity, and identity processing style) [17]. Young people's engagement with social

media encompasses both quantitative and qualitative dimensions, each associated with different aspects of identity development. However, this distinction has not been systematically explored in previous research. To address this gap and enhance our understanding of how social media and identity development—both vital for adolescent growth—are interconnected, a synthesis of existing research is urgently needed. This systematic review of original qualitative and quantitative studies on adolescents' social media engagement differentiates between the quantity of engagement (time spent on specific media) and the quality of engagement (activities undertaken on social media), along with aspects of identity development, such as commitment and exploration, and their related constructs, including self-concept and identity distress.

## **METHOD**

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis's modified reporting criteria were adhered to in this review. The names of particular platforms were picked because of their widespread appeal. In order to make sure that pertinent studies that had already been published were not missed, search terms for platforms that were previously used as social media were also included. The search encompassed article titles, abstracts, and keywords. To get rid of duplicates, book chapters, dissertations, and conference studies, the results were imported into Zotero. Rayyan was then used to screen the titles and abstracts. [18]

Studies that satisfied the following requirements were accepted: centered on teenagers whose average age was between nine and nineteen, or within that age range; evaluated identity discomfort, self-concept clarity, and exploration and commitment as social media correlates; were qualitative or quantitative original studies; appeared in a

journal with peer review; were carried out in English.

Studies that failed to meet the inclusion requirements were disqualified, particularly if they included: Participants who were chosen for the study based on a clinical diagnosis (e.g., diabetes, depression); platforms like WeChat, Telegram, and WhatsApp that were first created only as messaging applications; general internet use or the use of communication devices such as computers, tablets, or smartphones; online learning, gambling, addiction, or purchasing; social identities (such as sexual, religious, ethnic, gender, civic, national, or professional identities) rather than emphasizing elements of identity development including self-concept clarity, identity discomfort, and dedication and exploration [19-21].

Both qualitative and quantitative research assessment tools were used to evaluate the quality of qualifying studies. The quality of quantitative studies was evaluated using a modified version of the National Institutes of Health Quality Assessment Tool for Observational Cohort and Cross-Sectional Studies. Criteria pertaining to study design, study population, sample size, independent and dependent variables, and follow-up rate were all part of our review. Cohort study-related items were eliminated, giving quantitative studies a maximum score of six, which denotes the highest quality. The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme Qualitative Studies Checklist was used for qualitative research. Although this checklist consists of ten items, two items related to ethical considerations and research value were excluded, as these aspects were not applicable to the quality assessment of quantitative studies. Consequently, a qualitative study could achieve a maximum score of eight (indicating best quality) [22].

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Since the majority of quantitative studies were cross-sectional and follow-up loss rates in longitudinal studies above 20%, none of them were given a score for follow-up rates when evaluating the quality of quantitative research. As a result, none received the highest possible score of six. The other studies did not receive points for this criterion since just one study provided justification for its sample size. Every study developed a research topic and offered sample data. By over-attributing identity development to social media, three research characterized it as a component of social media use, which could skew the results. Furthermore, two research failed to explicitly characterize social media use, and one study failed to describe identity formation. Despite these limitations, the overall quality of the included studies was deemed satisfactory [23].

None of the qualitative studies achieved a score of eight for various reasons, including inadequate data analysis, insufficient reporting on research design appropriateness, and unclear researcher-participant relationships. All studies explained their qualitative research methodology and recruitment strategies, but one study did not adequately detail its recruitment approach. Furthermore, two studies did not clearly articulate their research questions.

### **Social Media Use and Commitment**

There were conflicting findings from two research that looked at the connection between identity commitment and social media usage. Teenagers who spent typical or excessive amounts of time on social media were more likely to break their obligations, according to one study, while another found no significant correlation. Two additional studies compared social media use with identity commitments. One

study suggested that adolescents who compared their abilities had greater self-certainty, while another found that those who compared opinions felt more confident in their identities. The age differences between these studies may account for the variance; the first involved younger adolescents, while the second focused on older adolescents. This implies that younger adolescents may present themselves as capable, whereas older adolescents may emphasize knowledge. However, due to the cross-sectional nature of the research and the limited number of studies, a general conclusion about the relationship between comparing abilities and opinions on social media and identity commitment cannot be established [24-28].

