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SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS INFLUENCE ON YOUTH IDENTITY, VALUES, AND SOCIAL BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT

Social media has become a significant part of young people's everyday lives, influencing how they communicate, express themselves, establish relationships, develop personal identities, and understand social values. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and other digital networking applications provide opportunities for creativity, information sharing, cultural exchange, social activism, and peer interaction. At the same time, these platforms expose young people to social comparison, unrealistic lifestyle expectations, cyberbullying, misinformation, and pressures to gain social approval through likes, comments, and followers. This study examines the influence of social media on youth identity, values, and social behavior, with particular attention to self-expression, cultural attitudes, peer influence, interpersonal relationships, and online conduct. The study adopts a qualitative, literature-based approach to synthesize relevant scholarly research published in 2025 and 2026. The literature is analyzed thematically to identify the opportunities and challenges associated with social media engagement during adolescence and young adulthood. The reviewed evidence suggests that social media can support identity exploration, belonging, social awareness, and community participation, while idealized self-presentation and frequent social comparison may contribute to identity uncertainty and social pressure. The influence of social media appears to depend not only on the amount of time young people spend online but also on the content they encounter, the nature of their interactions, their existing relationships, and their ability to evaluate digital information critically. The study concludes that digital literacy, supportive family and peer relationships, responsible platform design, and educational interventions are essential for encouraging positive social media engagement and promoting healthy identity development among young people.

KEYWORDS: *Social Media, Youth Identity, Personal Values, Social Behavior, Adolescents, Digital Culture, Peer Influence, Self-Expression, Social Comparison, Online Communities, Cultural Identity, Digital Literacy, Cyberbullying, Social Networking, Youth Development.*

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become one of the most influential communication environments in contemporary society, particularly for adolescents and young adults who use digital platforms to interact with friends, explore interests, share experiences, and participate in public discussions. The widespread availability of smartphones and internet connectivity has transformed the ways young people receive information, maintain relationships, express opinions, and understand their social surroundings. Unlike traditional forms of communication, social media enables users to create and distribute content, receive immediate feedback, and participate in communities that extend beyond their geographical locations. These features provide opportunities for self-expression, learning, creativity, and social participation. However, they also introduce new pressures and challenges that may influence the development of personal identity, moral values, and social behavior during important stages of psychological and social development.Youth identity formation is a complex process through which individuals develop an understanding of who they are, what they believe, which groups they belong to, and what goals they wish to pursue. During adolescence and early adulthood, young people often explore different interests, cultural affiliations, lifestyles, beliefs, and future aspirations. Avci, H., & Baams, L. i Kretschmer,

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T.(2025). found that Family relationships, educational institutions, peer groups, cultural traditions, and community experiences have traditionally played important roles in this process. Social media has added another influential environment in which identity can be explored, expressed, challenged, and evaluated.

Young users may present their personalities through photographs, videos, personal opinions, fashion choices, hobbies, and participation in online communities. Feedback from other users can reinforce particular aspects of identity or encourage individuals to reconsider how they present themselves.One important characteristic of social media is the visibility of social approval. Likes, comments, shares, views, and follower counts provide measurable indicators of online engagement. Although these features can encourage participation and creativity, they may also lead some young people to evaluate their worth through external responses. Carefully edited photographs, idealized lifestyles, and highly selective representations of success can create unrealistic expectations about appearance, popularity, relationships, and achievement. When young people compare their everyday experiences with the idealized presentations of others, they may experience dissatisfaction, insecurity, or pressure to conform to particular standards. Nevertheless, social comparison does not always produce negative outcomes. Exposure to diverse experiences and viewpoints can also encourage self-reflection, broaden understanding, and support the exploration of personal goals and values.Social media also influences the development and expression of social values. Cabeza Martinez, B., Cortesi, A., & Vlachos, S. (2026). Explained that Online platforms expose young people to discussions concerning equality, environmental protection, education, cultural traditions, human rights, public health, and community responsibility. Through digital campaigns and online communities, young users can become informed about social issues, organize collective activities, and participate in public conversations. At the same time, misinformation, discriminatory content, online hostility, and algorithmically reinforced viewpoints may influence how young people interpret social problems and evaluate other groups.

