

Social Media and Identity Formation – The Influence of Self-Presentation and Social Comparison

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Abstract

For today's youth, media and technology are major social elements, and they spend a substantial portion of their daily lives conversing via social media. According to Rideout (2010), youth that use the media regularly have a large number of friends, get along well with their parents, and are pleased with their schools and institutions. Those that use the media frequently also say that they get into a lot of trouble, are frequently upset or unhappy, and are frequently bored. Individuals' offline contacts with others decline as their spending on social networking sites increases, meaning that the majority of their socialising and sociability occurs in the glow of a screen. As a result, social media has the potential to influence an individual's psychological well-being, particularly among teens, as well as identity building, modifying how people see themselves and others. Without needing to meet in person, people can utilise social networking to create an identity and communicate with others. It offers both chances and obstacles for developing a consistent, stable, and meaningful sense of self. The paper elucidates the impact of social media on young people's self-presentation, social comparison, and self-esteem, as well as how it affects their identity construction. In today's technology environment, most studies on social networking sites have focused on the bad effects. However, this paper focuses on the positive sides of social media and how it aids in the formation of identity.

Keywords: Self-Presentation, Social Comparison, Self-esteem, Social networking, Identity

Introduction

Social media has become a global phenomenon and a key aspect of life and has widespread appeal among young people today, starting from online pages to mass communication networks where anybody can access any information about themselves or others within minutes. Social media allow users to connect and interact with friends, acquaintances, as well as strangers, which are web-based (and increasingly mobile) services. Examples of social networking sites are WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, and media-sharing sites such as YouTube, Clubhouse, Flickr, blogs, and other web-based communication forums. The psychological benefits of social media include more social engagement and, in certain cases, higher self-esteem as a result of updating one's own profile (Lup, Trub, & Rosenthal, 2015). Social networking sites provide a platform for teenagers to develop their

personal and social identities. Identity is the understanding of who we are, which is combined with self-awareness to form a cognitive representation of the self. In other words, both internal and external variables influence who we are and how we become who we are. On new media platforms such as the internet, the media is increasingly seen as an "expansion of everyday life and an instrument of cultural transformation". As a result, identity formation as a social concept is undergoing new and even more widespread worldwide transformations. In order to understand just how social media use influences are congruent with student identity development, it is first important to review the relevant theories. The next part discusses how self-presentation and social comparison are helpful in the formation of identity through non-empirical studies based on literature, observation, and interaction with the students.

Identity Formation: The Psychology of Adolescence

Identity is a “conscious sense of individual uniqueness” and an “unconscious striving for a continuity of experience” (Erikson, 1968), and it is attained through exploration and then commitment, a process fueled by a decrease in reliance on parents and an increase in the navigation of relationships in larger social spheres during adolescence and the transition to adulthood. Erikson’s (1968) theory of psychosocial development has eight phases, and each identifies the psychosocial crisis that is to be resolved in each stage in order to move to the next stage. In the adolescent phase, which is between the ages of thirteen and nineteen, the conflict is between identity and “role confusion.” The main developmental task in the fidelity stage is for adolescents to solidify a stable sense of identity. Coming of age, according to Erik Erikson’s psychosocial model, necessitates the creation of a cohesive and stable identity with meaning and value in society. Identity formation entails the establishment of a secure sense of self as well as the “crucial requirement for trust in oneself and others” (Erikson, 1968, p. 128). At this stage, youth have to develop an “inner sameness” that is matched to how their “sameness” is recognised by others. They try to compare themselves with others in terms of how they feel and how others see them. They’re trying to figure out who they are in the context of their surroundings; after they’ve figured out who they are, they realise that who they are is consistent across settings and that others notice it. A healthy, mature individual has established a stable, integrated identity. Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) theory consists of seven vectors and is an incremental developmental model whereby a student progresses through discrete stages such as developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, developing mature interpersonal relationships, developing purpose, and developing integrity.

