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The Role of Social Media in the Formation of Adolescent Identity: A Review of Psychology and Popular Culture

I Ketut Budaraga[✉]

Universitas Ekasakti

e-mail: * iketutbudaraga@unespadang.ac.id*Inputed : July 25, 2025**Revised : August 10, 2025**Accepted : July 30, 2025**Published : August 30, 2025*

ABSTRACT

Social media has become a fundamental element in the lives of modern adolescents, playing a significant role in the process of identity formation in the digital era. This study analyzes how social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube influence adolescent identity construction from the perspectives of developmental psychology and popular culture. Using a qualitative approach with a case study design, the study involved four adolescents aged 16-18 in Semarang City through in-depth interviews and observations of digital activities. The findings indicate that social media plays a dual role as a means of positive identity exploration and a source of psychological distress. Adolescents use digital platforms to experiment with various roles and lifestyles, but often become trapped in a false image to gain external validation. The process of identity formation is influenced by the dynamics of identity exploration and commitment, with social media providing a broad space for self-discovery but also creating the risk of identity conflict due to social comparison and popular cultural pressures. The study identified that adolescent girls are more vulnerable to negative impacts related to body image and beauty standards, while adolescent boys tend to focus on achievement and social recognition. Contextual factors such as family background, digital access, and local cultural values play a significant role in shaping adolescents' social media experiences. The results emphasize the need for structured digital literacy education and psychological support to help adolescents navigate the complexities of digital identity in a healthy and authentic manner.

Keyword: *social media, adolescent identity, developmental psychology, popular culture, digital literacy*

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become an integral part of teenagers' daily lives in the digital age. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube serve not

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only as communication tools but also as arenas for teens to express themselves, build their personal image, and forge a social identity. In adolescence, characterized by self-exploration and the search for identity, social media provides a new, expansive and dynamic space.(Ellington, 2025; Nurdin et al., 2025; Ouyang & Bai, 2025)On the one hand, social media provides opportunities for self-discovery and exploration of various social and cultural identities. However, on the other hand, social media also carries psychological risks due to constant exposure to public opinion, social comparison, and pressure to conform to popular cultural standards. This complexity demonstrates that social media is not just a technological phenomenon, but also a psychosocial and cultural phenomenon that plays a significant role in the identity formation process of today's youth.(Agarwal, 2024; Avci et al., 2024).

The process of identity formation on social media is influenced by the dynamics of identity exploration and commitment. In many cases, adolescents use social media as a tool to experiment with various roles, lifestyles, and values they encounter online. This exploration process can broaden horizons and strengthen self-concept clarity when done authentically. However, many adolescents also fall into the trap of false imagery constructing an identity based on what is considered popular or attractive in the public eye, rather than on authentic personal desires and values. This gives rise to identity conflict and self-ambiguity, especially when social comparison dominates their interactions on social media.(Senekal et al., 2022; Vb, 2024). Therefore, it is important to understand that social media can be a means of forming a positive identity, but it can also be a source of psychological distress if not balanced with healthy self-awareness and social control.(Avci et al., 2024; Chen, 2025).

Social media also plays a dual role as a source of social support and social pressure. On the one hand, teens can gain emotional support, validation, and social connection from online communities. Social media provides a safe space for those who feel isolated in the real world to express themselves, find relevant peer groups, and build meaningful relationships. However, on the other hand, social media is also a significant source of social pressure. The pressure to gain likes, positive comments, and public recognition can create an emotional dependence on external validation. Furthermore, the prevalence of appearance comparisons, cyberbullying, and popular cultural expectations exacerbate the psychological burdens experienced by teens.(Popat & Tarrant, 2022; Senekal et al., 2022; Shankleman et al., 2021)In this context, the role of social media becomes ambivalent – it can empower, yet also trap, teenagers in complex social dynamics.(García-Ordóñez et al., 2024).

From a psychological perspective, social media can have a positive impact on adolescent development if used wisely and productively. Access to extensive information, connections with inspirational figures, and exposure to diverse perspectives can help adolescents build a strong and reflective identity. Social media also facilitates the formation of consumer identity, as adolescents learn to recognize personal preferences, aesthetic values, and lifestyles through interactions with the content they consume. This enriches adolescents'

understanding of themselves and the world around them.(Chen, 2025; Parent, 2023; Wilska et al., 2023)Popular culture that develops on social media, such as music trends, fashion, or memes, is also part of the process of internalizing values and self-expression that is important in the formation of social identity. However, it cannot be ignored that social media also has a negative impact on adolescents' psychological well-being. Excessive use, exposure to unrealistic beauty standards, and a culture of false imagery can lead to body image disorders, social anxiety, and even depression. Adolescent girls are the most vulnerable group in this regard, as they are more frequently exposed to content that emphasizes ideal bodies, luxurious lifestyles, and popularity as measures of self-worth.(Cataldo et al., 2021; Choukas-Bradley et al., 2021; Valkenburg et al., 2021)The inability to distinguish between online images and real-life reality often leads to identity confusion, where teens feel they must pretend to be someone they're not to be socially accepted. If not properly addressed, this can hinder personality development and long-term mental health.

