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SOCIAL MEDIA'S INFLUENCE ON IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AND SELF-EXPRESSION IN ADULTHOOD

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ABSTRACT
This integrative review synthesises empirical and theoretical evidence on how social media affects identity development and self-expression in adulthood. While most research on identity and social media has focused on adolescence, emerging adult populations show distinct dynamics in how digital interactions shape self-presentation, self-concept clarity, and self-expression. This review integrates findings from developmental psychology, media studies, and social psychology to map how adults use social media for identity exploration, negotiate authenticity and idealised online identities, and manage social feedback and comparison. The paper highlights both positive impacts (enhanced opportunities for self-expression and social connection) and risks (self-doubt, identity confusion, social comparison pressures) and suggests strategies for navigating social norms and expectations (vis a vis adoption of true self expression, increased awareness, resistance to social comparison and need for external approval, self disclosure, restrictions in disclosure) and directions for future research (need for more longitudinal and experimental studies).

Keywords: Authenticity, Idealized online identities, Identity confusion, self expression, social comparison pressure.

Introduction
Social media has become an integral part of everyday life. With the capacity to connect, communicate, and share experiences instantly, platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and Twitter have transformed the way individuals express themselves and relate to others. In this regard, social media can be understood as part of the wider domain of digital leisure, which Galzacorta, Blanco, and Gutiérrez (2014) describe as encompassing social digital leisure (online social networks), mobile digital leisure (smartphone-based activities), and recreational digital leisure (such as video games). As an integral part of daily life, social media has transformed the ways people interact and spend their leisure time, while also generating concerns about excessive engagement, addictive tendencies, and privacy vulnerabilities. Recent studies indicate that heavy use may undermine

mental well-being, affecting concentration, self-worth, and emotional stability (Sevilla-Fernández et al., 2025; Ramadhan et al., 2024; Du et al., 2024; Varela et al., 2023). Simultaneously, social media plays a significant role in shaping shared identities and encouraging civic and community involvement, creating spaces that both expose users to online hostility and provide avenues for secure communication, self-expression, and social solidarity across diverse populations.

Social media often appears to be a curated, unreal space where people's lives look like a nonstop stream of luxury trips, perfect friendships, and picture-perfect healthy meals. In reality, a whole industry exists to help individuals craft and display these polished, idealized versions of themselves online. This pervasive influence of social media plays a crucial role in the process of identity formation and self-presentation. The former is a psychological and social process through which individuals develop a sense of self, establish values, and define their roles within society, which is influenced by factors such as family, peers, culture, and life experiences. Self-presentation involves every behavioural attempt to create impressions in the minds of others. However, the advent of social media brought a new level of complexity to this process, providing special opportunities and challenges for identity formation and self-presentation. This is because, as people increasingly present themselves on social media platforms, the difference between their real and digital identity usually blurs, resulting in both positive and negative impacts on self-esteem, self-perception, and social relationships.

Consistent with the self-idealisation perspective, studies indicate that self-expression on social media is frequently polished, amplified, and detached from everyday reality. In this sense, users function as curators of their online identities, carefully staging, selecting, and editing the content they share with others to present an enhanced version of themselves. In contrast, another line of research argues that social media largely reflects users' offline identities, with individuals presenting relatively authentic versions of themselves because the inherently social nature of these platforms is believed to create accountability that limits extreme misrepresentation. This is especially evident on platforms like Facebook, where most online connections also exist offline. Goffman's earlier work on self-expression in the Digital era (2021) suggests that social media users act as artists and create an idealized version of themselves for the public.

Identity development especially self-concept and self-expression is a lifelong process influenced by social contexts, relationships, and cultural tools. The rise of social media has introduced digital environments where adults actively construct and signal their identities to broad audiences (e.g., through profiles, posts, comments). While classic theories like Erikson's psychosocial model emphasize

identity work in adolescence and emerging adulthood, identity exploration and adjustment continue beyond youth into adulthood as individuals navigate careers, relationships, and social roles. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and LinkedIn provide spaces for narrative self-presentation, social feedback, and peer comparison. These digital environments function as both arenas of social interaction and mirrors of the self, influencing how adults perceive, negotiate, and express their identities. This paper examines the impact of social media on adult identity formation and self-presentation. In achieving this, the paper considered strategies to navigate complex social norms and expectations affecting being authentic on social media, and explored the psychological mechanisms underlying social media use.