Identity Development

Identity is a socially, historically, and culturally constructed concept. It encompasses how we think about ourselves and our role/part in the bigger society; identity is enacted through social interactions with family, peers, organizations, institutions, and the media, and our relationships with them. As Martin and Nakayama observed, “Identity is created in part by the self and in part by relation to group membership.”

Traditional psychology views adolescent identity formation via the lens of offline criteria. However, today’s youth are regularly exposed to intricate cognitive processes through social media. Donath and Boyd (2004) observe some of the ways that individuals reflect their social identity:

People show their connections in the physical world in a variety of ways. They have family functions, festivals, and parties in which they introduce friends who they think would like—or impress—each other. They casually mention the names of high-ranking associates in their discourse. They decorate their refrigerator with photos. Simply appearing in public with one’s associates is a display of connection. (p. 72)

Adolescents and teenagers can use social networking sites to create their personal and social identities. Martinovic et al. (2019) highlight the role of digital skills as drivers of well-being in young people. ICTs contribute to well-being through supporting informal learning, creating digital identities, increasing job competencies, and fostering meta-social abilities, among other things. Moreover, identity is constructed during the transition to adulthood, and digital abilities can play an important role in this process. Mannerstrom (2019) showed that identity formation was related to digital practises and competencies. Middaugh et al. (2017) suggest that there is a positive relationship between youth empowerment and certain uses of digital tools. In the digital age, establishing a self in online places via digital screens where they communicate their thoughts and opinions is becoming increasingly important. Identity constitutes both individual and personal discriminators (such as one’s personal history) as well as components related to one’s role in social groups, such as the way we interact with others in online communities. How we see ourselves and our role/position in the greater social system can have an impact on how we act, believe, and associate with others. Adolescents try to develop their identity and self-esteem in their interactions with friends and peers. Because online information and communication technologies have the capacity to meaningfully impact identity processes, it is important to consider the way we present ourselves (self-presentation), social comparison, and self-esteem in the formation of identity.

Adolescence and Social Networking Sites

Social networking sites are virtual communities where people can establish individual public profiles,

interact with friends and others, stay connected despite geographical distance and other barriers, and meet new people based on common interests. It is also a space for socialization. Youth are a distinct group of social network site users, having been among the first to grow up in a world dominated by communication technologies. Youth use social networking sites to create their personal and social identities as well as to mediate their interactions with friends, romantic partners, and larger groups of peers. It offers adolescents new opportunities as well as new challenges to express to the world who they are. Youth today employ technology that is both unique and comparable to that used by previous generations. It is pointed out that, as past generations have gathered in parking lots and shopping malls, teens gather in networked public spaces for a variety of purposes, including to negotiate identity, gossip, support one another, jockey for status, collaborate, share information, flirt, joke, and goof off. They go there to hang out. Social networking sites represent a new environment for people to learn different things and through which to examine adolescent development. Furthermore, adult supervision is less intense online than it is offline, allowing them to imagine or share about themselves without hesitation, as well as experiment with new ideas, behaviors, and so on. In studies of social media, psychological mechanisms such as social comparison (comparing oneself to others in either an upward or downward direction; that is, with those who are perceived to be better or worse than oneself); self-disclosure (sharing information about oneself with others); and impression management (acting to highlight positive aspects of the self and minimize characteristics that are perceived to be unattractive) have been identified, and these are associated with adolescents' behavior, both positively and negatively. As a result, Collin and Burns (2009) observed that, as a result, technology can be considered a driver of well-being, as it has an impact on the lives of young people all over the world.