Young people may negotiate these differences by adapting online trends, selectively sharing content, or developing identities that combine local traditions with global cultural influences.The influence of social media also extends to the development of communication habits and interpersonal values. Online interactions can encourage collaboration, empathy, and mutual support, particularly when users participate in constructive communities. Conversely, anonymous communication, rapid exchanges, and the absence of direct interpersonal cues can sometimes encourage impulsive comments, aggressive behavior, or reduced sensitivity to the feelings of others. These possibilities highlight the importance of teaching respectful online communication and helping young people understand the consequences of their digital actions.In this context, the present study examines how social media influences youth identity, values, and social behavior through a qualitative synthesis of recent scholarly literature.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

1. To examine how social media influences youth identity formation, personal and cultural values, and social behavior, including the roles of peer influence, online self-presentation, social comparison, and digital community participation.

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RESEARCH QUESTION

1. How does social media influence youth identity, personal and cultural values, and social behavior, and what factors determine whether these influences are positive or negative?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Identity formation is a central developmental process during adolescence and early adulthood. It involves understanding personal characteristics, developing beliefs, exploring interests, establishing relationships, and determining the social groups with which individuals identify. During these stages, young people frequently reconsider their preferences, values, aspirations, and sense of belonging. Social media has become an important environment in which these processes take place because it allows users to observe others, communicate their experiences, experiment with self-presentation, and receive feedback from peers and wider audiences.Avci, Baams, and Kretschmer (2025) conducted a systematic review of social media use and adolescent identity development, synthesizing 32 studies involving 19,658 adolescents. Conte, G., Iorio, G. D., Esposito, D., Romano, S., Panvino, F., Maggi, S., ... & Terrinoni, A. (2025). Explains that Their review distinguished between the quantity of social media use and the quality of engagement, including active participation, authenticity, and social comparison. The findings indicated that active participation was associated with greater identity exploration, while authentic self-presentation was associated with higher self-concept clarity. Social comparison was associated with both identity exploration and identity distress. These findings demonstrate that social media engagement is not a single uniform experience; its relationship with identity depends on how young people participate and interpret their online experiences. Social media enables young people to explore different aspects of their identities through photographs, videos, personal opinions, creative projects, and participation in interest-based communities. A young person interested in art, science, literature, sports, or social activism can find communities that recognize and support those interests. This participation may strengthen confidence, encourage experimentation, and help users discover opportunities beyond their immediate surroundings.

Nevertheless, identity exploration can become challenging when online approval becomes a dominant measure of personal worth. Young people may feel pressure to present themselves according to popular trends or audience expectations rather than their own preferences. The ability to edit photographs, select favorable experiences, and remove unwanted content can encourage highly controlled self-presentation. When the online identity differs substantially from everyday experience, some users may find it difficult to reconcile external expectations with their developing sense of self.Varadi (2025), in qualitative research involving 15 Canadian high-school-aged young people, examined the ways social media and smartphones facilitated connection, identity expression, and leisure. The research centered young people's own accounts rather than assuming that their digital engagement could be explained simply as excessive screen time. This perspective highlights the importance of understanding the purposes for which young people use social media and the meanings they attach to their online activities. Crocetti, E. (2026). revealed that Identity development should therefore be understood as an ongoing interaction between personal experiences and social environments. Social media can provide opportunities for exploration and expression, but the quality of those experiences depends on authenticity, social feedback, the content encountered, and the

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availability of supportive relationships outside digital platforms.Personal values are principles that guide individuals' judgments, priorities, and behavior. They influence how young people understand honesty, respect, achievement, responsibility, fairness, relationships, and community participation. During adolescence and early adulthood, values are shaped by family traditions, education, peer relationships, cultural expectations, personal experiences, and exposure to wider society. Social media adds another source of influence by circulating messages about success, beauty, popularity, consumption, political participation, and desirable lifestyles.Online platforms expose young people to a broad range of viewpoints and experiences.