Research Questions

1. What is the existing evidence available on the influence of social media on identity development and self-expression in adulthood?
2. What theories provide justification for the influence of social media on identity development and self-expression.
3. What are the strategies for navigating social norms and expectations affecting Social Media Authenticity?

Methodology

This paper aims to examine the topic through a critical review of existing literature and an analysis of data drawn from primary and secondary sources, including official publications, textbooks, academic journals, and conference proceedings (qualitative and quantitative research), empirical and positional papers aim to examine social Media's Influence on Identity Development and Self-Expression in Adulthood. This is largely due to the limited available evidence on the specific impact on adults. This review followed Whittemore & Knafl's (2005) five-stage framework:

1. **Problem identification:** This review aims to answer questions on the impact of social media on identity development and self expression in adulthood.
2. **Literature search:** Literature sources included AJOL, Scopus, Google Scholar, Web of Science, PubMed, Nigerian university repositories, and relevant grey literature relating to the topic of discourse. The search strategy combined keywords and Boolean operators related to social media, identity, and adulthood. The primary search string was adapted to each database but generally followed this structure: social media OR social networking sites OR Facebook OR Instagram OR TikTok AND identity development OR self-concept OR self-expression OR self-presentation OR authenticity AND adult OR emerging adulthood.
3. **Data evaluation:** Data obtained from the search were screened for empirical or theoretical relevance and publication credibility.
4. **Data analysis:** Key findings from selected studies were extracted and

synthesized, with the interpretations articulated in the researcher's own words to inform the study's results.

5. **Presentation:** This study presents narrative synthesis with integrative comparisons. This approach allowed inclusion of quantitative studies, qualitative case analyses and mixed method studies thereby supporting a comprehensive synthesis of evidence.

Literature Review

For clarity, this section addresses the definition of some key variables, which include:

Social Media

Digital technology includes gadgets like computers, tablets and smartphones as well as the wide range of digital activities people do nowadays like using social networking sites and the internet (Omokhabi 2021). Digital technology use is broad and encompasses a variety of tools services and usage patterns that have grown and are rapidly changing people's lives (Omokhabi,2023). Obar and Wildman (2015) in Omokhabi, Omokhabi, & Oloyede, (2025) define social media as an internet-based tool that facilitates communication among users through an online community by allowing them to exchange ideas, knowledge, and other forms of expression social media is a form of digital communication that lets users build online communities and networks for uploading user-generated content, interacting with others, and exchanging information. Through messages, videos, images, and other content, users can interact with virtual communities and exchange information on these online platforms (Paljug, 2025). Sharma & Behl (2022, 549) define social media as programs that let users communicate and engage with others in order to produce and distribute new types of textual, audio, and visual material (Sharma & Behl, 2022). Using online platforms that require an internet connection is known as social media. According to Clement and Joseph (2019), it is a type of online communication that is used to build networks and communities as well as to exchange ideas, messages, and other content.

Social Media is a community of dynamic contact amongst individuals who use dedicated digital mediums for engagement, such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp twitter and LinkedIn (Chris, 2015 in Omokhabi et al 2025). Social media refers to Internet-based services that enable users to create a public or semi-public profile within a system, list other users with whom they are connected, and navigate both their own and other users' connections. Therefore, social media is the medium that enables two-way communication between people, enabling everyone with an internet account to express their thoughts to other social media users. The word "social media" refers to a broad category of technologies that enable users to connect with others, create and share material, and link up (Adegboyega, 2020). Social media can be divided into six different categories, according to Yahaya and Ayodeji (2019): virtual game worlds (World of Warcraft), blogs and microblogs (Twitter), collaborative projects (Wikipedia), content communities (YouTube), social networking

sites (Facebook), and virtual social worlds (Second Life) (20–23). Paljug (2025), however, divided social media into the following categories: community forums (Reddit, Discord, Clubhouse), video and photo sharing (Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Snapchat), visual curation and search (Pinterest, Houzz, Deviant Art), messaging (WhatsApp, Signal, WeChat, Marco Polo), microblogging (X, BlueSky, Mastodon, Threads), long-form blogging (Substack, Ghost), and professional networking (LinkedIn, Research Gate).

