

Social Media and Young Adults: A Comprehensive Review of Identity Formation and Its Implications for Academic Performance

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Abstract

The transition into young adulthood is a key time for forming one's identity. This process is increasingly shaped by digital environments. As social media platforms become central to the lives of young adults, their influence reaches beyond social interaction. It affects psychological development and academic engagement. This review looks at how social media usage patterns influence self-concept and self-esteem, which are crucial for identity formation. It also explores the effects on academic performance in institutions. A systematic review of recent studies was done across multiple databases, focusing on both longitudinal and cross-sectional studies involving young adults aged 18 to 25. The findings show that social media has both positive and negative aspects. When used intentionally, it can improve academic learning, professional networking, creativity, and cultural awareness. However, over-reliance on digital validation can lead to anxiety, lower self-esteem, sleep problems, poor concentration, and academic distractions. The study concludes that a balanced approach to social media use, supported by digital literacy and mental health awareness, is essential. This balance helps to maximise educational benefits while reducing psychological risks. The results suggest that institutions should include digital literacy and self-regulation strategies in their courses to lessen the distracting effects of digital identity issues on academic success.

Keywords: Social media, Self-esteem, Identity Formation, Young Adults, Academic Performance

Introduction

Young adulthood is an important time for identity development and the achievement of academic and career goals. Nowadays, this developmental process is increasingly mediated by social media platforms that have become central to the lives of young adults around the world (Obodo & Onwuekwem, 2024). The rise of social media platforms over the past two decades has fundamentally reshaped how young adults communicate, socialize, and understand themselves. Digital media use is now the norm rather than the exception among people in their teens and twenties, who continue to represent the heaviest-using demographic across most platforms (Soh et al., 2024). This period is marked by important psychosocial tasks. The most notable task is forming a stable and clear sense of identity, which happens through exploring love, work, and worldview (Arnett, as cited in Villanti et al., 2017). On one hand, social media provides young adults with valuable opportunities for self-expression and identity exploration. Research shows that emerging adults actively use platforms to share identity claims related to their personal, gender, ethnic, and racial identities (Soh et al., 2024). On the other hand, these platforms also expose users to

constant social comparison and the pressures of carefully crafted self-presentation. A growing body of research links these dynamics to lower self-esteem and psychological distress (Vogel et al., 2014; Vannucci et al., 2017). These tensions are not just psychological; they have real effects on academic life. The findings suggest both direct and indirect negative effects (Lau, 2017; Abuzar & Hussain, 2024). The connection between social media and academic performance is complex. While some platforms help with literacy instruction, learning, and academic engagement, others are linked to "scrolling into trouble." In these cases, social network addiction and digital distraction can negatively impact GPA and study habits (Yang et al., 2025). Given these complex and sometimes conflicting findings, this literature review will look at existing research on the relationship between social media use, identity formation through self-esteem and self-concept, and its implications for the academic performance of young adults.

Research Objectives

1. To review the influence of social media factors (social validation and identity contribution) on identity formation (self-esteem and self-concept) among young adults.
2. To synthesize previous findings regarding identity formation on the academic performance of young adults.
3. To propose a conceptual model explaining the mediating role of identity formation in the relationship between social media factors and academic performance among young adults.

Research Methodology

This study uses a conceptual review research design to look at the existing literature on social media, identity formation, and academic performance among young adults. The study critically combines previous research to identify key relationships, research gaps, and emerging themes from previous studies. Based on this analysis, a simplified conceptual model is proposed to explain how social media affects the academic performance of young adults through identity formation.

Review of Literature

Social Media Factors and Identity Formation

The relationship between social media use and self-esteem has attracted significant research attention over the past two decades. Early research highlighted the positive potential of social media in strengthening social relationships and enhancing self-esteem. Steinfield, Ellison, and Lampe (2008) found that Facebook use increased bridging social capital, particularly among individuals with lower self-esteem. Tao and Cheng (2018) reported that authentic self-disclosure, larger online social networks, and perceived social support were associated with higher self-esteem. Together, these findings suggest that social media can positively influence psychological well-being when it promotes meaningful interactions and supportive relationships. Vogel et al. (2014) demonstrated that lower self-esteem among frequent social media users was driven more by upward social comparison than by the amount of time spent on these platforms. Jiang and Ngien (2020) reported that Instagram use indirectly increased social anxiety through heightened social comparison and lower self-esteem. Overall, these studies indicate that users' interpretations of online content, rather than social media use itself, largely determine psychological outcomes.

Recent research has identified several factors that influence the relationship between social media use and self-esteem. Burrow and Rainone (2017) found that individuals with a stronger sense of purpose were less reliant on online validation for their self-worth. Guðmundsdóttir (2017) reported significant gender

differences in the relationships between social media use, anxiety, and self-esteem. Chen (2025) also reported that adolescents were more sensitive to online feedback than adults.