#### **Social Media Use and Exploration**

The relationship between social media use and identity discovery was examined in two research, with conflicting findings. While one study found no correlation, another indicated that people who used social media excessively were more likely to feel unclear about who they were [29].

The studies investigated the connection between identity exploration and different types of self-presentation. According to the study, teenagers were more likely to participate in identity exploration if they tried out new looks, tried out different roles, responded to questions about who they were, and pretended to be someone else. Additionally, four studies found that adolescents who edited their profiles, shared posts, or created blog entries were also more inclined to explore their identities. In summary, active participation in social media appears to play a significant role in identity exploration.

Two studies investigated the relationship between comparing abilities and opinions and identity exploration. One study revealed that adolescents who compared their abilities were more likely to analyze

and reconsider them, while another study found that those who compared their opinions tended to analyze and question them as well. This suggests that comparing abilities and opinions may lead to identity confusion, which can facilitate further exploration and the formation of new commitments. However, due to the cross-sectional design of the research and the limited number of studies, drawing broad conclusions about this relationship remains challenging [30].

#### **Social Media Use and Self-Concept Clarity**

Six studies examined the relationship between time spent on social media and self-concept clarity, yielding mixed results. Two studies reported no significant correlation between social media use and self-concept clarity. In contrast, two other studies indicated that excessive social media use was associated with an unclear self-concept. Conversely, two studies found that individuals who spent a lot of time on social media had clearer self-concepts. Given these mixed findings, it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions regarding the relationship between social media use and self-concept clarity [31-33].

According to a short-term longitudinal study that looked at the relationship between social media comparison and self-concept clarity, people who compared their skills frequently felt unsure of who they were. Both cross-sectional and longitudinal data corroborated this. Additionally, about five months after the original examination, self-concept clarity and opinion comparison were found to be negatively correlated. This implies that both kinds of comparison—opinion comparisons possibly coming after ability comparisons—are associated with ambiguous self-concepts. However, it is difficult to draw broad conclusions regarding this link because of the small number of research [34].

The studies demonstrated that adolescents who presented their true selves in a manner consistent with their in-person identities experienced a clear self-concept. In contrast, those who portrayed an idealized self that did not align with their offline persona exhibited less clarity regarding their self-perception. The evidence suggests that individuals who present themselves authentically foster greater self-concept clarity [35].

The studies indicated that adolescents who frequently used social media, shared content, and engaged in recreational activities were more confident in their identities. Additionally, four studies investigated the relationship between social media feedback and self-concept clarity, yielding mixed results. Three qualitative studies found that receiving feedback from their audience reinforced self-concept clarity. However, one short-term longitudinal study did not find a significant correlation between social media feedback and self-concept clarity.

#### **Social Media Use and Identity Distress**

Three studies explored the connection between social media use and identity distress. One study identified that individuals who spent considerable time on social media experienced identity-related distress. Conversely, another study found no significant relationship—either cross-sectional or longitudinal—between excessive social media use and identity distress. Only one short-term longitudinal study reported a cross-sectional association, indicating that individuals who compared their abilities were more likely to experience identity distress. Therefore, establishing a clear relationship between social media usage and identity distress remains challenging due to these mixed findings. Nonetheless, ability comparison may be a potential factor associated with identity distress [36].

## **DISCUSSION**

Social media has become an essential aspect of adolescents' lives, and numerous studies have explored the relationship between social media engagement and adolescent development, particularly identity development. However, achieving a comprehensive understanding of how social media interacts with identity development is challenging due to variations in how social media use and the different facets of identity development are conceptualized and assessed [37–43].