Identity Formation

Identity is a conscious sense of individual uniqueness and an unconscious striving for a continuous experience, which is attained via exploration and commitment, a process fueled by an increase in the navigation of relationships in larger social spheres during the transition to adulthood. Identity, which includes how people view themselves and their place in society, is a historically, socially, and culturally formed notion. Social contacts with friends, family, and social media, as well as one's relationships with them, are how identity is enacted. Social media use can be crucial to the process of constructing one's identity as one enters adulthood. Social media competences and behaviours are linked to identity construction (Jeyanthi, 2022).

Identity development is a complex process in which people create their sense of self, impacted by both internal and external forces. This process has numerous stages and can include in-depth investigation of personal responsibilities in a variety of social situations such as family dynamics, school, and community. Furthermore, societal, cultural, and personal factors such as gender and ethnicity play an important part in the construction of an identity. This is because, as society becomes more multicultural, a grasp of cultural identity enables people to navigate numerous identities at once. Furthermore, the modern environment of social media and popular culture has a tremendous influence on identity formation. (Cherry, 2023). One of the most important developmental tasks in adulthood is identity formation. Many psychological theories shed light on this process. Two important theories in this area are James Marcia's identity status theory, which divides identity development into four statuses according to commitment and exploration, and Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory, which emphasises the idea of an identity crisis experienced during adolescence (Pazer, 2024).

Self-Presentation

Self-presentation is the process by which people control the impressions that others have of them. It seeks to manipulate this information in order to impact others' impressions (Schlosser, 2020). Thus, self-presentation reflects people's qualities and ambitions, social roles, and audience perceptions in a given social situation (Zillich & Wunderlich, 2024). It is a natural process that occurs in the offline world in which people develop a mental image of themselves and expend psychological energy seeking to

guarantee that others see them in the same light (Jeyanthi, 2022).

Self-presentation refers to the behavior of conveying information or an impression about oneself to others, influenced by the presence of evaluative observers, and plays an important role in the development of identity. It involves how people manage the image they project to others, and social media has introduced new environments for selective self-presentation (the portrayal of a personal image that individuals wish for others to see, often seen in selfies and online profiles). Self-presentation is a reciprocal process that entails contemplation of an individual's identity and potential selves, along with consideration of the audience and social context (Pérez-Torres, 2024).

Self-presentation refers to "all actions aimed at influencing the perceptions others hold. People desire for others to perceive them in the same way they view themselves or, at the very least, to ensure that their true selves are accurately represented. Consequently, self-presentation encompasses both actions that actively promote a specific impression and defensive actions that help prevent a decline in one's reputation. Traditional theories characterise self-presentation as a purposeful behaviour that seeks to influence how others perceive oneself. This typically involves highlighting positive traits and creating a favourable impression (Wunderlich & Zillich, 2025).

Self-Disclosure, Impression Management, Social Comparison and Social Media Usage

Self-disclosure refers to the act of sharing and communicating personal details with others through the Internet (Masur, 2018). At its core, self-disclosure involves revealing personal information about oneself to someone else. This can encompass anything from trivial facts to deeply personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences. In face-to-face communication, self-disclosure typically unfolds gradually, fostering trust and intimacy over time. Various elements, including reciprocity, perceived risks, and the desire for social connection, influence the nature and level of self-disclosure. On social media platforms, users can reveal personal information by posting content or updating their profiles. Many users choose to share personal details online due to the anticipated attention, instant satisfaction, and encouragement from their friends (Ostendorf, Müller & Brand, 2020). Social media offers diverse opportunities for sharing, leading to enhanced interpersonal connections, improved relationship outcomes, and greater psychological wellness. Self-disclosure involves the act of sharing and communicating personal information with others via the Internet (Ostendorf, Müller & Brand, 2020).