Self-Presentation

Adolescents use social media for self-presentation and represent themselves online by posting images and sharing details about their lives. Online self-presentation is primarily done through social media profiles, and in addition, they update their status and share attractive and positive images through social networking platforms. Users can create a profile and graphically exhibit their social network relationships

on several social networking platforms (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). They decide what to display on their profiles for others to see. The physical detachment from audiences and the control of self-presentation make it easier to hide or fake personal characteristics. Individuals make intentional decisions to expose personal information about themselves on their profiles through photos, and their networks provide social feedback on those profile displays. The desire to produce a positive impression on others, or an impression that matches one's beliefs, is typically seen to motivate self-presentation. It is the conscious or unconscious process by which people try to influence the perception of their image, typically through social interactions. Self-presentation is a natural process that takes place in the offline world—people have a mental representation of themselves and spend psychological energy attempting to ensure that others see them in the same light. So, if people believe they are generous, for example, they will act outwardly in generous ways; they may also highlight how they are generous so that others make the same evaluation of them. Self-presentation occurs through conscious processes such as selectively sharing self-relevant information. This process is similar to what occurs online when people do not reveal all facets of their personalities to others. Self-presentation then helps youth to build their identity by externally displaying the characteristics they find more acceptable while repressing those they find disagreeable, impolite, or embarrassing.

The internet environment is ideal for youth to explore their identities and obtain feedback in quantifiable ways. Adolescents share and interact with a larger expanse of teens outside their immediate social circles by projecting their views, opinions, thoughts, and issues onto digital platforms such as profile pictures, photos, videos, memes, etc. The profile picture is the main image or photo that appears alongside the name of the presenter and is the first image that new friends see before sending a friend request. It appears next to every user's message, chat, comment, response, or "Like." The construction of identity on social networking platforms is so flexible that people can design, hide, or even alter their identity if they want. As a result, people can put their new identity to the test online by posting pertinent items on social media under their real names, adopting a pseudonym and posting as someone who has already come out, or anonymously addressing worries about the coming-out process. In these ways, the student can gather support

for the challenging intrapsychic and social processes he or she is dealing with. Boyd (2015) mentions that the ability to share pictures and exchange ideas and small talk via text messaging, blogs, profiles, and status updates is the new-age “note passing,” meaning that these methods have become ways to interject their identity. As a result, social media sites and the profiles they provide serve as a reference point for young adults to construct their social identities. They interact with their peers, who are the most essential source of information for teenagers. According to Boyd (2007), “teens obtain a sense of what types of presentations are socially acceptable by looking at other people’s profiles; other people’s profiles provide crucial indications about what to display on their profile.” (p. 10). Thus, self-presentation helps to find a socially appropriate way of presentation that helps the young in constructing their identity.

Social Comparison

According to Leon Festinger’s social comparison theory, humans have an innate desire to appropriately assess their own ideas and talents. People compare themselves to their peers when objective evaluations are unavailable. Social comparison is the basic human tendency to feel good or bad about ourselves based on how we compare ourselves with others. As a result, we are continuously evaluating ourselves and others in a variety of disciplines (for example, attractiveness, wealth, intelligence, and success). When one compares himself to people who are superior and have positive attributes, upward social comparison happens, while downward social comparison occurs when one compares himself to others who are inferior and have negative characteristics (Wills, 1981; Wood, 1989). Although upward comparison motivates people to become more like them (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997), it also makes people feel inadequate, evaluate themselves negatively, and experience negative affect (Marsh & Parker, 1984; Morse & Gergen, 1970; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & LaPrelle, 1985). However, while downward comparison can occasionally make people feel bad because it shows how things could be worse (Aspin-wall, 1997), it more commonly leads to gains in effect and self-evaluation (Wills, 1981).

In “offline” settings, social comparisons have traditionally focused on in-person interactions with intimate friends, co-workers, and family. Festinger (1954) argued that social networking sites lead many people to self-evaluations and make social comparisons between themselves and others based on social classes,

social roles, beauty, popularity, wealth accumulation, and other social functions. People who spend more time on social media read other people’s profiles, compare themselves to others, and begin to envy particular people they believe are better off than they are. Walther and colleagues argue that most people use Facebook to know what is going on or happening in the lives of other people and judge others based on the cues found on their profiles (Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008). These people compare themselves to others who are considered high. As a result, they start feeling inferior, less privileged, and ungrateful. Individuals’ self-esteem is directly affected by these negative feelings. People’s lives are made worse by social comparisons made on social networking sites like Facebook, which promotes people’s negative well-being (Steers, Wickham, & Acitelli, 2014). As a result, people evaluate themselves poorly. People who use Facebook commonly assume that other users are happier and more successful, according to Chou and Edge (2012), especially when they do not know them well in person. So, when people compare their real-life offline selves to others’ idealised online selves, it can be harmful to their well-being and self-evaluation. Positive self-evaluation leads to a positive sense of self and is more desirable for identity formation.

