

Digital Identities: Adolescents' Construction of Identity Influenced by Modern Trends of Social Media



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Abstract

The vast majority of researchers have looked into how people use social media, but they have ignored the impact it has on people's ability to regulate their sense of identity and connectedness to others, and their perceptions. The rapid rise in the use of social media is something that, depending on one's perspective, either poses a challenge or presents an opportunity for today's younger generations. With 400 adolescents in India, the study here uses the Aspects of Identity (*AIQ-IV*) questionnaire to understand the impact caused by social media usage. Multiple linear regression suggests the significant role of social media usage among the adolescents on the creation of four aspects of identity. The study provides implications based on the results.

Keywords – Adolescents; Social; Media; Self; Identity

1. Introduction

Individuals acquire their attitudes by observing, analysing, and monitoring their own behaviour and understanding what attitudes must have contributed to it, according to the Self-Perception Theory developed by psychologist Daryl Bem (Woosnam, et al., 2018). In this theory, individuals grow their attitudes through time. Studies have shown that adolescents' opinions about concepts, physical attractiveness, weight dissatisfaction, and beauty are correlated with adolescents' usage of social media and the frequency with which they are exposed to it. In addition, Vukovic and colleagues investigate how adolescents' use of social media is related to issues concerning their own sense of self-worth and their bodies. Gallinari, (2017) asserts that "Social Media has a considerable influence on one's Self-Perception." Outward perception, inner perception, and the capacity for self-observation and self-evaluation are the three primary components that comprise self-perception. The ability to react, manage, and otherwise regulate one's emotions in response to an emotional event, circumstance, or experience is referred to as emotional regulation (Bonanno & Burton, 2013). Throughout the course of their lives, people are likely to feel a wide range of emotions, including joy, sadness, rage, envy, pleasure, and enthusiasm, amongst others. Emotional regulation refers, at its core, to a person's response to an emotionally charged situation as well as the ways in which they are able to keep their own feelings in check. In addition to this, it exerts control over one's cognitive process, ensuring that such thoughts accurately represent daily behaviour (Liao, et al., 2021). The same set of circumstances might elicit very diverse responses from different people. Numerous studies have found that today's young people, particularly adolescents, have difficulty keeping their feelings under control, demonstrate a

great deal of emotional instability, and virtually invariably show negative feelings. Young teenagers in today's society frequently display surprising outbursts of rage, erratic mood swings, and consistent alterations in their emotions, all of which frequently lead to irrational behaviours on their part (Mukerjee, et al., 2022). One of the causes that is being pointed the finger at is the rise in the amount of time that people spend on social media, which is also known as an increase in screen time. This causes the release of hormones that are inherently negative, which can lead to people unknowingly hurting themselves, which is another way to explain emotional regulation.

A sense of belonging to a social relationship or network is an important component of social connectedness, which can be defined as the state of being socially linked (Allen, et al., 2021). One example of this type of community or network is one that connects people from all over the world to one another in order to provide those people a sense of belonging within a community and to alleviate any feelings of alienation they may be experiencing. It was discovered that a sense of being socially connected is a more accurate way to express this particular form of belongingness than any other term. It is essential to conduct more and more research in the field in order to strike a balance between your current and ideal usage of social media. This is because the current time involves investing a significant amount of one's daily life in social media. In order to strike this balance, one must conduct more and more research in the field. As a result, it is very necessary to approach the matter with objectivity in order to achieve a state of equilibrium. Due to the dynamic nature of this study on social media, the gulf between the two camps will narrow, and the focus will shift to the grey area. It will provide a strong support to the adolescents and

young adults as well as the parents, instructors, and elders, assisting in maintaining and increasing adaptability in a positive manner. After reviewing the results of past studies and the relevant literature, one can see that there are many different fields in which researchers are interested in locating or identifying the various positives and negatives. This research will make an effort to take an all-encompassing stance with regard to the aspects of social media platforms that may be disregarded and those that can be recognised as having good and beneficial connotations.