Overall, the literature consistently demonstrates that social media factors, particularly social validation and identity contribution, this relationship is influenced by social comparison, self-presentation, and perceived social support and is further shaped by individual and contextual factors.

Identity Formation and Academic Performance

A growing, although comparatively smaller, body of literature has examined the relationship between identity formation and academic performance. Erzen (2017), in a comprehensive review, concluded that self-esteem is related to academic performance, although the strength and consistency of this relationship vary across studies. Similarly, Batool et al. (2017) and Pahlavani et al. (2015) reported a significant positive relationship between self-esteem and academic self-efficacy, indicating that students with higher self-esteem tend to have greater confidence in their academic abilities.

Self-concept has also been identified as an important predictor of academic outcomes. Research on executive functioning and academic self-concept among children and adolescents further suggested that poor academic performance can gradually weaken academic self-concept, reducing motivation and frustration tolerance over time.

Taken together, the available evidence suggests that identity formation, reflected through self-esteem and self-concept, is meaningfully associated with academic performance among young adults. However, the direction and consistency of this relationship continue to require further empirical investigation.

The Mediating Role of Identity Formation Between Social Media Factors and Academic Performance

The use of social media networks, with the constructs of identity, has begun to be addressed in a unified framework within a research field, giving preliminary indications that there is a mediation between social media networks and academic achievement. In a cross-sectional study involving medical students, researchers identified no difference in grades point average (GPA) based on usage of social media in medical students (Takieddin et al., 2022). In respect, the study conducted with university students in Honduras reported that while there was no direct effect of social media addiction on academic engagement, it did have an indirect effect mediated by self-esteem and depressive symptoms (Landa-Blanco et al., 2024). Together, these studies imply that the impact of social media on academic success isn't necessarily immediate (Takieddin et al., 2022; Landa-Blanco et al., 2024; Al Mosharrafa et al., 2024). Rather, it seems to work on a psychological level: self-esteem and a sense of self (Erzen, 2017; García-Martínez et al., 2022). This contributes some preliminary support of the mediation model through which social validation and identity contribution of social media influences academic performance among young adults in an identity formation process (Li et al., 2026).

Research Gap

Although a considerable body of research has examined social media use, identity formation, and academic performance, relatively few studies have investigated these variables within a single integrated framework, particularly among Indian young adults. Most existing research has examined the relationship between social media and self-esteem and the relationship between self-esteem and academic performance

separately and on a wider spectrum. Addressing this gap provides the rationale for the present study and forms the basis of its conceptual framework.

Table 1.1

Year	Author(s)	Study Title	Key Findings
2008	Kim & Davis	Problematic Internet Use (PIU) and Self-Esteem	Risky internet habits lower self-esteem and optimism.
2009	Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe	Facebook Paths to Social Capital (follow-up)	Facebook strengthened social capital among lower self-esteem users.
2010	Mehdizadeh	Self-Presentation 2.0: Narcissism and Self-Esteem on Facebook	Frequent Facebook engagement encouraged narcissistic self-presentation behaviors.
2011	Kim & Lee	The Facebook Paths to Happiness	Honest self-presentation and friendships enhanced subjective well-being.
2013	Krasnova, Wenninger, Widjaja & Buxmann	Envy on Facebook: A Hidden Threat to Users' Life Satisfaction	Curated peer success triggered envy, lowering life satisfaction.
2014	Vogel, Rose, Roberts & Eckles	Social Comparison, Social Media, and Self-Esteem	Social comparison lowered self-esteem, not usage time.
2015	Michikyan, Subrahmanyam & Dennis	Online Self-Presentation on Facebook and Self Development During the College Transition	Online self-presentations shaped identity during college transition.
2016	Seabrook, Kern & Rickard	Social Media, Depression and Anxiety (systematic review)	No consistent causal link across social media studies.
2017	Burrow & Rainone	How Many Likes Did I Get? Purpose and Positive Feedback	Purpose buffered self-esteem gains from positive feedback.
2018	Bergagna & Tartaglia	Self-Esteem, Social Comparison and Facebook Use	Comparison and envy lowered Facebook users' self-esteem.