Our synthesis of the research indicates that it is not the amount of time spent on social media that is crucial, but rather the nature of the activities conducted during that time that impacts identity development. This aligns with findings indicating that appearance comparisons on social media are linked to body dissatisfaction, and that specific types of engagement—such as comparisons and active versus passive use—are associated with symptoms of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress. Here, the activities themselves appear to be more significant than the duration of social media use. For instance, an adolescent interested in science might strengthen their identity by watching chemistry videos on platforms like YouTube. This passive engagement in content consumption serves as an active process of identity exploration and reinforcement. Merely quantifying screen time fails to capture the complexities of social media usage. By examining the specific activities users engage in on these platforms, we can gain deeper insights into how social media relates to various facets of identity development [44].

Furthermore, our research shows that teens frequently use self-presentation techniques on social media. These tactics, which can all aid in identity development, may include

fabricating profiles, impersonating people, or altering one's appearance to project an ideal self. But changing one's identity in social media settings might also make it more difficult to have a clear self-concept. Teenagers that exhibit a false self-image that deviates from their true selves frequently have less clarity in their self-concept. On the other hand, teenagers who display their genuine selves on social media typically have a more distinct sense of who they are, which suggests greater dedication. Although we are unable to make firm judgments regarding the direction of these effects, it is plausible that teenagers who have a more distinct sense of who they are feel more comfortable sharing their true selves on social media.

To fully understand adolescents' self-presentation strategies on social media and their connection to identity development, it is essential to explore their motives for using these platforms. The reasons for engaging in fictitious self-presentation can vary. For instance, adolescents may create alternate profiles to appear older and bypass age restrictions, to engage in bullying while remaining anonymous, or simply for entertainment. Thus, manipulating one's image on social media may extend beyond mere identity exploration, whereas presenting an authentic self may indicate stronger commitments [45-49].

There is little research on the relationship between social media comparisons of skills and viewpoints and elements of identity development. The small number of papers in our study raises the possibility of age-related variations. When younger adolescents contrasted their abilities, they were more likely to reevaluate their identity commitments and either reinforce or make new ones. On the other hand, when comparing their views, older teenagers saw comparable changes. This suggests that whilst older teenagers tend to define

themselves by their thoughts on social media, younger adolescents are more inclined to do so based on their ability. However, the cross-sectional character of these research restricts the ability to detect changes over time, making it impossible to draw definitive conclusions [50-53].

The majority of recent study has focused on popular social media sites like Facebook and Instagram that gained popularity in the late 2000s, during the 2010s, and into the early 2020s. Young people have, however, shifted significantly toward newer platforms, and the use and popularity of each platform are evolving more quickly than in the past. These more recent platforms offer unique involvement opportunities. On TikTok, for example, youthful users engage in video challenges, a sort of connection that is rare on older platforms. YouTube provides a wealth of educational content that can support the identity reinforcement of youth in school settings. Although these platforms share some characteristics, each provides unique engagement opportunities. Therefore, it is crucial to update social media research regularly to track trends among adolescents and understand the impact of new forms of interaction on these platforms on adolescent identity development [54-59].

## **CONCLUSION**

This systematic review seeks to enhance the understanding of identity development research by synthesizing existing evidence regarding the role of social media in adolescent identity formation. The findings indicate that it is the specific activities adolescents engage in on social media, rather than the total time spent on these platforms, that correlate with their identity development. Moreover, adolescents with clearer self-concepts are more likely to engage in authentic self-presentation, while those exploring their identities tend to present themselves in a more fictitious

manner. The cross-sectional design of the majority of research, however, raises questions regarding whether identity development is influenced by social media use, whether social media behavior is influenced by identity development, and whether these links may be reciprocal. Well-designed longitudinal studies are therefore desperately needed to elucidate the temporal dynamics of this association. Furthermore, concentrating only on the amount of time spent on social media restricts our comprehension of the relationship between identity development and social media engagement. To give a

more thorough knowledge of this link, future study should focus on looking at the relationships, activities, and information that teenagers come across on social media.

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