On social media, the dynamics of sharing personal information have shifted considerably. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and X (previously known as Twitter) offer accessible ways for

individuals to reveal a wide range of personal details, including daily routines, opinions, significant life events, and emotional experiences. The audience for self-disclosure on these platforms is often unclear and widely varied, encompassing close family and friends, distant acquaintances, and even strangers. This diverse audience presents both advantages and challenges. While it facilitates the upkeep of weak connections and allows for information to reach a broad network, it can also blur the lines between what is private and what is public, raising issues regarding privacy and the risks of misunderstanding or misuse of shared content.

As noted by Luo and Hancock (2020), sharing personal information on social media can enhance the quality of relationships. This occurs because self-disclosure on these platforms can positively impact psychological well-being through feelings of connectedness, social support, the process of capitalisation, and psychological authenticity. The term "perceived connectedness" refers to the psychological yearning that reflects individuals' feelings of connection in their everyday lives. Social media facilitates visibility of others' responses through comments and 'Likes', which helps alleviate feelings of loneliness. Users who engage in self-disclosure on social media may experience a heightened sense of social support. Sharing personal experiences can lead to improved social support, resulting in higher levels of self-esteem and satisfaction with one's social media connections (Luo & Hancock, 2020).

Impression management

Impression management is a deliberate or involuntary process aimed at shaping how others perceive a person, event, or object by managing and controlling information during social interactions. It is a fundamental aspect of social exchanges, as individuals seek to portray themselves positively, accomplish particular objectives, or uphold a desired social identity. In direct interactions, managing impressions entails a variety of verbal and nonverbal signals, such as appearance, behaviour, and style of communication (Tashmin, 2016). Social media platforms provide unique tools and opportunities for managing one's image. Users can carefully curate their online profiles by choosing specific images, crafting well-thought-out posts, and emphasising their accomplishments or appealing traits. This grants individuals a significant level of control over how they present themselves, allowing them to create an idealised or aspirational version of who they are. Additionally, the asynchronous nature of online interactions gives individuals the chance for contemplation and revision, further aiding in the strategic development of their online identity (de Vaate et al., 2018).

Individuals can influence their behaviour and performance on social media through impression management to establish or modify the impressions others have of them, and to sustain those desired impressions. Those who possess a higher efficacy in impression management are likely to feel

more assured in their self-presentation on social media. This confidence may lead individuals to become more skilled at selecting and producing content that appeals to their audience, thereby enhancing their social status and popularity (Liu & Lei, 2025). Consequently, impression management serves as a significant motivation for users who engage actively in social media, as their self-efficacy in this area is positively associated with the quantity of their virtual friendships (Wang, Zhou, Yu & Li, 2020). Nonetheless, striving for a perfect online identity can result in stress and worry. The ongoing exposure and possibility of being judged by others can foster a need for continuous self-improvement. People might feel obligated to showcase a perpetually upbeat and accomplished version of themselves, which could cause a gap between their digital representation and their real-life experiences.

Social Comparison

Social comparison refers to the way individuals assess their skills, beliefs, and social status by looking at others. This inherent human behaviour serves multiple purposes, such as self-assessment, self-promotion, and personal growth. Comparisons can be upward (where one compares oneself to someone deemed superior) or downward (where one compares oneself to someone viewed as inferior) (Gerber, 2018). Social comparison is a basic human tendency to experience feelings of positivity or negativity about oneself based on comparisons with others. Consequently, individuals continuously assess themselves and others in terms of attractiveness, financial status, intelligence, and accomplishments (Verduyn, Gugushvili, Massar, Täht & Kross, 2020). Social media platforms offer a rich environment for social comparison. The ongoing flow of curated posts from friends, acquaintances, and even public figures presents endless chances for people to juxtapose their lives, appearances, successes, and belongings with those of others.

