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THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON YOUTH IDENTITY AND BEHAVIOUR

Tayyaba Fatima

BS, Department Islamic Studies, The Cosmic Degree College (For Women) ,University of Okara

ABSTRACT

Social media has become an influential part of young people's daily lives, shaping how they communicate, express themselves, develop relationships, and understand their identities. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube provide opportunities for young people to explore personal interests, share opinions, participate in social discussions, and connect with diverse communities. However, social media can also expose youth to unrealistic lifestyles, social comparison, cyberbullying, peer pressure, and misleading information, which may influence their attitudes, emotional wellbeing, and behavioural choices. Research suggests that the relationship between social media use and identity development depends not only on the amount of time young people spend online but also on the nature and quality of their online activities (Avci et al., 2025). This article examines the impact of social media on youth identity and behaviour, with particular attention to self-expression, social relationships, cultural values, and behavioural patterns. It adopts a qualitative approach based on a review of relevant academic literature to explore both the positive opportunities and potential risks associated with digital participation. The discussion highlights the importance of digital literacy, responsible online engagement, parental guidance, and educational support in helping young people develop healthy identities and constructive behaviours in an increasingly connected society.

KEYWORDS

Social Media, Youth Identity, Online Behaviour, Digital Culture, Self-Expression, Social Influence, Digital Literacy.

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become an important part of contemporary youth culture, influencing how young people communicate, establish relationships, express opinions, and understand their place in society. Digital platforms allow youth to share personal experiences, participate in online communities, explore interests, and interact with individuals from different cultural and social backgrounds. These interactions can contribute to identity exploration by exposing young people to new perspectives, lifestyles, values, and opportunities for self-expression. Pérez-Torres (2024) explains that social media can function as a digital environment in which adolescents construct and communicate their identities through self-presentation, social comparison, role models, and audience feedback. Consequently, social media should not be understood simply as a communication tool; it is also a social environment in which young people negotiate their personal identities and social relationships.Youth identity develops through the interaction of

individual experiences, family relationships, peer groups, educational settings, cultural expectations, and wider social influences. Social media adds another dimension to this process by allowing young people to present selected versions of themselves to online audiences. Profile pictures, videos, comments, personal stories, and shared interests may become important ways of communicating personality and belonging. Positive feedback and supportive online communities can strengthen confidence and encourage creative expression, while negative comments and pressure to gain approval may lead to uncertainty about personal identity. Avci et al. (2025), in their systematic review of adolescent identity development, found that the quality of social media engagement can be more informative than time spent online alone. This suggests that understanding youth identity requires attention to how young people participate in digital spaces rather than relying exclusively on measures of screen time.Such exposure can encourage educational engagement, social awareness, creativity, and participation in positive community activities. However, it can also promote impulsive decisions, harmful trends, aggressive communication, or unrealistic expectations about appearance and success. Pérez-Torres (2024) identifies social comparison and role models as important themes in the relationship between social media and adolescent identity. Such comparisons can create pressure to maintain an idealized online image or to seek approval through likes, comments, and followers. At the same time, social media can offer opportunities for authentic self-expression, especially when young people find communities that respect their interests and experiences. Avci et al. (2025) reported that authentic self-presentation was associated with greater self-concept clarity, whereas social comparison was associated with identity exploration and identity distress. These findings indicate that digital environments can provide both developmental opportunities and emotional challenges, depending on how young people engage with online content and feedback.

The influence of social media extends beyond individual identity to cultural values and social belonging. Digital platforms enable young people to encounter different languages, traditions, beliefs, and lifestyles, potentially increasing intercultural understanding and awareness of social issues. They can also help youth maintain cultural connections, participate in community discussions, and communicate with people who share similar experiences. Nevertheless, continuous exposure to global trends may create tensions between traditional expectations and emerging digital values. Young people may feel pressure to adopt popular lifestyles or behaviours that conflict with their family or community norms. The relationship between social media and identity is therefore connected to broader questions of cultural belonging, social acceptance, and the changing expectations placed on younger generations.In view of these developments, examining the impact of social media on youth identity and behaviour is essential for understanding young people’s experiences in contemporary digital society. Although online platforms provide valuable opportunities for communication, learning, creativity, and social participation, their effects should not be assumed to be uniformly positive or negative. The

