The Impact of Social Media Use on Identity Formation among Adolescents

Sora Pazer
sorapazer@gmail.com
IU International University of Applied Sciences, Germany

ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between social media use and identity formation among adolescents aged 14 to 21. A quantitative survey (n = 131) assessed social comparison, online identity, and the influence of social media feedback on self-esteem. Results show a significant correlation between social comparison and the importance of online identity. Adolescents who spend more time on social media report a stronger influence of online reactions on their self-esteem. While social media fosters identity exploration, it also encourages validation-seeking behavior. These findings underscore the need for mindful social media use among adolescents.

Keywords: *Adolescence, Identity Formation, Online Identity, Self-Esteem, Social Comparison, Social Media Use*

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social media has become a central component of daily life for adolescents, playing a significant role in their identity formation process. Adolescents are at a critical developmental stage where they explore their sense of self, and social media provides a platform for this exploration (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). The ability to curate and present one's identity online, combined with constant exposure to the lives of peers and influencers, has led to growing concerns about the impact of social media on identity development and self-esteem (Boyd, 2014).

Erikson's (1968) theory of psychosocial development suggests that adolescence is a period where individuals work through identity versus role confusion, seeking to establish a cohesive sense of self. However, in the age of social media, the lines between offline and online identities have become increasingly blurred (Turkle, 2011). This raises important questions about how adolescents navigate their identity formation in digital spaces and what effects social media might have on this process.

Despite the vast body of research on adolescence and identity, there is still a need to explore the specific impacts of social media use on identity formation. This study aims to fill that gap by examining the relationship between social media use, social comparison, and identity development among adolescents aged 14 to 21. We hypothesize that increased social media use is associated with higher levels of social comparison and that this, in turn, impacts the adolescents' self-concept and self-esteem.

This paper seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How does the frequency of social media use affect adolescents' self-esteem and identity formation?
2. What is the relationship between social comparison on social media and adolescents' self-concept?
3. How do online interactions and reactions to social media posts influence adolescents' self-esteem?

By addressing these questions, this study contributes to a growing body of research aimed at understanding the psychological implications of social media use during adolescence.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Identity formation is a critical developmental task during adolescence, as theorized by Erikson (1968). His theory posits that adolescents face a psychosocial crisis between identity and role confusion, where they must establish a clear sense of who they are and where they fit in society.

During this period, social interactions play a pivotal role in shaping one's identity, and with the rise of social media, these interactions have increasingly shifted to digital platforms (Arnett, 2014). While traditional identity exploration occurred in face-to-face environments, today's adolescents engage in self-presentation and identity construction both offline and online (Oyserman & Markus, 1998).

The advent of social media has provided adolescents with new opportunities for identity exploration. Boyd (2014) notes that platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat allow users to experiment with different aspects of their identities by curating content, interacting with peers, and receiving feedback from online audiences. This form of "performance" aligns with Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation, where individuals manage the impressions they give to others. On social media, adolescents can explore multiple identities, ranging from experimenting with different looks to adopting new personality traits, which in turn can affect how they perceive themselves (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Research indicates that social media enables a continuous process of identity construction that is fluid and multifaceted (Turkle, 2011). This environment allows for both positive and negative outcomes. On the positive side, adolescents can connect with like-minded individuals, express themselves freely, and find communities that support their identity exploration (Livingstone, 2008). However, this constant exposure to others' curated identities can also lead to negative consequences, such as increased social comparison and the pressure to conform to idealized versions of self (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015).

Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) asserts that individuals evaluate themselves based on comparisons with others. In the context of social media, adolescents are frequently exposed to the seemingly perfect lives of their peers, influencers, and celebrities. These idealized portrayals can create a sense of inadequacy and lead to lower self-esteem, particularly when adolescents feel that they do not measure up to these standards (Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014). Research has shown that upward social comparisons on social media—comparing oneself to individuals who appear more successful, attractive, or happy—are associated with negative body image, lower self-esteem, and heightened anxiety (Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian, & Halliwell, 2015).
Conversely, some studies suggest that downward social comparisons—comparing oneself to individuals perceived as less successful or fortunate—can have a protective effect on self-esteem (Valkenburg, Koutamanis, & Vossen, 2017). However, given the prevalence of idealized content on platforms like Instagram and TikTok, adolescents are more likely to engage in upward comparisons, which pose a greater risk to their mental health (Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011).