There is a need for an exploration that gives time to sit and introspect on how social media is impacting one's identity, issues related, dealing with emotional upsurge and perceiving one in the right light, by demystifying the myths, and bridging the gap through introspection, which in most studies are not addressed. Therefore, finding the solutions of the problems of others and instructing the others about the do's and the don'ts. Studies on the rural population's use of social media make up a relatively small portion of the overall body of research on this topic. It is essential to get research going that focuses on the rural population, especially in India, because the rural population is such an important component of society there. There is research that concentrates on the major cities in India, but the number of studies conducted in rural parts of states like Rajasthan is practically non-existent. There are not nearly enough studies that concentrate solely on the youth of today's society, which is another noteworthy gap that was discovered. They are either categorised as a cohort of young adults or as a group of children, however there are a comparatively small number of research that focus specifically on adolescents.

The vast majority of researchers have looked into how people use social media, but they have ignored the impact it has on people's ability to regulate their sense of identity and connectedness to others, and their perceptions. The rapid rise in the use of social media is something that, depending on one's perspective, either poses a challenge or presents an opportunity for today's younger generations. The aforementioned problems could be used to assist in the generation of interesting insights regarding the topic.

Hence, the study here estimates the following research question for better understanding about social media usage and development of adolescent's identity:

How does social media usage impact the creation of identity of an adolescent?

2. Review of Literature

Hernández-Serrano et al., (2022), analyses the self-presentation practices and the profiles on TikTok

and Instagram of teenagers from Spain. The results of the study highlighted the fact that self-presentation practices of adolescence were related to three different factors, namely: image control, social validation, and authenticity. An important result of the study had been that social feedback had a lesser influence on self-presentation practices as it was seen that the number of likes or followers was not so important for most adolescents. Rather, adolescents were increasingly guided by an innovative predisposition of truthfulness. Okabe-Miyamoto et al., (2021), investigated if changes in the general sense of social connection differed according to the size and makeup of the household. Undergraduates in Canada and adults mostly from the United States and the United Kingdom reported their perceived social connection once before and once during the epidemic in two pre-registered investigations. Living with a spouse strongly and specifically buffered changes in social connection throughout the early stages of the pandemic in both investigations. Sebre & Miltuze, (2021), examined adaptive and maladaptive cognitions associated with digital social media activity of adolescents and to establish its interrelationship with identity development. The authors surveyed 359 adolescents Media Activity using Form—Youth Self-Report and the Identity Style Inventory. The results report that social media acts as a medium for identity development for Adolescents. The excessive engagement with social media facilitates the identity uncertainty and diffuse-avoidant processing style. Smith et al., (2021), made an effort to comprehend how this technology affects people's psychosocial development. More pertinent to know is not whether kids who use social media feel more alone and isolated or whether it creates new opportunities for them to feel connected and like they belong, but rather under what conditions and to whom these effects happen. Depending on how it is used, social media technology can both hinder and enhance young people's feeling of social well-being. Torrijos-Fincias et al., (2021), reports that the permanent connectivity of adolescents to the internet has raised a greater self-perceived risk. The phenomenon of hyperconnectivity in adolescents' lives was investigated through a focus group based qualitative study with a sample size of 130 adolescents. Many factors like "Ease of access", "freedom of movement", and "the provision of personal" and "social features" were identified as adhesive agents which keeps the new generation close to social media sites. Harahap and Sitepu, (2019), conducted a research that aimed at finding the trends related to social media usage of teenagers in Medan for fulfilling their needs for information as well as to know their social media habits. The study emphasized on finding the various risks that were faced by teenagers online while looking for