Self-Esteem

People at various stages of life face a variety of situations, challenges, and environments, and young people have a critical need to maintain and/or achieve self-esteem in order to react to and face these situations and events. Coopersmith (1967) defines self-esteem as “the evaluation which the individual makes and customarily maintains with regard to himself: it expresses the attitude of approval or disapproval and indicates the extent to which the individual believes himself to be capable, significant, successful, and worthy.” According to Heatherton and Wyand (2003), self-esteem is the evaluative emotional component of the self-concept. Moreover, self-esteem can be both a relatively stable attribute that develops over time and a fluid state that changes in response to daily events and contexts (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). The emergence and growth of social networking sites have become a key part of people’s lives, especially the lives of the youth. They use social media to develop relationships, interact with people in any part of the world, and share, learn, and gain knowledge and information. The views, opinions and feedbacks of

others (whether friends or the general public) have a significant impact on their self-esteem. According to Chen & Lee (2013), social networking sites help a person to compare themselves with others, which increase the psychological distress of individuals and, as a result, lowers their overall level of self-esteem. People's self-evaluation and self-esteem may be negatively impacted by chronic or occasional exposure to upward comparisons on social networking sites. However, social media interactions that gave teenagers a sense of closeness and support had a favourable impact on self-esteem. Also, the act of creating a socially appealing self-presentation is reinforced by improvements in mood and self-esteem as well as social approval. Furthermore, if teenagers felt a sense of closeness and when people use Facebook for positive self-presentation, it can boost subjective well-being in some areas (Kim & Lee, 2011). Additionally, he found that positive self-presentation, selecting only socially desirable images to share on one's social network page, was directly positively correlated with subjective well-being because it helps people affirm positive views of them. Thus, self-presentational considerations as well as self-affirmation drive the building of a positive Facebook page, highlighting positive elements of the self and enhancing self-esteem (Toma, 2013).

During interaction with adolescents, they feel that when they introduce themselves to peers or friends in person, that is, in a face-to-face setting, they feel nervous and might cause uncomfortable or apprehensive sensations. When they try to expose themselves online and build relationships, they feel at ease, and being online helps to overcome these uneasy sensations. In face-to-face conversation, body language plays a major role in expressing emotions and communicating more than verbally to each other. When they are online, they are less concerned about

how others view them and, as a result, are less hesitant to initiate contact or introduce themselves, and they expose or express themselves in a socially acceptable manner. In a nutshell, networking allows young people to have more control over their self-presentation and relationship initiation when compared to face-to-face contact. So, social networking sites help people keep their sense of self-worth by letting them express themselves and putting an emphasis on their relationships with friends and family. Hillier agrees that online social media technologies can help these teens feel less lonely and more confident by improving their chances of finding like-minded peers. Therefore, increased social capital (resources accessed through one's social relationships), safe identity exploration, social support, and more opportunities for self-disclosure enhance their self-esteem. All of these processes are necessary for healthy development and identity formation.

Conclusion

Social media helps us to connect, interact, present ourselves, and engage in other activities that are important for identity formation. Social media, an online arena for social behaviours such as self-presentation and social comparison, may have both positive and negative effects on users' moods and mental health. It is a platform for common human behavior, and it makes tools for self-presentation and targets for social comparison more widely available than ever before. Now, in the social media culture, it's a competition to manage one's online image and compare oneself to others. People are conscious of who is viewing their online constructions, and thus, they actively construct the ideal self-formation in line with how they want to be perceived. Thus, with the help of social media, youth evaluate themselves positively, and the positive/healthy self-esteem lays a strong base for identity formation.

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