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The effect of social media in identity formation in adolescence

Ayushi Agarwal *

University of Manchester, England, United Kingdom.

Abstract

This article explores the effects of social media networking sites on identity formation and self- presentation among adolescence. It analyses the positive and negative consequences of social media use on formation of a unique, authentic and coherent identity. Effects such as self – exploration, community building, networking, learning of new skills are some of the many positive effects that have been explored. Nonetheless, scientific evidence indicating negative effects such as decreased self- worth, social comparison, depleting self – concept, identity confusion, augmenting depression and anxiety outweigh the positive consequences of use. This literature does not vindicate a positive or negative effect of social media as that might present a skewed view.

Keywords: Social Media; Adolescence; Identity Formation; Self- Esteem; Self-Presentation

1. Introduction

From the early days of face-to-face social interactions to the immersive social media of the present, an idea that has always interested psychologists is identity formation in adolescents and the factors which influence it. According to Erikson, adolescence is a period where one is presumed to form a coherent and unique identity (Erikson,1950, as cited in Singelman & Rider, 2017). Identity can be defined as a stable sense of self that is influenced by an amalgam of memories, experiences, relationships, and values. Adolescence is a very crucial juncture between childhood and youth. It is an age group typically ranging from 10-19 years. Due to the rampant spread and hackneyed use of social media especially by adolescents, it has become necessary to study its impact on identity formation (Gündüz, 2017; Lenhart, 2015, Wood et al.,2016). Social media is a network of technology that allows people to connect with others, upload status and posts, like and comment on the pictures, videos and opinions of others. It has a profound impact on the identity exploration, experimentation, emotional experiences, intimacy, social skills, well-being and mental health of adolescents. The processes of self-presentation and self-disclosure that adolescents engage in on social media contribute to their identity construction (Michikyan & Surárez-Orozco, 2016; Subramaniam & Smahel, 2011). While the benefits of social media use are not trivial, the emotional, psychological, social and physical concerns that it prompts in adolescents cannot be neglected. This essay argues that there are protracted effects of social media on the identity development in adolescents. Additionally, it also reasons that the negative consequences of social media seem to outweigh the positives.

Distinguished developmental psychologists like Piaget, Erikson and Marcia have emphasized exploration as the key to forming a secure identity. Social media sites offer the opportunity to adolescents to explore their identity and experiment with it. Exposure to others helps us build our sense of self. As the adolescents face emotional fluctuations due to confusion regarding developing a sense of identity, they often turn to their peers for advice through social media platforms and make meaning of their thoughts and experiences (de Vries et al., 2015; Koutamanis et al., 2015). Moreover, the digital identities created by adolescents (called 'profiles' on social media) are usually self-flattering and constructed to generate 'likes' and 'comments.' These are in turn viewed as 'social currency' and a form of feedback

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from their peers. (Madden et al., 2013; Pütten et al., 2019). Valkenburg and Peter (2012) in their meta-analysis observe that the feedback one receives from others gets assorted to the sense of self.

For adolescents, the escalated use of social media transpires along with exploration and formation of identity, sexuality, moral consciousness etc. Hence the impact of social media on adolescents and their identity genesis is enormous. In the context of Marcia's theory of identity statuses (Marcia, 1980, as sited in Singelman & Rider, 2017), it can be inferred that in the case of foreclosed identity, adolescents who had earlier committed to an identity (due to parental or societal pressure to conform etc.) might be able to discover their own inherent identity through social media. Secondly, adolescents in a diffused identity state who are low on commitment and have not explored much about themselves might be influenced more easily on such platforms. For adolescents in the moratorium state, social media is like a haven where they are free to experiment and discover themselves. Lastly, adolescents in the identity achievement state, through the self-presentation and self-disclosure on social media sites might reinforce their identity. Moreover, social media can be used in a plethora of positive ways such as communicating with like-minded people, interacting with friends, spreading awareness, generating support, learning new skills etc. (Allen et al.,2014; O'Keeffe, 2011). But it can also be used in fatalistic manners which include cyberbullying, the spread of misleading information, scaremongering, exacerbation of the pre-existing disorders, the spread of 'clout culture', strengthening the need to seek validation etc. (Wood et al., 2015). Some disturbing uses of social media are the formation of "Pro-ana" groups. These are groups that teach people with anorexia nervosa how to lose weight and reinstall the need to do so in them. (Teufel et al. 2013). There are some self-injury guides that encourage self-harm and mutilation as discovered by Seko et al. (2015). Exposure to information like this at such a vulnerable time can have a major negative impact on the identity of the adolescent and cause them to form low self-esteem, negative self-conception, low self-efficacy, feelings of inferiority and worthlessness.