information through social media platforms. The study revealed that the teenagers in Medan used social media in a balanced manner for both fulfilling their educational needs as well as for fulfilling their informational and entertainment needs. However, in this regard several online risks that they generally experience include being exposed to sexual photos and videos, people talking about or sharing their experiences of drug intake on various websites as well as receiving messages that scare them. Apart from these, contact risks that have generally experienced include providing private information to people they have known online only, and being bullied online to name a few. Yang et al., (2018), conducted a short term longitudinal survey to understand the role of social media in causing identity distress among college freshmen at a state university in the USA. The authors examined a dual path model comparing two social comparison factors viz. “comparison of ability” and “comparison of opinion” through social media platforms to evaluate the impact on two introspective processes viz. Reflection and rumination. The results clearly depicted a positive association of social media usage on concurrent rumination and reflection thereby predicting identity distress at varying levels. However, the study highlighted that different social media platforms offer different types of social comparisons having varying degrees. Eleuteri et al., (2017), in a review has highlighted the impact of social media in terms of identity, sexuality, relationships and risky behaviors of adolescents. The review throws light on the fact that young adolescents in the contemporary world are proactively developing their identity and relationships through social networking sites. Even relationships of a sexual nature have tremendously increased through online platforms which has made a drastic influence on the overall identity of adolescents. Mirkin, (2016), created “The Social Media Literacy Program (SMLP)” which was evaluated anticipating that adolescent participants in the program are regular users of social media and thereby exploring many facets of their identity via these platforms. The study reported that participants depicted increased self-esteem with reduced anxiety symptoms. This in turn helped them cope up with issues like low self-esteem and potentially reduce negative mental health outcomes,

enabling them to develop and establish a solid identity which helps them to transpire into young adulthood.

3. Research Methodology

The study here takes a full-fledged quantitative approach to derive the answers to the research question established here. The main mode of data for utilising the answers would be primary sources comprising adolescents belonging to the each group of 14 to 18 years studying in various schools across India. The use of a structured questionnaire for data collection provides the scope for quantification of data. The aspect of identity questionnaire attempts to understand the attribute of the individuals themselves when they are creating a definition about oneself. The Aspects of Identity Questionnaire (AIQ – IV) attempts to cover the identity orientation across personal, relational, social and collective identity orientation. The use of this scale gives a detailed idea about the individuals thinking about themselves and can cause a significant impact on their behaviour in the current social media scenario. Social media usage is measured through a similar scoring scale consisting of 11 items. The collected datasets include 400 competent sets of responses that would be analysed through different statistical tools.

4. Data Analysis

The *Aspects of Identity Questionnaire (AIQ – IV)* questionnaire used here in the study is the one on identity and its various aspects provided by (Cheek & Briggs, 2013). The scale here has a set of 45 items which is in a 5 Point Likert scale. The aspect of identity questionnaire attempts to understand the attribute of the individuals themselves when they are creating a definition about oneself. The scale attempts to cover the identity orientation across personal, relational, social and collective identity orientation. In the 45 items, there are 10 items which are not used in either of the four above mentioned categories and considers these items to form special items not covered in any of the aspects. These items would be investigated as a part of the mean score analysis but will not be included in the composition of the four variables representing the identity of the adolescents.

Table 1 Descriptives Self-Identity

Statements	N	Mean	Median	SD
The things I own, my possessions	400	3.00	3.00	1.001
My personal values and moral standards	400	3.60	3.50	0.664
My popularity with other people	400	2.60	3.00	0.491
Being a part of the many generations of my family	400	3.10	3.00	0.701
My dreams and imagination	400	3.00	3.00	0.633