One significant feature of social media is the ability to receive immediate feedback in the form of likes, comments, and shares. This feedback loop can become a key determinant of self-worth for many adolescents, as positive reactions to their posts may reinforce their self-esteem, while negative or lackluster responses may diminish it (Burrow & Rainone, 2017). The validation-seeking behavior observed on social media platforms is especially concerning among adolescents, as they are more susceptible to the influence of peer feedback (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Research by Nesi and Prinstein (2015) suggests that the number of likes or comments received on a post can directly influence adolescents' mood and self-esteem, making social media a potent force in shaping their self-concept. Although there is extensive research on social media's influence on adolescents, most studies have focused on specific aspects, such as self-esteem or body image, without a comprehensive understanding of how social media affects overall identity formation. Additionally, much of the research has been conducted in Western countries, with limited data on how adolescents in diverse cultural contexts experience social media. This study aims to bridge these gaps by examining not only the influence of social media on self-esteem but also its broader role in identity development, taking into account the daily duration of use and the types of platforms most commonly engaged with.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine the relationship between social media use and identity formation among adolescents. An online survey was distributed to gather self-reported data on variables such as social comparison, online identity, and the influence of social media reactions on self-esteem.

The survey employed a 5-point Likert scale, allowing participants to express their agreement or disagreement with various statements. This approach was chosen for its efficiency in collecting data from a large sample and its capacity to quantify subjective experiences related to social media use.

The participants in this study were adolescents aged 14 to 21, recruited through social media platforms and online forums. A total of 131 individuals completed the survey. Inclusion criteria required participants to be within the designated age range and active users of social media. The sample was diverse in terms of age, gender, and educational background, ensuring representation from different demographic subgroups. Parental consent was obtained for participants under the age of 18, following ethical guidelines for research involving minors.

The survey consisted of four key constructs:
1. **Social Comparison**: Measured by asking participants to rate their tendency to compare themselves with others on social media (e.g., "I frequently compare myself with others on social media"). Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).
2. **Online Identity**: This construct was assessed using items that explored the importance of social media in shaping personal identity (e.g., "My online presence is an important part of my identity").
3. **Self-Esteem Influence**: To measure the impact of social media feedback on self-esteem, participants responded to items such as "The reactions to my social media posts affect my self-esteem."
4. **Identity Exploration**: This dimension was evaluated through items that gauged participants' engagement in online identity experimentation (e.g., "I try out different personalities or styles online to figure out what suits me").

In addition to these constructs, participants were asked about their average daily social media usage (in hours) and the specific platforms they used most frequently (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat).

The online survey was developed using a secure survey platform to ensure participant confidentiality and data protection. The link to the survey was distributed across various social media channels, allowing for broad participation. Participants completed the survey independently, and all responses were anonymized to protect their privacy. The survey took approximately 10-15 minutes to complete, and no personal identifying information was collected.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional review board (IRB) to ensure adherence to ethical standards in research, particularly regarding consent and the protection of minors.

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics software. Descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize demographic information and responses to the key variables. To assess relationships between variables, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated. This allowed for an examination of the strength and direction of associations between social media usage, social comparison tendencies, online identity, and the influence of social media reactions on self-esteem. A significance level of $p < .05$ was used to determine statistical significance. The data were also checked for normality, and appropriate measures were taken to ensure the reliability and validity of the survey items.

4. RESULTS

The results of this study provide a detailed examination of the relationship between social media use and identity formation among adolescents. The findings are divided into several sections: demographic characteristics, descriptive statistics of key variables, correlational analysis, and platform-specific insights.

The study sample consisted of 131 participants aged 14 to 21. The age distribution was as follows: 28 participants (21.4%) were aged 14-15, 43 participants (32.8%) were aged 16-17, 37 participants (28.2%) were aged 18-19, and 23 participants (17.6%) were aged 20-21. The gender distribution of the sample was predominantly female (n = 71, 54.2%), with males representing 43.5% (n = 57), and 3 participants (2.3%) identifying as diverse. Regarding education, the majority of participants were attending Gymnasium (n = 62, 47.3%), followed by those attending Realschule (n = 38, 29.0%), Berufsschule (n = 16, 12.2%), and Hauptschule (n = 15, 11.5%). The survey included several key questions designed to measure aspects of identity formation and social media use, including social comparison, online identity, and self-esteem influence. The responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 representing strong disagreement and 5 representing strong agreement.

Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they compare themselves with others on social media. The majority of respondents agreed that they frequently compare themselves with others, with 32.8% (n = 43) selecting "4" (agree) and 28.2% (n = 37) selecting "5" (strongly agree). A smaller portion of participants selected neutral or negative responses, with 21.4% (n = 28) indicating neutrality and 6.1% (n = 8) selecting "1" (strongly disagree). The mean

score for this item was 3.7 (SD = 1.2), suggesting that social comparison is a common experience among adolescents in the study.

Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of responses to the social comparison item.

Table 1
Social Comparison on Social Media

Response Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1 (Strongly Disagree)	8	6.1%
2 (Disagree)	15	11.5%
3 (Neutral)	28	21.4%
4 (Agree)	43	32.8%
5 (Strongly Agree)	37	28.2%
Total	**131**	**100%**

When asked about the importance of their online presence in shaping their identity, 39.7% (n = 52) of participants indicated that they "agree" with the statement, and 32.1% (n = 42) "strongly agreed." A minority of respondents disagreed, with 3.8% (n = 5) selecting "1" and 7.6% (n = 10) selecting "2" (disagree). The mean score for this item was 3.9 (SD = 1.1), indicating that for most adolescents, their online presence is considered a significant part of their identity. Participants were also asked about the influence of social media reactions (likes, comments, shares) on their self-esteem. A significant portion of respondents indicated that their self-esteem is affected by online feedback, with 34.4% (n = 45) selecting "4" and 23.6% (n = 31) selecting "5." However, 9.2% (n = 12) of respondents strongly disagreed with this statement, and 13.7% (n = 18) disagreed. The mean score for this item was 3.5 (SD = 1.3), suggesting that while social media reactions do influence self-esteem for many, this effect varies across the sample.

Table 2
Influence of Social Media Reactions on Self-Esteem

Response Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1 (Strongly Disagree)	12	9.2%
2 (Disagree)	18	13.7%
3 (Neutral)	25	19.1%
4 (Agree)	45	34.4%
5 (Strongly Agree)	31	23.6%
Total	**131**	**100%**

Participants were asked whether they experiment with different identities or personalities online. The responses were relatively evenly distributed, with 26.7% (n = 35) agreeing and 18.3% (n = 24) strongly agreeing with the statement. A notable proportion of respondents, however, disagreed (15.3%, n = 20) or strongly disagreed (17.6%, n = 23). The mean score for this item was 3.2 (SD = 1.4), indicating that while some adolescents engage in identity exploration online, others are less inclined to do so. The average daily time spent on social media among participants was 3.7 hours (SD = 1.5). Instagram was the most frequently used platform, with 89% (n = 117) of respondents reporting regular use, followed by TikTok (76%, n = 100) and Snapchat (62%, n = 81).

To explore the relationships between key variables, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated.

A positive correlation was found between the average daily use of social media and the influence of social media reactions on self-esteem (r = 0.68, p < .001). This suggests that adolescents who spend more time on social media are more likely to report that the feedback they receive on their posts (likes, comments, etc.) influences their self-esteem. There was a moderate positive correlation between the tendency to compare oneself with others on social media and the importance of online identity (r = 0.54, p < .01). This indicates that adolescents who frequently engage in social comparison are more likely to view their online presence as a significant part of their identity.

Interestingly, no significant correlation was found between identity exploration on social media and self-esteem influence (r = 0.21, p = .09). This suggests that while some adolescents experiment with different online identities, this behavior is not necessarily linked to their self-esteem being influenced by online reactions.

Table 3
Correlations Between Key Variables

Variables	Social Media Use	Social Comparison	Online Identity	Self-Esteem Influence
Social Media Use	1	0.45**	0.36**	0.68**
Social Comparison	0.45**	1	0.54**	0.44**
Online Identity	0.36**	0.54**	1	0.33**
Self-Esteem Influence	0.68**	0.44**	0.33**	1

Note: p < .01 for all significant correlations.

Given the popularity of certain social media platforms among the participants, further analyses were conducted to determine whether platform choice influenced identity-related outcomes. Participants who primarily used Instagram (n = 117) reported higher levels of social comparison (M = 3.9, SD = 1.2) compared to those who did not frequently use the platform (M = 3.2, SD = 1.3). Instagram users also rated the importance of their online presence more highly (M = 4.1, SD = 1.0) than non-users (M = 3.4, SD = 1.2). TikTok users (n = 100) displayed higher levels of identity exploration, with a mean score of 3.6 (SD = 1.4) on the identity exploration item, compared to non-users (M = 2.9, SD = 1.3). TikTok was also associated with greater variability in self-esteem influence, with users reporting a mean score of 3.8 (SD = 1.2), compared to non-users' mean of 3.1 (SD = 1.3). Snapchat users (n = 81) showed no significant differences in terms of social comparison or identity exploration compared to non-users, but they did report slightly lower self-esteem influence from social media reactions (M = 3.3, SD = 1.2) than Instagram or TikTok users.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings from this study provide a nuanced understanding of the influence that social media usage has on identity formation among adolescents. The results indicate that social media, while offering a platform for self-expression and identity exploration, also introduces potential risks related to self-esteem and social comparison. In this section, we will interpret these findings within the context of existing literature, consider the broader implications for adolescent development, and critically evaluate both the positive and negative aspects of social media use. We will also address the limitations of the current study and propose directions for future research.