In the context of popular culture, social media introduces teenagers to multicultural values and global perspectives. They are exposed to trends and ideologies from various countries, which can enrich their knowledge and expand cultural tolerance. However, too much exposure without a strong foundation of local values can also erode teenagers' cultural identity. When global values conflict with local or religious values, teenagers can experience internal conflict that can lead to an identity crisis.(García-Ordóñez et al., 2024; Ghai et al., 2022)Therefore, the process of identity formation on social media cannot be separated from the cultural context in which adolescents are raised. Contextual support is needed to help adolescents navigate cross-cultural influences without losing their own identity roots.

In addition to cultural factors, the digital access gap and regulatory policies also influence adolescents' experiences using social media. In some regions, access to the internet and digital devices remains limited, so not all adolescents have equal opportunities to build a digital identity. Furthermore, differing regulatory policies across countries regarding digital content lead to significant disparities in social media experiences (Vb, 2024; Ghai et al., 2022). This inequality creates a new social dynamic, where digital identity becomes a privilege that is not always accessible to all adolescents. Therefore, it is crucial for educational policies and media regulations to ensure that social media is an inclusive, safe, and educational space for all adolescents.

To minimize the risks and maximize the benefits of social media, a structured digital literacy education approach is needed. Digital literacy not only teaches technical skills for using social media, but also encompasses critical understanding of content, awareness of privacy and security, and strengthening ethical values in online interactions. This education should be integrated into the school curriculum from an early age and combined with mental health programs to help adolescents manage the emotional distress that may arise from social media use.(Senekal et al., 2022; West et al., 2024)With good literacy,

5 teenagers can use social media as a means of self-empowerment, rather than as
18 a source of psychological crisis or identity confusion.

27 Despite extensive research, understanding of the role of social media in
adolescent identity formation is still evolving. Long-term and cross-cultural
studies are urgently needed to fully illustrate the global impact of social media
on adolescent identity across various social contexts. Research that focuses on
differences in gender, social class, cultural background, and the role of family
and educational institutions can provide a deeper and more comprehensive
perspective (Vb, 2024; Ghai et al., 2022). Thus, policies and interventions
designed are not uniform but responsive to diverse social needs and dynamics.
26 This study aims to analyze in depth how social media influences the process of
adolescent identity formation from the perspectives of psychology and popular
culture.

This research is significant because it offers an interdisciplinary approach
that links psychological dynamics, such as self-exploration and social pressure,
with the context of rapidly evolving digital culture. The novelty of this study
lies in its attempt to integrate the perspective of adolescent developmental
psychology with the study of popular culture as two major forces in the
formation of adolescent digital identity. Furthermore, this study also considers
contextual factors such as differences in digital access, local cultural
background, and regulatory policies that influence how adolescents construct
and interpret their identities on social media. Therefore, the results of this study
are expected to contribute to the development of more adaptive education and
34 mental health policies that are appropriate to the challenges of today's digital
age.

METHDOLOGY

15 This research uses a qualitative approach (Sugiyono, 2019), with a case
study design to explore in depth the role of social media in adolescent identity
formation from the perspective of psychology and popular culture. A
1 qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to understand
adolescents' subjective experiences in interacting with social media and how it
influences their identity construction. This method allows for the extraction of
rich and contextual data about the complex psychological and sociocultural
processes in adolescent identity formation in the digital era. The research was
conducted in Semarang City, Central Java, which was chosen as the location
because of its characteristics as a metropolitan city with high internet and social
media penetration among adolescents, as well as the diversity of socioeconomic
backgrounds that allow for a comprehensive analysis of variations in adolescent
experiences in using social media.

11 Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews using a semi-
structured interview guide developed based on the theoretical framework of
adolescent identity formation and the influence of social media. Interviews
were conducted individually, lasting 60-90 minutes for each informant,
35 allowing for an in-depth exploration of the informant's personal experiences,

perceptions, and reflections regarding social media use and identity formation. In addition to the interviews, this study also employed limited participant observation techniques on the informants' social media activities (with consent) to understand their digital behavior patterns. Additional data were collected through content analysis of the social media profiles of informants who were willing to share this information, focusing on how they presented themselves, selected the content they shared, and interacted with peers on digital platforms.