The more recent studies such as that by Fox and Moreland (2015) and Kross et al. (2013) suggest that the previous research might have underestimated the negative impact that social media has on adolescents and their sense of self. It is not just the use of social media to interact with others that is affecting the development of adolescents, but also the relationship and the interaction that adolescents have with the social media sites. (e.g., addiction). The use of social media in this generation of the "digital natives" is so profound and intense that a study by Steeves (2014, as cited in Wood et al., 2016) found that 39% of adolescence sleep with their phones. Bhargava and Velasquez (2021) attributed such behaviour to the attention economy model, which is the base for the formation of social media sites.

These sites are designed to catch people's attention for longer and make them addicted. Besides, it is rather alarming to think that people behind these technologies, by controlling the algorithm of these sites control the type of information one is exposed to and consequently guide the thoughts, emotions and choices of so many people, which in turn carve out their identity.

The importance and use of social media is heightened during adolescence as peer interaction and connections become crucial (Bukowski et al. 2011; Rubin et al. 2006). This boundless exposure to the "filtered" images and lives of peers makes one question their worth. This is mainly upward social comparisons that makes one feel inferior (Festinger, 1954, as cited in Jelenchick et al., 2013). These comparisons and peer reviews are important for self-evaluation and work as the building blocks of selfesteem. A low sense of self-esteem can trigger many mental health conditions which can eventually lead to distorted impressions of identity. For example, someone with depression might falsely believe that they are 'worthless' and might form a negative sense of identity. A riveting study by Jelenchick et al. (2013) suggested a term called "Facebook Depression" which can be defined as depression induced by Facebook use. Furthermore, Banjanin et al. (2015), through empirical evidence stated that there is a positive correlation between social media use and depression. Moreno et al. (2011) found a link between the use of social media and depression and Egan and Moreno (2011) found a correlation between social media and stress. Shaw et al. (2015) found that frequent use of social media to be associated with social anxiety.

Moving on, it can be stated that identity is explicit. It is who we think we are. Thus, when we disclose our identity, we reiterate our sense of self and strengthen our identity. There are other factors that might affect the type of role that social media can play on identity formation in adolescents such as individual differences and the personality of the individual. For example, an extraverted individual might engage more in self-disclosure activities (like posting stories, opinions, comments etc.) and introverted people might use social media for social compensation. Hence social media might reinforce and solidify the personality characteristics that one possessed before. Kraut et al. (2002) and Van den Eijnden et al. (2008) suggested that the effect of social media can be understood as the 'rich-get-richer' and the 'poor-get-poorer'. This means that adolescents with poor mental health have further negative effects on their well-being because of social media and individuals with secure mental wellbeing are positively affected further. However, this might be an oversimplification and such generalisations should not be made without proper empirical evidence. In addition, some studies also show differences within adolescents based on their age and suggests that there are sub-

stages of identity formation and development even within the age group of adolescence which should be addressed more. For example, Bukowski et al. (2011) and Moreau et al. (2012) stated that those aged between 10-15 years of age are more conscious and cannot do with uncomplimentary images of themselves on social media sites, but the youth aged between 16-19 years have arguably developed a more stable sense of identity and on an average do not mind such pictures until they can be traced and identified in them.

A major limitation of most of the studies on this research question is that they are providing a correlation and not causality. Additionally, most of the studies are limited to the use of Facebook and some other social media giants, but nowadays the types of social media have become very diverse, spanning from Snapchat, which is more of a one-to-one secretive platform to Twitter, which can be seen as an opinion broadcasting hub. The properties of the different platforms might have a varied effect on individuals who use them and their identity. This is a relatively untouched part of the study and needs to be emphasized on. Furthermore, the 'Hawthorne effect' elucidates how one might alter their behaviour when they are aware that they are being watched. So, the behaviours seen online might not correlate to the real behaviours of the adolescents (Spencer & Mahtani, 2017). Therefore, many studies that are based on the behaviours manifested by adolescents online might be biased and not very valid. Moreover, most of these studies view adolescents as passive recipients of social media. But that's not entirely true and is more of a lopsided view of the topic.

2. Conclusion

In conclusion, social media plays a salient role in the process of identity formation in adolescents. It accelerates a sense of autonomy, helps in testing different forms of self, getting peer feedback, provides opportunities to explore different opinions, morals, views and reinvigorates a sense of self. This essay does not in the slightest state that social media is a good or bad digital tool. But in the context of identity construction in adolescents, it infers that the opportunities provided by social media for identity formation do not come without underlying risks that are exorbitant to ignore. Nonetheless, there is a need for more nuanced and regular research to keep up with the rapidly evolving social media sites. Yet present studies do provide critical insights and propositions that future research can extend.

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