Educational creators, community organizations, public figures, and social campaigns can encourage interest in environmental protection, social justice, public health, cultural preservation, and civic responsibility. By participating in these discussions, young people may develop greater awareness of social problems and discover opportunities to contribute to their communities.However, social media also presents values through popularity metrics and consumer-oriented content. Influencers may associate success with expensive products, physical appearance, travel, or public recognition. Repeated exposure to such content can make material achievement and social approval appear more important than they otherwise might. This does not mean that every young person adopts the values promoted online, but it suggests that digital environments can influence which goals become visible, desirable, and socially rewarded.Uysal, Alavi, and Bezençon (2026) investigated the relationship between social media adoption and value orientations using a cross-country difference-in-differences approach. Their findings suggested increases in achievement and conformity orientations in countries with higher social media adoption relative to culturally similar comparison countries. The results indicate that social media may be associated with changes in the values emphasized within societies, although they should not be interpreted as proof that every individual user experiences the same change. Social media may also create tension between personal values and perceived group expectations. A young person may support an opinion privately but hesitate to express it online because of concerns about criticism, exclusion, or disagreement. Conversely, supportive digital communities may give young people the confidence to express beliefs that are not widely accepted in their immediate environments. These different possibilities demonstrate that online social influence can encourage both conformity and independent expression.

The relationship between social media and personal values is consequently dynamic. Young people actively interpret and negotiate the messages they encounter rather than simply absorbing them. Family discussion, critical thinking, education, and opportunities to reflect on personal principles can help young people distinguish between their own values and the expectations communicated through digital popularity.Peer relationships play an important role in adolescent social development. Young people often seek acceptance, friendship, recognition, and a sense of belonging among their peers. Social media extends these processes into digital environments where social interactions are visible, persistent, and sometimes measurable through likes, comments, reposts, and follower counts. These features can make peer approval more immediate and publicly observable than in many face-to-face settings.Online approval may reinforce positive behaviors when peers encourage creativity, educational achievement, kindness, cooperation, or community participation. Supportive comments can help young people feel recognized, while group activities can strengthen friendships and shared interests. Digital communities may also provide social support to

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individuals who have difficulty finding people with similar experiences in their immediate surroundings.However, visible measures of popularity can also encourage conformity. Young users may imitate clothing styles, expressions, opinions, or behaviors that receive widespread attention. They may share content because it is popular rather than because it reflects their own beliefs. Some may feel pressure to participate in trends or maintain an online presence to avoid being excluded from peer conversations.The study also reported a moderating role for social media in relationships among these factors. Because the study involved a particular population and relied on questionnaire-based data, its findings should be interpreted within that context rather than generalized automatically to all young people.