Statements	N	Mean	Median	SD
The ways in which other people react to what I say and do	400	2.60	3.00	0.491
My race or ethnic background	400	3.20	3.00	0.749
My personal goals and hopes for the future	400	3.00	3.00	0.633
My physical appearance: my height, my weight, and the shape of	400	3.20	3.00	0.749
My religion	400	3.00	3.00	0.633
My emotions and feelings	400	3.00	3.00	1.001
My reputation, what others think of me	400	3.60	3.50	0.664
Places where I live or where I was raised	400	2.60	3.00	0.491
My thoughts and ideas	400	3.00	3.00	1.001
My attractiveness to other people	400	3.60	3.50	0.664
My age, belonging to my age group or being part of my generation	400	2.60	3.00	0.491
My gestures and mannerisms, the impression I make on others	400	3.20	3.00	0.749
The ways I deal with my fears and anxieties	400	3.00	3.00	0.633
My sex, being a male or a female	400	3.20	3.00	0.749
My social behavior, such as the way I act when meeting people	400	3.00	3.00	0.633
My feeling of being a unique person, being distinct from others	400	3.00	3.00	1.001
My relationships with the people I feel close to	400	2.60	3.00	0.491
My social class, the economic group I belong to whether lower, middle, or upper class	400	3.20	3.00	0.749
My feeling of belonging to my community	400	3.00	3.00	0.633
Knowing that I continue to be essentially the same inside even though life involves many external changes	400	3.20	3.00	0.749
Being a good friend to those I really care about	400	3.00	3.00	0.633
My self-knowledge, my ideas about what kind of person I really am	400	3.00	3.00	1.001
My commitment to being a concerned relationship partner	400	3.60	3.50	0.664
My feeling of pride in my country, being proud to be a citizen	400	2.60	3.00	0.491
My physical abilities, being coordinated and good at athletic activities	400	3.00	3.00	1.001
Sharing significant experiences with my close friends	400	3.60	3.50	0.664
My personal self-evaluation, the private opinion I have of myself	400	2.60	3.00	0.491
Being a sports fan, identifying with a sports team	400	3.20	3.00	0.749
Having mutually satisfying personal relationships	400	3.00	3.00	0.633
Connecting on an intimate level with another person	400	3.20	3.00	0.749
My occupational choice and career plans	400	3.00	3.00	0.633
Developing caring relationships with others	400	3.70	3.50	1.006
My commitments on political issues or my political activities	400	2.90	3.00	0.701
My desire to understand the true thoughts and feelings of my best friend or romantic partner	400	3.00	3.00	0.633
My academic ability and performance, such as the grades I earn and comments I get from teachers	400	3.70	3.50	1.006
Having close bonds with other people	400	3.00	3.00	1.001
My language, such as my regional accent or dialect or a second language that I know	400	3.60	3.50	0.664
My feeling of connectedness with those I am close to	400	2.60	3.00	0.491
My role of being a student in college	400	3.20	3.00	0.749
My sexual orientation, whether heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual	400	3.00	3.00	0.633

The above 45 items mostly range in mean scores around 3 to 3.5. The highest score goes up to 3.70 and shows that the adolescents have higher scores of identity towards elements such as caring relationship with others, their regional language, commitment to a relationship partner along with personal values and their moral standards. The lowest scores shows that adolescents do not relate much to identity aspects such as their popularity, the way people react to them, belongingness to their age

groups, personal evaluation and feeling connected to the ones close to them. These scores show that the adolescents have a lower sense of belongingness and relate highly to true relationships based on their moral and personal grounds.

In order to calculate the individual scores of each of the items, the summation of the responses against each of the items representing the four identity categories are done.

Table 2 Descriptives of Self-Identity Factors

	N	Mean	Median	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Personal Identity Orientation	400	30.4	30.5	5.72	21.0	42.0
Relational Identity Orientation	400	31.3	31.0	3.88	24.0	36.0
Social Identity Orientation	400	21.8	21.0	3.06	16.0	27.0
Collective Identity Orientation	400	21.0	20.5	2.37	17.0	26.0

The analysis of the scores for each of the individual elements shows that the minimum score is the lowest for social identity orientation followed by collective identity orientation. In case of the maximum score, with 42, personal identity orientation scores the highest followed by relational identity of orientation. The difference between the highest and lowest score is the minimum for relational identity and highest for collective identity. This analysis shows that in terms of adolescents, their identity aspect is the highest in terms of relational identity and personal identity. It states that in terms of the personal goals and aspirations of the adolescents, they identify themselves highly. Similarly with respect to relationships whether it is friends or family, their identification levels are high in terms of it. It is essential to state that in terms of the social and collective aspects such as being a part of the larger ethnic group etc. the identification levels are lower.