consequences depend on the nature of online engagement, the reliability of information, the behaviour of digital communities, and the guidance available to young users. Building on research into adolescent identity development and digital self-presentation (Avci et al., 2025; Pérez-Torres, 2024), this article explores how social media shapes youth identity, influences behavioural patterns, and creates challenges that require attention from families, educators, and society.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the influence of social media on youth identity formation and self-expression.
2. To investigate the relationship between social media engagement and youth behavioural patterns.
3. To identify the positive opportunities and potential risks of social media for youth development.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does social media influence youth identity formation and self-expression?
2. In what ways does social media engagement shape the behaviour of young people?
3. What positive opportunities and potential risks does social media create for youth identity and behaviour?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between social media and youth identity has received increasing attention as digital platforms become central to everyday communication and social participation. Pérez-Torres (2024) describes social media as a digital mirror through which adolescents present themselves, receive feedback, compare themselves with others, and observe role models. These processes may help young people explore different aspects of their personalities, interests, and social affiliations. Online communities can also provide opportunities to discuss shared experiences and develop a sense of belonging. However, identity formation may become challenging when young people rely heavily on external approval or feel compelled to present an idealized version of themselves. The literature therefore suggests that social media can support identity exploration, but its influence depends on the kinds of interactions and self-presentation practices involved.Avci et al. (2025) conducted a systematic review of 32 studies involving 19,658 participants to examine social media engagement and adolescent identity development. Their review indicated that active participation was associated with greater identity exploration,

while authentic self-presentation was associated with stronger self-concept clarity. Social comparison, however, was associated with both identity exploration and identity distress. These findings are important because they demonstrate that the relationship between social media and identity cannot be understood through screen time alone. The content young people consume, the way they communicate, and the feedback they receive may be equally important. The authors also highlighted limitations in the existing evidence, particularly the difficulty of establishing whether social media influences identity development or whether young people's existing identities influence their online behaviour.

The behavioural effects of social media are also connected to the formation of consumer preferences, lifestyle expectations, and social attitudes. Wilska et al. (2023) examined how young people construct consumer identities through social media, including their engagement with influencers, advertising, and consumption-related content. Online personalities and peer networks can influence the products young people prefer, the lifestyles they admire, and the ways they communicate their social status. This influence may provide access to new interests and creative ideas, but it can also encourage materialism and pressure to follow popular trends. Social media therefore operates not only as a space for personal expression but also as a commercial environment where identity can become associated with brands, appearance, and purchasing choices. (2024), in an umbrella review of research on adolescent social media use and mental health, found that outcomes depend on individual characteristics, patterns of use, the content encountered, and platform design. Supportive interactions may strengthen social connection and provide access to useful information, while harmful experiences can contribute to emotional distress and reduced wellbeing. Orben et al. (2024) similarly discussed mechanisms through which social media may interact with adolescent development, including social comparison, responsiveness to feedback, self-presentation, and social exclusion. These studies indicate that online behaviour should be examined within its psychological and social context rather than assuming that all social media use produces the same effects.

Further evidence comes from Fassi et al. (2024), whose systematic review and meta-analysis examined social media use and internalizing symptoms among adolescents in clinical and community samples. Their findings showed small positive associations between social media use and symptoms such as anxiety and depression, although the strength of associations varied according to the type of use and the outcomes measured. Ahmed et al. (2024) also reported that problematic social media use was more consistently associated with depression, anxiety, and poorer wellbeing than general social media use. These findings suggest that the behavioural consequences of digital participation may depend on whether use becomes excessive or disruptive to everyday responsibilities and relationships. Nevertheless, associations do not automatically establish causation, and individual circumstances must be considered when

interpreting these results.Overall, existing research indicates that social media influences youth identity and behaviour through several interconnected processes, including self-presentation, social comparison, feedback, peer influence, consumer culture, and emotional experiences. Digital platforms can encourage creativity, social connection, cultural exchange, and identity exploration, but they may also expose young people to cyberbullying, unrealistic expectations, harmful trends, and excessive dependence on online approval. Although recent research provides valuable insights, further investigation is needed into how these processes operate across different cultural settings and social backgrounds. This article brings these themes together to examine the potential benefits and risks of social media for youth identity and behaviour, emphasizing the importance of meaningful engagement, digital literacy, and supportive social environments.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, literature-based methodology to examine the impact of social media on youth identity and behaviour. It draws on published academic research concerning adolescent identity development, online self-presentation, behavioural influence, consumer identity, and psychological wellbeing. The selected literature includes systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and peer-reviewed research articles published between 2023 and 2025. These sources provide different perspectives on how digital interaction may shape young people's self-understanding, relationships, attitudes, and behavioural choices. The methodology focuses on interpreting existing evidence rather than collecting new information directly from participants.Relevant literature was identified through academic search resources, including Google Scholar, using terms such as social media and youth identity, adolescent online behaviour, digital self-presentation, social comparison, and youth mental health. Studies were considered relevant when they addressed young people's identity development, social behaviour, online interactions, or related psychological and cultural outcomes. Particular attention was given to peer-reviewed publications that synthesized existing findings or examined specific mechanisms linking social media with youth development. The reviewed studies were then organized according to the main themes addressed in the research objectives.