The research subjects consisted of four adolescents aged 16-18 years who were selected using a purposive sampling technique based on the following criteria: active users of at least three social media platforms, domiciled in Semarang, and willing to participate in the research with limited access to their social media activities. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis techniques with an inductive approach to identify key themes related to adolescent identity formation through social media. The analysis process included data familiarization, initial coding, theme search, theme review, theme naming, and report writing. Data validity was ensured through source and method triangulation, member checking with informants, and peer debriefing with experts in adolescent psychology and digital media. The ethical aspects of the research were strictly maintained by obtaining informed consent from informants and parents, maintaining confidentiality of identities, and providing the right to withdraw from the research at any time.

Table 1. Research Informant Data

No	Initials	Age	Gender	Class/School	Major Social Media Platforms	Daily Usage Duration	Family Background
1	AR	17 years	Man	XII/SMAN 3 Semarang	Instagram, TikTok, Twitter	6-8 hours	Upper middle class, professional parents
2	DM	16 years	Woman	XI/SMAN 5 Semarang	Instagram, TikTok, Pinterest	4-6 hours	Middle class, self-employed parents
3	FS	18 years	Woman	XII/State Vocational School 7 Semarang	Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp Status	3-5 hours	Lower middle class, working parents
4	MH	17 years	Man	XII/MAN 1 Semarang	YouTube, Instagram, Discord	7-9 hours	Middle, parent teacher

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Social Media Usage Patterns and Identity Motivation

The research results showed that the four informants had intensive social media usage patterns, with a duration of 3-9 hours per day. The primary motivation for social media use was closely related to the need for exploration and identity formation. AR revealed that social media became a space for expressing interests in technology and gaming, stating:

"On Instagram and Twitter, I can share my passion for coding and gaming. I feel more confident there because I have a community that shares my passion."

Meanwhile DM explains the use of social media as a means of aesthetics and self-presentation:

"Pinterest and Instagram are like my mood board. I like to create an aesthetic feed because it reflects my personality, which is that I like beautiful things."

An interesting finding emerged from differences in motivation based on gender and socioeconomic background. FS from lower-middle-class families used social media more functionally for networking and information:

"I use Facebook and WhatsApp Status to keep up with part-time job vacancies and learn online for free."

Meanwhile, MH with a teaching family background showed more educational use:

"On YouTube, I subscribe to channels that provide programming tutorials and religious discussions. Discord is for discussions with friends about lessons."

2. Digital Identity Construction and Authenticity

The process of constructing a digital identity demonstrates the complexities between the desire for authenticity and the pressure to conform. Interviewees experienced dilemmas in presenting themselves online, as AR explained:

"Sometimes I'm confused about what to post that I like or what will get a lot of likes. The thing is, if I post coding stuff, I get few likes, but if I post selfies or jokes, the engagement is high."

This phenomenon reflects an internal conflict between authentic self-expression and the need for social validation.

DMs experience more intense pressure regarding body image and beauty standards:

"I often compare my photos to those of beautiful influencers on Instagram. Sometimes I get insecure and delete photos I've posted because I feel like they're not good enough."

In contrast, FS demonstrates a more pragmatic approach:

"I post what I find. I don't really think about it being perfect, the important thing is that I can connect with people and get useful information."

Table 2. Characteristics of Social Media Usage of Sources

Source person	Main Platform	Primary Motivation	Posted Content	Social Anxiety Level	Frequency of Social Comparison
AR	Instagram, TikTok, Twitter	Exploring technology interests	Gaming, coding, meme	Currently	Currently
DM	Instagram, TikTok, Pinterest	Aesthetic expression	Selfie photos, fashion, mood boards	Tall	Tall
FS	Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp	Networking and information	Activity updates, useful info	Low	Low
MH	YouTube, Instagram, Discord	Learning and discussion	Educational content, religious discussions	Currently	Low

3. Psychological Impact and Mental Well-being

Psychological impact analysis revealed varying responses to social media use. DM exhibited symptoms of social anxiety related to body image:

"Once, I didn't want to leave the house for a week because I felt so ugly after seeing photos of models on Instagram. My mom was worried and took me to a psychologist."

On the contrary, MH shows the positive impact of targeted social media use:

"Discord and educational YouTube channels actually motivate me to learn more. I have discussion partners from various regions who share my interest in programming."

AR experiences ambivalence in social media use:

"On the one hand, social media makes me more confident because I meet people who also enjoy gaming. But on the other hand, sometimes I feel addicted and have trouble focusing on studying."