Peer influence is not necessarily harmful. Social groups can encourage positive habits, offer emotional support, and expose young people to new perspectives. The important distinction is between supportive social influence and pressure that undermines personal judgment or encourages harmful behavior. Social media literacy programs should help young people recognize peer pressure, evaluate online trends critically, and develop the confidence to make decisions consistent with their own values.Social comparison occurs when individuals evaluate their own characteristics, achievements, or circumstances in relation to those of other people. Social media provides numerous opportunities for such comparisons because users can observe carefully selected representations of appearance, popularity, relationships, educational success, and lifestyle. Photographs and videos may be edited, staged, filtered, or presented without the difficulties that accompany everyday life. As a result, users may compare their ordinary experiences with highly curated representations of other people's lives.During adolescence, when physical appearance, peer acceptance, and social identity can be especially important, repeated exposure to idealized content may contribute to dissatisfaction or insecurity. Gayle, D., & Mayeux, L. (2026). Elaborated onYoung people may feel pressure to meet unrealistic appearance standards or believe that their own achievements are inadequate compared with those of highly visible users. Public metrics can intensify these experiences by presenting popularity as something that can be directly counted and compared.Mulisa, Kejela, and Dido's systematic review, published in 2025 and included in the 2026 volume of the Journal of Technology in Behavioral Science, examined how social media content and pathways relate to adolescent mental health. The review identified associations between social media experiences and outcomes including anxiety, loneliness, depression, and low self-esteem. Its focus on content and pathways is important because different types of engagement may have different implications for well-being.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, literature-based methodology to examine the influence of social media on youth identity, personal and cultural values, and social behavior. This approach is appropriate because the research topic involves interconnected social and psychological processes, including identity exploration, peer influence, self-presentation, social comparison, cultural participation, and online communication. Rather than collecting new data from participants, the study synthesizes existing scholarly research to identify recurring themes, compare findings, and develop a broader understanding of how social media shapes youth experiences.The literature focuses on scholarly publications released in 2025 and 2026, including peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic reviews, longitudinal studies, qualitative investigations, and research reports relevant to youth development. Sources are identified through academic search platforms and publisher websites using

keywords such as social media and youth identity, adolescent social behavior, social media and personal values, peer influence, cultural identity, social comparison, and digital well-being.Publications are selected according to their relevance to the research question, methodological transparency, credibility, and contribution to understanding youth identity or behavior. Studies examining the quantity of social media use are considered alongside research focusing on content, interaction patterns, self-presentation, and algorithmic recommendations. Both positive and negative outcomes are included to avoid presenting social media as inherently beneficial or harmful.The analysis considers evidence concerning identity exploration, self-esteem, personal values, peer relationships, cultural identity, emotional well-being, cyberbullying, and responsible online participation. Differences among findings are examined in relation to research design, population, platform, cultural context, and the way social media engagement is measured.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study employs a qualitative descriptive research design supported by a structured literature review and thematic synthesis. This design provides a systematic framework for examining how social media engagement relates to youth identity, values, and social behavior without conducting a new survey or experiment.The design distinguishes between observed associations and causal explanations. For example, a relationship between social media use and identity distress does not necessarily demonstrate that social media caused the distress. Existing identity concerns may influence online behavior, and both may be affected by other social or individual factors. Maintaining this distinction strengthens the credibility of the research. The collected information is organized into thematic categories and synthesized to identify areas of agreement, contrasting evidence, and gaps in existing research. Since the study relies on secondary sources, its findings represent a qualitative interpretation of the reviewed literature. It does not claim to establish new causal relationships or report original participant data. The 2026 umbrella review by Tølbøll found weak and inconsistent associations between general social media use and adolescent well-being, while problematic use was more consistently associated with ill-being. This suggests that the quality and consequences of engagement should be considered alongside the amount of time spent online. The reviewed literature supports teaching young people to evaluate online information, recognize edited or misleading content, protect personal information, and communicate respectfully. These skills may help young users benefit from social media while reducing exposure to peer pressure, misinformation, and harmful online interactions.Overall, the findings suggest that social media can support identity exploration, social participation, and cultural learning, but it may also create pressures involving conformity, comparison, and online approval. Its influence depends on the nature of engagement and the social environment in which it occurs.