2019	Schmuck et al.	Upward Social Comparison and Self-Esteem on SNS	Upward social comparison reduced self-esteem on networking sites.
2020	Barthorpe et al.	Social Media Screen Time and Adolescent Mental Health (time-use diary study)	Screen time weakly predicted mental health outcomes.
2020	Orben, Tomova & Blakemore	Effects of Social Deprivation on Adolescent Development	Adolescents showed heightened sensitivity to social feedback.
2022	Crone, Green, van de Groep & van der Crujsen	A Neurocognitive Model of Self-Concept Development in Adolescence	Self-concept stabilized from adolescence into adulthood gradually.
2022	Villegas Dominguez et al.	Self-Esteem and Social Network Addiction in University Students (18–26)	Social network addiction predicted lower self-esteem levels.
2023	de Moor, Nelemans, Becht, Meeus & Branje	Personality Development, Life Transitions and Self-Concept Clarity	Life transitions influenced self-concept clarity across development.
2023	(Taylor & Francis)	Effects of Upward Comparison Targets on Self-Evaluation (meta-analysis)	Upward social comparisons lowered self-evaluations and mood.
2024	Al Ahbabi	The Effects of Social Media on Self-Esteem	Social media exposure modestly reduced self-esteem levels.
2025	Jaruga-Sękowska, Staśkiewicz-Bartecka & Woźniak-Holecka	Social Media, Eating Disorder Risk and Self-Esteem (ages 16–25)	Greater social media exposure increased eating disorder risk.
2025	Chen	State Self-Esteem Responses to Social Media Feedback Loops: Adolescents vs. Adults	Adolescents showed stronger self-esteem reactions than adults.

Concept Analysis

This study unfolds around the central theme of the impact of social media on identity development among young adults and the educational implications this may have. Identity formation occurs when people develop a coherent identity, based on their values, beliefs, roles, aspirations, etc. This change is especially pronounced across and becomes prominent during young adulthood (aged 18 to 25), when people seek full-time education and/or careers, and take on independent social lives. Social media is increasingly playing a role in this process by exposing the user to the social comparison, online validation and self-expression, which contribute to the construction of the self-concept and personal identity. Self-esteem is a consistently recurring mechanism identified in the literature that has been shown to be affected by social media, both in regards to psychological wellbeing and to the construction of identity. Academic performance is relational, where students' achievement, involvement, concentration and learning outcomes in educational contexts define their performance.

Development of Conceptual Model

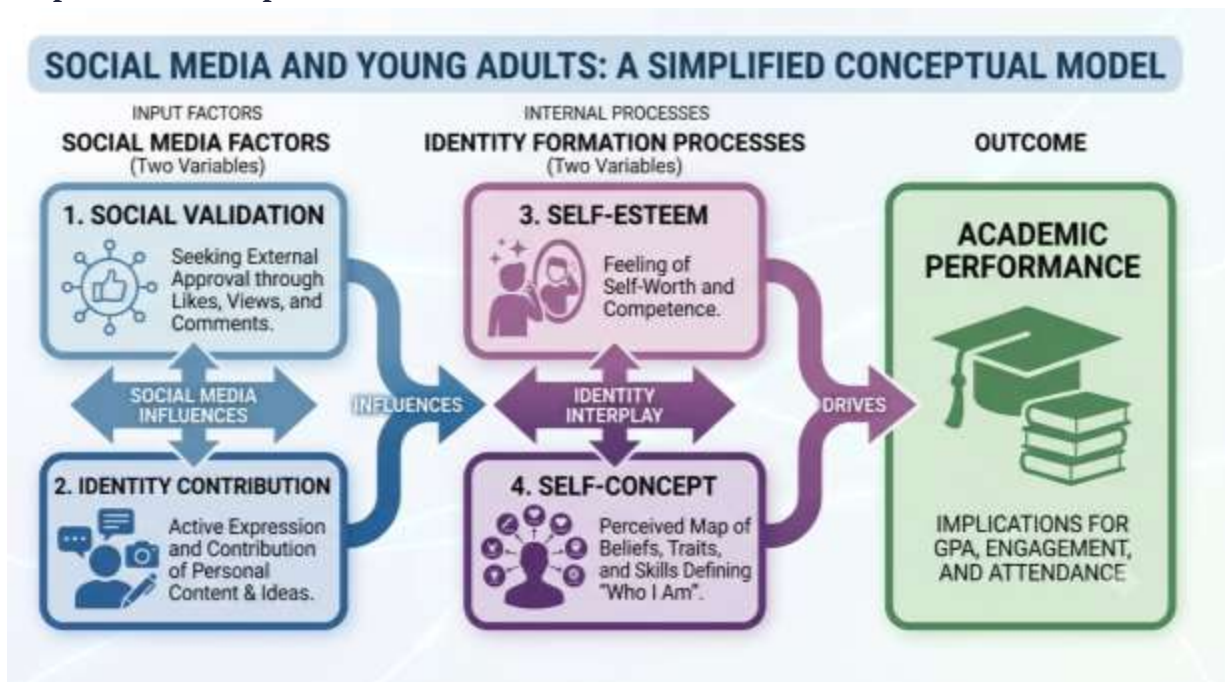


Fig. 1 Author Source

Based on the literature review, we developed a model that brings together the main ideas from earlier studies. This model suggests that social validation and identity contribution, which are important factors on social media, play a role in shaping identity through self-esteem and self-concept. These elements then impact academic performance in young adults. The model aims to serve as a theoretical basis for future research.