Upward social comparison is notably common on social media, where users frequently showcase idealised aspects of their lives, emphasising achievements, positive moments, and appealing qualities (Qiu, 2024). The widespread occurrence of upward social comparison on these platforms can have meaningful psychological effects. Studies indicate that regular exposure to idealised portrayals online may result in feelings of envy, inadequacy, reduced self-esteem, and even signs of depression. The selective nature of how people present themselves online means that individuals are often measuring their own behind-the-scenes" reality against others' highlight reels," establishing an unrealistic and often harmful benchmark for self-assessment. In contrast, while downward social comparison is less frequent in social media's curated settings, it can occasionally produce feelings of gratitude or boost self-esteem (McComb, Vanman & Tobin, 2023).

Interplay and Significances

The ideas of self-disclosure, impression management, and social comparison are closely connected in the realm of social media use. Self-disclosure, whether done deliberately or accidentally, serves as the foundational material for managing one's impression. People make strategic decisions about what to reveal and how to present it in order to shape a specific online persona. This carefully constructed self-presentation then serves as a reference point for social comparison by others (Paliszkiewicz & Mądra-Sawicka, 2016). The intrinsic feedback mechanisms found in social media, such as likes, comments, and shares, further enhance these interactions. Positive feedback can affirm an individual's self-presentation and inspire more self-disclosure, while negative or a lack of feedback may lead to changes in impression management approaches.

The drive for social approval through these metrics can act as a significant incentive for ongoing participation and the meticulous management of one's digital persona (Konovalova, Le Mens & Schöll, 2023). The long-term effects of these interconnected dynamics on social media are currently a topic of extensive investigation and discussion. Although social media offers opportunities for connection, community development, and information access, it also poses challenges regarding mental health, privacy, and the genuineness of social exchanges. Grasping the relationship between self-disclosure, impression management, and social comparison is essential for navigating the intricacies of the digital era and promoting healthier online behaviors (Omar & Ondimu, 2024).

Social Media as a Context for Identity Development

The following Mechanisms links social media to identity:

- Self-presentation: Users construct and share personal content, shaping how they are perceived. This contributes to how they see themselves and their social roles.
- Feedback and social comparison: Likes, comments, and comparisons with others influence self-evaluation and self-concept clarity.
- Digital mirroring: Online interactions act like a looking-glass self, where responses from others affect self-perception and identity consolidation.
- Platform norms: Different platforms encourage different styles of expression (e.g., Instagram's visuals vs. LinkedIn's professional persona), influencing identity portrayals in distinct ways.
- Social media thus serves as both social environment and identity toolkit, shaping how adults explore and endorse identities

Impact of Social Media on Identity Formation

Social media has become a vital component of human existence, influencing how identities are formed, which is traditionally viewed as an ongoing process throughout

one's life and has evolved in the context of social media. While Erik Erikson's psychosocial stages of development do not specifically address the digital landscape, they offer a fundamental framework for comprehending how people face identity challenges and cultivate their sense of self. In the stage of adulthood, significant developmental objectives include creating intimate relationships, fostering generativity, and achieving integrity. Social media can impact these objectives by offering new opportunities for connection, self-expression, and introspection (Darmawan & de Jesus Isaac, 2022). One major effect of social media is the online identity, which refers to the persona that a person creates and showcases in digital environments. This virtual self is often an edited and enhanced representation. The capability to modify, filter, and choose what information to share enables individuals to construct stories about themselves that reflect how they wish to be perceived. This careful selection can be a purposeful act of identity exploration, where people test out various aspects of their personality or interests (Tonks, 2021).