DATA ANALYSIS

The study uses thematic analysis to examine and interpret information obtained from the selected publications. The purpose is to identify recurring patterns concerning how social media engagement relates to young people's identity development, personal values, and social behavior.The first stage involves familiarization with the literature. Each publication is examined for its research objectives, study population, methodology, principal findings, and limitations. Information about self-presentation, identity exploration, and self-concept is

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grouped under identity development. Evidence concerning achievement, conformity, cultural expectations, and social attitudes is organized under values. Findings about peer relationships, communication, cyberbullying, and social participation are categorized under social behavior.The second stage involves comparing findings across studies. Research concerning active social media participation is examined alongside studies of passive browsing and social comparison. Qualitative accounts of young people's experiences are considered alongside longitudinal studies and systematic reviews. This comparison helps identify why outcomes may differ across users and contexts.The third stage examines relationships among the themes. For example, peer feedback may influence self-presentation, while algorithmic recommendations may increase exposure to particular lifestyles or social expectations. Family support, digital literacy, and cultural background are considered as factors that may influence these relationships.The fourth stage identifies recurring findings and areas of uncertainty. Evidence of identity exploration and social support is compared with findings concerning conformity, identity distress, and problematic use. Differences are interpreted in relation to study design and the type of social media engagement examined.Finally, the themes are integrated into a conceptual explanation of how social media may influence youth development. The analysis emphasizes that outcomes depend on content, interactions, individual characteristics, and the wider social environment.No original statistical calculations or new numerical participant results are reported. The analysis is qualitative and interpretive, consistent with the study's literature-based design.

FINDINGS

The following findings summarize the research reviewed in this paper. They are a synthesis of existing publications, not results from a newly conducted survey or experiment.The reviewed literature indicates that social media can offer young people opportunities to express their interests, explore different identities, and participate in communities that share their experiences. Avci et al. (2025) found that active engagement and authentic self-presentation were associated with particular aspects of identity development. These findings suggest that meaningful participation may be more informative than time spent online alone. Likes, comments, and follower counts can influence how young people present themselves online. Such feedback may strengthen confidence and encourage creativity, but it may also create pressure to conform to popular expectations. The literature suggests that the relationship between online feedback and identity depends on users' motivations, authenticity, and interpretation of social responses.Online content exposes young people to different attitudes toward achievement, relationships, appearance, consumption, and social responsibility. Research by Uysal et al. (2026) suggests that social media adoption may be associated with shifts in achievement and conformity orientations at the societal level. These findings indicate that social media may influence value environments, although individual outcomes can vary. Digital peer networks can encourage friendship, cooperation, creativity, and community participation. However, pressure to gain approval or follow popular trends may limit independent judgment. The literature indicates that supportive relationships and digital literacy are important for helping young people navigate peer expectations.Repeated exposure to idealized lifestyles and appearance-related content can encourage unfavorable comparisons. The reviewed research links some forms of social comparison with identity distress and identifies concerns about self-esteem and well-being. However, social comparison may also inspire learning and goal development, depending on the context and the user's interpretation. Social media can strengthen cultural connections through language,

traditions, and community participation, while also exposing young people to global influences.

CONCLUSION

Social media has become an important influence on youth identity, personal values, and social behavior. It provides opportunities for self-expression, cultural exchange, friendship, educational engagement, and participation in community discussions. At the same time, it introduces challenges related to social comparison, peer pressure, unrealistic expectations, misinformation, and harmful online interactions. Understanding these different possibilities is essential for developing a balanced view of the role of digital platforms in youth development.This study examined recent literature published in 2025 and 2026 to understand how social media influences the ways young people perceive themselves, develop personal beliefs, and interact with others. The reviewed evidence suggests that social media engagement is not uniformly beneficial or harmful. Active participation, authentic self-expression, supportive peer interactions, and access to constructive content may encourage identity exploration and social connection. Conversely, persistent comparison, pressure to gain online approval, and problematic engagement may contribute to identity distress and difficulties with well-being.The study also highlights the importance of cultural and social context. Young people interpret digital content through their existing values, family relationships, peer networks, and community experiences. Social media may strengthen cultural identity by connecting users with their languages and traditions, while also exposing them to new perspectives and global influences. These interactions can expand understanding, but they may also create tension when online expectations conflict with personal beliefs or community norms.Several practical implications emerge from the findings. Families should encourage open communication about online experiences without relying exclusively on restrictive approaches.

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