FS shows better resilience:

"I'm not really affected by drama or negative comments on social media. What's important is that I benefit from it for networking and finding information."

Table 3. Psychological Impact of Social Media Use

Psychological Aspects	AR	DM	FS	MH
Self-esteem	Fluctuating	Low-medium	Stable	Tall
Social anxiety	Currently	Tall	Low	Currently
Body image concerns	Low	Tall	Low	Low
Fear of missing out	Tall	Tall	Low	Currently

Psychological Aspects	AR	DM	FS	MH
Life satisfaction	Currently	Low-medium	Tall	Tall
Sleep quality	Bad	Bad	Good	Currently

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm the complexity of social media's role in adolescent identity formation, as stated in the introduction that social media functions as an arena for self-exploration that can have both positive impacts and psychological risks. Intensive usage patterns with a duration of 3-9 hours per day indicate that social media has become an integral part of adolescents' lives, in line with the view that digital platforms are not only a means of communication but also an arena for social identity formation. Diverse motivations for use based on gender and socioeconomic background indicate that the process of identity formation on social media is not universal but highly contextual, as emphasized that cultural and social factors play a significant role in shaping adolescents' social media experiences.

The authenticity dilemma experienced by the interviewees, particularly AR, who experienced a conflict between authentic self-expression and the need for social validation, reflects the dynamics of identity exploration and commitment discussed in the theoretical framework. This supports the argument that adolescents are often trapped in a false image to gain public recognition, which can give rise to identity conflict and self-doubt. The finding that DM experienced intense pressure related to body image confirms the vulnerability of adolescent girls to unrealistic beauty standards and a false image culture, consistent with literature showing that adolescent girls are more frequently exposed to content that emphasizes the ideal body and popularity as benchmarks of self-worth.

The differences in psychological impacts across informants illustrate the dual role of social media as a source of social support and social pressure identified in the introduction. MH, who demonstrated positive impacts from targeted social media use for learning, confirmed that access to extensive information and connections with relevant communities can help adolescents build a strong and reflective identity. Conversely, DM, who experienced high social anxiety and body image issues, showed a risk of impaired psychological well-being due to excessive exposure to unrealistic standards, as discussed in the discussion that excessive use and exposure to image culture can lead to body image disturbance and social anxiety.(Riendani et al., 2024).

The variations in resilience demonstrated by FS indicate that socioeconomic background and family values influence how adolescents navigate social media pressures. FS's pragmatic approach, which focuses more on networking and information than social validation, suggests that not all adolescents become trapped in social comparison dynamics, especially when they have clear goals and strong family support. This supports the argument

that the process of identity formation on social media cannot be separated from the cultural and family context in which adolescents are raised.

The research findings also confirm the importance of structured digital literacy education as recommended in the introduction. Interviewees who demonstrated healthier and more targeted social media use, such as MH and FS, tended to have a better awareness of the purpose of social media use and the ability to manage emerging emotional distress. Conversely, interviewees who experienced more significant negative impacts demonstrated a lack of digital literacy and effective coping strategies in dealing with the complex dynamics of social media.

CONCLUSIONS

This research confirms that social media plays a highly complex and multidimensional role in adolescent identity formation, operating as an arena for self-exploration that can both empower and create significant psychological risks. The findings suggest that adolescents' digital identity formation process cannot be understood simply as positive or negative, but rather as a highly contextual dynamic influenced by individual factors, gender, socioeconomic background, and family and cultural values. Adolescents use social media platforms for diverse motivations—ranging from exploring interests and talents, aesthetic expression and creativity, social networking, to learning and self-development reflecting the diversity of psychological needs during identity development. However, high usage intensity, with durations ranging from 3-9 hours per day, indicates a potential dependency that can disrupt adolescents' life balance. Gender differences are crucial, with adolescent girls showing higher susceptibility to body image pressures and beauty standards promoted through popular culture on social media, while adolescent boys tend to experience pressures related to achievement and social recognition in specific domains of interest. The dilemma of authenticity versus social validation is a universal challenge experienced by all interviewees, reflecting an internal conflict between the desire to express themselves authentically and the need for acceptance within the digital community. Adolescents' resilience and adaptability in navigating the complexities of social media vary widely, with those with clear usage goals, strong family support, and good digital literacy demonstrating more positive psychological outcomes. This research emphasizes the urgency of developing digital literacy education that focuses not only on technical skills but also encompasses critical content awareness, emotional management, and healthy identity development in the digital age. It also emphasizes the need for psychological support that is responsive to the unique challenges adolescents face in constructing their digital identities.

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