The objective in the study is to associate the use of social media with the aspects of identity of the

adolescents. The use of social media can result in several ups and downs due to its dynamic nature and can often lead to adolescents facing emotional difficulties.

The estimation of social media usage among adolescents is measured using an 11 item scale. It involves items in 5 Point Likert Type Scale that measures aspects such as "Using social media is my daily habit" and "I often use social media to relax in habit". The mean score estimates of the items show the highest score of 3.90 for three items that represent using it before sleeping, using it to relax and being satisfied with the relationship created with friends through social media.

Overall, the scores suggest that using social media has become more of a habit among adolescents and they tend to use social media platforms when they are bored or wish to spend time.

To interpret the relationship between the aspects of identity generated among the adolescents and their social media usage behaviour, multiple linear regression is conducted below.

Table 3 Correlation Matrix

		Personal Identity Orientation	Relational Identity Orientation	Social Identity Orientation	Collective Identity Orientation
Social Media Usage	Pearson's r	-0.308	-0.162	-0.008	-0.029
	p-value	< .001	0.001	0.875	0.556

Firstly, the correlation matrix of social media usage with the four components of emotional regulation of

adolescents shows that there is statistically significant correlation only among two components.

For social identity and collective identity, the p-value is more than 0.05 and shows that they do not correlate to social media usage. On the other hand both personal and relational identity correlate significantly but negatively. Moreover, a medium to

weak correlation is observed among the two factors with social media usage. To understand further, the respective multiple linear regression models each with personal identity and relational identity as the dependent variables is shown below.

Table 4 Model Fit Measures Personal Identity Orientation

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Overall Model Test			
				F	df1	df2	p
1	0.308	0.0951	0.0928	41.8	1	398	<.001

Table 5 Model Coefficients - Personal Identity Orientation

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	62.35	4.95	12.60	<.001
Social Media Usage	-9.01	1.39	-6.47	<.001

Tables 4 & 5 show the model with the level of significance at 0.05 with adjusted R² of 0.0928 and F statistic at 41.8. The estimate stands at -9.01 with error levels of 1.39 and t-value against the independent variable at -6.47.

For personal identity orientation, the model is significant with p-value of less than 0.05. the

adjusted R² stands at 0.0928 showing a variance of 9.28% with one unit change in social media usage. The model coefficient show that the impact caused by social media usage on personal identity orientation is however negative in nature.

Table 6 Model Fit Measures Relational Identity Orientation

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Overall Model Test			
				F	df1	df2	p

Table 7 Model Coefficients - Relational Identity Orientation

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	42.67	3.482	12.26	<.001
Social Media Usage	-3.21	0.981	-3.27	0.001

Table 6 & 7 shows the model with the level of significance at 0.05 with adjusted R² of 0.0237 and F statistic at 10.7. The estimate stands at -3.21 with error levels of 0.981 and t-value against the independent variable at -3.27.

Similarly for relational identity, the model is significant with p-value of less than 0.05. the adjusted R² stands at 0.0237 showing a variance of 2.237% with one unit change in social media usage. The model coefficient show that the impact caused by social media usage on relational identity orientation is however negative in nature. Comparing the two it can be established that the impact of social media use is more on personal identity and as it effects negatively, the use of social media among adolescents at a higher rate can impact in these two aspects of emotional regulation

significantly. Therefore, **objective** is fulfilled in this section of the study.