The analysis considered both beneficial and potentially harmful aspects of social media use. Positive aspects included identity exploration, creative expression, social connection, access to information, and participation in online communities. Potential risks included social comparison, pressure to gain online approval, exposure to unrealistic lifestyles, problematic use, and emotional distress. The findings from the selected publications were compared to identify recurring patterns, differences in interpretation, and limitations in the available evidence. As this

study relies on published literature, its conclusions are based on existing research and should not be interpreted as results from a new survey or experiment.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study uses a descriptive and thematic research design to organize and interpret published evidence concerning social media and youth identity and behaviour. A descriptive approach is appropriate because the article aims to explain existing patterns, identify major influences, and present the different ways social media may affect young people. Thematic analysis provides a framework for grouping findings into related categories, including identity formation, self-expression, peer influence, cultural values, behavioural choices, and emotional wellbeing. These themes correspond to the study's objectives and research questions.The research design involves three connected stages: identifying relevant academic literature, organizing the selected publications into thematic categories, and comparing their findings to develop an integrated interpretation. The first stage establishes the evidence base, the second identifies common topics and differences across studies, and the third examines how these findings collectively explain the relationship between social media and youth development. The design also recognizes that social media effects may vary according to the type of content encountered, the purpose of engagement, and the social circumstances of individual users. Because the study is literature-based, it identifies patterns in existing evidence without claiming to establish direct causal relationships.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data were analyzed through qualitative thematic synthesis of the selected academic literature. Information from each publication was organized around its research focus, major findings, and relevance to youth identity or behaviour. The analysis concentrated on recurring themes such as online self-presentation, social comparison, identity exploration, peer and influencer influence, emotional wellbeing, and responsible digital participation. Findings from different studies were compared to identify areas of agreement and variation, with attention to the distinction between general social media use and particular forms of engagement that may be more closely associated with positive or negative outcomes. At the same time, online feedback, idealized representations, and peer expectations can influence self-esteem, lifestyle preferences, and behavioural decisions. The reviewed literature suggests that the quality and purpose of engagement are important considerations when evaluating these effects (Avci et al., 2025; Sala et al., 2024). However, because the included studies use different populations, methods, and measures, their findings cannot be treated as directly equivalent or generalized to every young person.A further aspect of the analysis was the identification of limitations in the available evidence. Much of the research reports associations between social media use and developmental

or psychological outcomes, but these associations do not necessarily demonstrate that social media alone causes particular behaviours. Family relationships, peer support, personal characteristics, cultural expectations, and offline experiences may also contribute to the observed outcomes. The analysis therefore adopts a balanced interpretation, recognizing both the potential influence of digital environments and the broader factors that shape youth development.

FINDINGS

The findings suggest that social media plays a meaningful role in youth identity formation by providing spaces for self-expression, identity exploration, and social interaction. Young people can communicate their interests, experiment with different forms of presentation, and connect with communities that share their experiences. The literature indicates that authentic participation may support a clearer sense of self, while excessive concern about online approval can create pressure to conform to others' expectations (Avci et al., 2025; Pérez-Torres, 2024). Social media therefore provides opportunities for identity development, although the outcomes depend on the nature of engagement and the social feedback young people receive.The reviewed literature also indicates that social media may influence behavioural patterns through peer interactions, influencers, advertising, and exposure to online trends. These influences can encourage creativity, learning, cultural awareness, and constructive social participation, but they may also promote unrealistic lifestyle expectations, consumer pressure, and harmful forms of social comparison. Research on adolescent wellbeing further suggests that problematic use is more consistently associated with negative outcomes than general use alone (Ahmed et al., 2024; Sala et al., 2024). These findings emphasize the importance of considering what young people do online, how they interpret digital content, and whether online activities interfere with their everyday lives.Finally, the findings highlight the importance of digital literacy and supportive relationships in helping young people manage social media influences. Families, educators, and communities can help youth recognize misleading information, understand the limits of online self-presentation, respond constructively to cyberbullying, and maintain a healthy balance between online and offline activities. The reviewed evidence also reveals a need for further research across different cultural and social contexts, since the experiences and expectations of young people are not identical. Overall, social media is best understood as an influential environment whose effects depend on personal circumstances, online practices, platform characteristics, and the support available to young users.

CONCLUSION

Social media has become a significant influence on youth identity and behaviour, shaping how young people express themselves, develop relationships, understand cultural values, and make

everyday decisions. The impact of social media is therefore not uniformly positive or negative; it depends on the quality of online engagement, the content encountered, and the individual and social circumstances of young users.The study concludes that promoting responsible social media use requires cooperation among families, educational institutions, digital platforms, and communities. Young people should be encouraged to develop digital literacy, evaluate online information critically, respect others in digital spaces, and maintain a healthy balance between online activities and offline relationships. Parents and educators can support these goals by encouraging open communication and helping young people recognize the difference between authentic identity and idealized online presentation. Future research should examine these relationships across diverse cultural settings and use longitudinal approaches to better understand how digital experiences relate to identity and behavioural development over time. A balanced and informed approach can help young people benefit from digital opportunities while reducing potential risks.

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