5.1 Social Comparison and its Impact on Identity

One of the most striking findings from this study is the significant relationship between social comparison on social media and the importance of online identity. Adolescents who frequently compared themselves to others were more likely to report that their online presence was an important aspect of their identity. This is consistent with social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), which suggests that individuals have an innate drive to evaluate themselves by comparing their abilities and opinions to those of others. On social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok, where idealized images and curated lifestyles are prominently displayed, this comparison often leads to a heightened awareness of one's shortcomings, particularly during the vulnerable stage of adolescence (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). Vogel et al. (2014) found similar results in their study on the effects of Facebook use, where upward social comparisons—comparing oneself to people perceived as better off—were associated with lower self-esteem. Our findings corroborate this, with adolescents who engaged in more frequent social comparisons also reporting greater importance placed on their online identity. This suggests that the process of comparing oneself to idealized versions of others can result in a stronger attachment to one's digital self, as adolescents may seek validation through their online personas. However, the reliance on these personas may further exacerbate feelings of inadequacy when the digital self does not align with offline realities (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). While the literature often focuses on the negative impacts of social comparison, some scholars argue that social media can also foster positive outcomes. For instance, downward comparisons—comparing oneself to those perceived as worse off—may enhance self-esteem and contribute to a sense of gratitude (Appel, Gerlach, & Crusius, 2016). However, given the prevalence of highly curated content on platforms like Instagram, it is more likely that adolescents engage in upward comparisons, which are more likely to harm rather than help their self-esteem (Fardouly et al., 2015).

This dynamic illustrates the dual nature of social media: while it offers opportunities for connection and self-expression, it also introduces new pathways for self-evaluation that can be harmful if not managed carefully.

5.2 The Role of Social Media in Identity Exploration

The findings of this study also highlight the role of social media as a platform for identity exploration. Adolescents in our sample reported experimenting with different personalities or styles online, a finding that aligns with previous research by Boyd (2014), who argued that social media allows adolescents to try out various identities in a relatively low-risk environment. This process of experimentation is a key aspect of adolescent identity development, as theorized by Erikson (1968). In today's digital age, social media platforms offer an expanded space for this exploration, enabling adolescents to interact with diverse groups of people, express different facets of themselves, and receive feedback from peers (Livingstone, 2008). However, there are critical perspectives on the role of social media in identity formation. Turkle (2011) argues that the fluidity of online identities can lead to a fragmented sense of self, where individuals struggle to integrate their

online personas with their offline identities. This "identity multiplicity" can result in confusion and a lack of coherence in one's sense of self, particularly for adolescents who are still in the process of forming a stable identity. Our study found no significant correlation between identity exploration on social media and the influence of social media on self-esteem, which suggests that while adolescents may engage in identity experimentation online, this behavior is not necessarily linked to how they perceive their self-worth. This finding could be interpreted in two ways: on the one hand, it could suggest that identity exploration on social media is a positive, low-risk activity that does not directly affect self-esteem; on the other hand, it could indicate that adolescents are compartmentalizing their online identities in ways that do not meaningfully impact their overall sense of self. A more critical view, presented by Goffman (1959), suggests that social media encourages adolescents to "perform" their identities for an audience, which may lead to the prioritization of external validation over authentic self-expression. The need for likes, comments, and shares can incentivize adolescents to present only the most socially desirable aspects of their identity, suppressing other parts of themselves in the process (Burrow & Rainone, 2017). This phenomenon may explain why social media reactions were found to influence self-esteem in this study: adolescents may place a disproportionate amount of value on the approval of their online audience, which can result in fluctuating self-worth depending on the feedback they receive.

5.3 The Influence of Social Media Reactions on Self-Esteem

One of the more concerning findings of this study is the positive correlation between daily social media use and the influence of social media reactions on self-esteem. Adolescents who spent more time on social media were more likely to report that the feedback they received (likes, comments, shares) influenced their self-esteem. This supports the notion that social media fosters a "validation-seeking" behavior, where adolescents gauge their self-worth based on the reactions of their online peers (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015).