5. Discussion

In the aspect identity questionnaire, the attempt has been to go through a total of 45 items to investigate the adolescents' overview of their self-identity. The recognition of one's own identity can be critical as it consists of different elements and hence this scale is effective in pointing out to each of them. The analysis of the scores for each of the individual elements shows that the minimum score is the lowest for social identity orientation followed by collective identity orientation. This reveals that the adolescents do not highly consider their identity of self in relation with what the larger social group thinks about them. This indicates that the

development of an identity is influenced highly by their personal orientation and relationship identity. This is a good sign as it shows a state of control on their self-identity generation since it is largely dependent on their own perception or with their closest one rather than others in their outer circle. However, the need to increase their identity perception based on their own evaluation would be required in the upcoming time so that close relations like family and friends do not influence them largely in this process. It is in accordance with the studies (Branje et al., 2021; Lannegrand-Willems et al., 2018; Pulkkinen & Rönkä, 1994) which also acknowledges the presence of a similar pattern.

The nature of social media interactions can contribute to feelings of isolation, rather than connection, despite the constant engagement with peers. As the level of interactions do not involve any deep relation, there might be overlooking of conversations and emotions resulting in a difficult position. The pressure to maintain a certain image online, coupled with the fear of missing out (FOMO) and the comparison culture perpetuated by social media, can exceed feelings of inadequacy and loneliness. Adolescents may become more focused on managing their online identities and seeking validation through virtual interactions, which can detract from the time and energy needed to cultivate meaningful relationships offline. Their inclination towards developing an entourage in the online world can take them away from the potential of real world friendships and bonds. The data might show that although adolescents report having numerous online connections, these do not translate into the same level of emotional support or intimacy found in face-to-face interactions. While social media provides a platform for connection, it often lacks the substantive qualities necessary for fostering true social connectedness, leading to a paradox where increased online activity coincides with decreased real-world social fulfillment. Moreover, during their online conversations as well, there is a very little expression of themselves which also restricts such bonds into moving to the next level of identity formulation. This is a prime issue at the present time and needs to be intervened by effective methods to stop adolescents from increasing their social connectedness levels. Specific social media platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter), exhibit distinct usage patterns between male and female adolescents. These behaviours can influence their identity formation levels. For instance, research has shown that female adolescents are more likely to use platforms like Instagram and TikTok, where the focus is on visual content and self-presentation (Dotson, 2022). These platforms encourage users to curate their online personas through images and videos, which can

intensify the pressure on girls to conform to societal standards of beauty and popularity. This can have a significant impact on their identity formation, as they may derive a sense of self-worth from the validation they receive in the form of likes, comments, and followers. These regulate the levels of confidence and worth that they subject themselves towards. It can have a direct impact on how they perceive themselves and post the adolescent stage how they move towards the development of identity. The connection they feel with others is often based on superficial interactions, which can lead to a vulnerable sense of social connectedness that is contingent on maintaining a certain online image. Overall, the creation of online personas due to the preference of the female adolescents towards such content on the social platform can have an influence on their overall mental well-being in the growing years.

Such instances of hindrance in creation of aspects of identity can be significant in the lives of adolescents and they must be effectively managed for a better future.

6. Conclusion

Social media plays a significant role in shaping the identity of adolescents. It provides a platform for self-expression and allows for the creation of a virtual identity that may be different from their offline self. Adolescents use social media to explore their interests, values, and relationships, and to receive feedback and validation from others. This feedback can positively impact their self-esteem and sense of belonging, but it can also result in negative comparison and feelings of low self-worth. In addition, the pressure that comes with presenting a pristine picture on social media can contribute to feelings of stress and worry. It is crucial for teenagers to establish a strong sense of self that is not exclusively dependent on the validation they receive online while using social media. It is also necessary for adolescents to be careful of their use of social media to ensure the better creation of their identity. Future studies can investigate the association between the two in a qualitative format covering the intricate areas of difficulty.

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