Figure 1 shows an exemplary conceptual model showing the presumed links between social media factors, identity formation processes, and academic success among youths. In this case, the input factors identified on the social media usage include social validation and identity contribution, where the former denotes the need to gain social approval from others using likes, views, and comments while the latter represents the expression of self in the form of posting personal ideas and content. The two input factors interact with and impact two internal identity formation processes, namely self-esteem and self-concept, where the

former is a feeling of self-worth and competence while the latter is the perceived map of beliefs, characteristics, and skills that denote “who I am.” The mutual relationship between the social validation and identity contribution factors is termed as social media influence, whereas the interaction between self-esteem and self-concept factors is referred to as identity interplay. Overall, the two identity formation processes drive the output factor of academic performance.

Discussion

The present study explored how social media influences identity development among young adults, with a particular focus on the mediating role of self-esteem and its educational implications. The findings are consistent with previous research, which suggests that social media itself is not inherently positive or negative. Instead, its impact depends on how individuals engage with these platforms and the experiences they have while using them. Steinfeld, Ellison, and Lampe (2008) found that social networking sites could strengthen social connections, especially among individuals with lower self-esteem. Similarly, Kim and Lee (2011) and Tao and Cheng (2018) reported that authentic self-presentation, meaningful interactions, and supportive online relationships were associated with higher self-esteem and better psychological well-being. These findings indicate that social media can contribute positively to identity development when it encourages genuine connections rather than superficial interactions.

However, many studies have also shown that social comparison is one of the strongest reasons why social media can negatively affect self-esteem. Vogel et al. (2014), along with Krasnova et al. (2013), Wang et al. (2017), Bergagna and Tartaglia (2018), Schmuck et al. (2019), and Jiang and Ngien (2020), found that constantly viewing idealized images and achievements online encourages upward social comparison. As a result, users often experience lower self-esteem, increased anxiety, and poorer psychological well-being. These findings suggest that it is not simply the use of social media that matters but how people interpret and respond to the content they see.

Research on identity development provides further support for this perspective. Mehdizadeh (2010) and Michikyan, Subrahmanyam, and Dennis (2015) found that individuals with lower self-esteem are more likely to present idealized versions of themselves online. More recent studies by de Moor et al. (2023), Heiman and Zafir (2024), Pérez-Torres (2024), and Avci, Baams, and Kretschmer (2025) suggest that authentic self-presentation and active participation on social media promote healthier identity development and greater self-concept clarity. Studies have also highlighted the influence of image-based social media on body image and self-esteem. Lee et al. (2014), Sherlock and Wagstaff (2019), and later studies published between 2020 and 2025 found that regular exposure to appearance-focused content increases body dissatisfaction and the risk of eating disorders. Although some evidence suggests that these platforms may not always lower overall self-esteem, they consistently affect appearance-related self-evaluations.

The literature further indicates that self-esteem plays an important role in explaining how social media affects psychological well-being. Hawi and Rupert (2016), Kircaburun (2016), Vannucci, Flannery, and Ohannessian (2017), and Atkinson (2021) associated problematic social media use with lower self-esteem, greater anxiety, and reduced life satisfaction. Factors such as resilience, self-compassion, emotional intelligence, purpose in life, and self-regulation can protect individuals from the negative effects of social media and encourage healthier online behaviour (Burrow & Rainone, 2017; Han & Yang, 2023; Crone et al., 2022; Chen, 2025).

Overall, the findings of the present study are in line with the existing literature, showing that social media influences identity development through interconnected processes involving self-esteem, social comparison, self-presentation, and psychological well-being. These findings highlight the need to encourage healthy digital habits, authentic self-expression, and responsible online engagement so that young adults can benefit from social media while minimizing its potential risks.

Future Research Directions

- Carry out empirical and longitudinal studies in order to confirm the conceptual model proposed.
- Discuss teachers' experiences of the impact of social media on young people's identities, experiences of learning and engagement in learning in the classroom.
- Examine the effectiveness of Digital literacy and self-regulation interventions for ameliorating the adverse academic impact of social media.
- Investigate further protective factors like emotional intelligence, familial support, and resilience that might act as a buffer against the effects of Social Media on identity development and schooling.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this review, it is concluded that social media has a great influence on the development of social media user identity among young adults in their identity formation process in terms of self-esteem and self-concept. Having a healthy and meaningful social media presence is linked to learning and growth and overusing social comparison and seeking validation can have a negative impact on a child's psychological health and wellbeing, as well as on their learning and academic progress. Thus, the importance of digital literacy, self-regulation and responsible social media use to ensure that young adults leverage the benefits with minimal dangers.

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