Burrow and Rainone (2017) found that individuals with high levels of social media use were more likely to base their self-esteem on social media feedback, a finding that is echoed in our study. The immediate nature of feedback on social media creates a reward system that reinforces certain behaviors, such as posting content that is likely to receive likes or positive comments (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). For adolescents, who are already sensitive to peer feedback, this dynamic can create a cycle of validation-seeking behavior, where self-worth becomes increasingly tied to online interactions. However, it is important to consider the broader implications of these findings. While the immediate effects of social media validation may be positive—such as a temporary boost in self-esteem—the long-term effects could be detrimental. As highlighted by Nesi and Prinstein (2015), relying on social media for validation can result in unstable self-esteem, where adolescents experience significant fluctuations in their self-worth depending on the feedback they receive. This "contingent self-worth" is particularly problematic during adolescence, a time when individuals are still developing a stable sense of identity (Valkenburg et al., 2017).

A more optimistic perspective is offered by scholars like Livingstone (2008), who argue that social media can also be a space for positive affirmation and support. For adolescents who may struggle to find validation in their offline lives—such as those facing social isolation or marginalization—social media can provide a platform where they can connect with like-minded individuals and receive positive feedback. This form of online community-building can be particularly important for marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ+ adolescents, who may use social media to explore their identities in a supportive environment (DeHaan, Kuper, Magee, & Mustanski, 2013).

5.4 Critical Perspectives on Social Media and Identity Formation

While the findings of this study align with much of the existing literature on social media and identity formation, it is important to consider the broader cultural and societal context in which these dynamics occur. Critics like Turkle (2011) argue that the increasing reliance on digital platforms for identity exploration reflects a broader shift towards a more fragmented, disconnected society. In her book *Alone Together*, Turkle suggests that while social media offers opportunities for connection, it also diminishes the depth and authenticity of those connections, leading to a sense of isolation even in the midst of constant communication. This critique is echoed by Fuchs (2014), who argues that social media platforms, driven by profit motives, are designed to keep users engaged and continuously seeking validation. The commodification of social interactions on platforms like Instagram and TikTok incentivizes users to present themselves in ways that generate engagement, often at the expense of authenticity. Adolescents, who are particularly susceptible to peer influence, may find themselves caught in this cycle of performance and validation, with long-term consequences for their self-esteem and sense of identity. However, it is also important to recognize that social media is not inherently harmful.

As noted by Boyd (2014), these platforms offer adolescents unprecedented opportunities for self-expression, creativity, and connection. The key, therefore, may lie in how adolescents use social media, rather than in the mere fact of using it. Encouraging adolescents to engage in reflective, mindful social media use—where they are aware of the potential risks and consciously manage their online personas—could mitigate some of the negative effects observed in this study.

5.5 Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into the relationship between social media use and identity formation, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design of the study limits our ability to draw causal conclusions about the relationships between variables. Future longitudinal research could provide a clearer understanding of how social media use influences identity development over time. Additionally, the sample was relatively small (n = 131) and may not be representative of the broader adolescent population. Future research with larger, more diverse samples would allow for greater generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, while this study focused on the role of social comparison, online identity, and self-esteem, there are other aspects of social media use that warrant further exploration. For example, the role of peer pressure, cyberbullying, and the specific content adolescents are exposed to on social media could all play significant roles in shaping identity and self-esteem. Finally,

while this study focused primarily on Western social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok, future research could explore how social media use differs in non-Western cultural contexts, where the norms and values surrounding identity and self-expression may differ.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study highlights the complex and multifaceted relationship between social media use and identity formation among adolescents. While social media offers opportunities for identity exploration and connection, it also introduces risks related to social comparison and validation-seeking behavior. Adolescents who spend more time on social media are more likely to base their self-esteem on the reactions they receive, which can result in unstable self-worth. At the same time, social media provides a platform for experimentation and self-expression, which can be a positive force in identity development when used mindfully. The findings of this study underscore the need for a balanced perspective on social media: while it has the potential to both positively and negatively impact adolescent development, the effects are largely determined by how it is used. Parents, educators, and policymakers should focus on promoting healthy social media habits, encouraging adolescents to engage in reflective, mindful use of these platforms, and fostering offline opportunities for identity exploration and self-esteem building. Future research should continue to explore the long-term effects of social media on adolescent development, taking into account the diverse ways in which adolescents use these platforms across different cultural contexts.

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