The feedback received through social media is crucial for shaping one's identity. Positive interactions can validate an individual's self-image and strengthen specific identity characteristics. On the other hand, minimal engagement or negative comments may result in self-doubt or a reconsideration of how one presents themselves online. Although this external approval is not the only factor affecting identity, it can greatly impact how adults view their value and position within society. The pressure to align with perceived social expectations or to showcase an "ideal" version of oneself can create identity tension, resulting in psychological discomfort due to the disparity between one's true self and the self that is portrayed (Sharma et al., 2024). Moreover, social media platforms frequently introduce users to a wide range of diverse identities and lifestyles. This exposure can be both beneficial and difficult. On one hand, it has the potential to enhance a person's understanding of various viewpoints and choices, which may result in the broadening of their identity or the embrace of new values. Conversely, it can lead to social comparisons, as individuals measure their own lives and accomplishments against the seemingly flawless lifestyles exhibited by others online. This upward social comparison can result in feelings of inadequacy, envy, and a reduced sense of self-worth, ultimately affecting the stability and assurance of one's identity (Lüders, Dinkelberg & Quayle, 2022). The idea of identity diffusion can be intensified by social media. With a massive influx of information and countless possible identities to investigate, certain individuals may find it challenging to establish a consistent sense of self. The ease with which one can change identities or interests on social media may obstruct the formation of a stable and unified self-concept. This can impact older adults who are experiencing major life changes or are looking for new ways to express themselves.

Impact of Social Media on Self-presentation

The rise and widespread use of social media platforms have significantly altered the way individuals present themselves, providing them with unique tools and opportunities to craft and oversee their public personas. At its essence, self-presentation refers to the effort made by individuals to influence the perceptions others have of them (Yang, Holden, Carter & Webb, 2018). This intrinsic human activity, once largely limited to in-person exchanges and some mediated forms, has been enhanced and transformed by the distinct features of social media.

One of the most important effects of social media on how individuals present themselves is the increased level of intentionality and control it provides, enabling users to carefully craft and refine their self-representations before sharing them publicly. This practice, commonly known as impression management, entails making strategic decisions regarding the information to disclose, the images to upload, and the persona to convey. Users can thoughtfully design their profiles, choose appealing photos, and write considerate captions, all aimed at showcasing an idealised version of themselves. This intentional construction of identity marks a shift from more spontaneous and less regulated forms of self-expression, resulting in a more polished and frequently aspirational self-image (Hollenbaugh, 2021).

The ongoing and visible nature of social media content is vital in influencing how individuals present themselves. Unlike fleeting discussions, posts and profiles on social media can remain available for long durations, creating a digital trace that impacts a person's online reputation. This lasting nature prompts users to consider the long-term consequences of their self-presentation, as previous posts can be readily accessed and evaluated (Fuchs, 2021). Additionally, the knowledge of a potentially large and varied audience shapes self-presentation methods. People often alter their self-presentation based on who they believe is watching, whether that includes friends, family, coworkers, or prospective employers. This awareness of the audience can result in a situation described as context collapse, where different social settings converge on a single platform, compelling individuals to juggle conflicting expectations and showcase a more generalised, often less detailed, version of themselves (Omar & Ondimu, 2024).

Additionally, social media platforms offer a distinct setting for front stage and back stage performances, as described by Erving Goffman. The front stage is where individuals showcase a polished version of themselves, aligning with social norms and expectations. On the other hand, the backstage allows individuals to let down their guard and be more genuine. Social media often complicates these distinctions, as users purposely share elements of their backstage to seem more genuine or relatable while still upholding a meticulously crafted front stage identity. This calculated authenticity is a crucial element of self-presentation in the digital era, where individuals strive to merge idealised images with a sense of authentic connection (Qian, 2022). Ultimately, the

feedback mechanisms present in social media, such as likes, comments, and shares, offer immediate and measurable validation for self-representations. This ongoing feedback loop can shape future self-presentation strategies, as individuals might modify their content depending on how well their past posts performed. The urge for positive recognition and social acceptance can result in a performance for the algorithm, where users customise their content to enhance engagement and visibility. This can initiate a cycle where self-presentation increasingly relies on external validation instead of internal genuineness (Bakić-Mirić, 2018).

Theoretical Perspectives

Classic identity theories (Erikson; James Marcia)

These theories frame identity as involving exploration and commitment across life tasks. Identity development in adulthood often includes career decisions, relational commitments, and value integration. Though research with adults in digital contexts is emergent, these frameworks remain useful for interpreting how online behavior intersects with identity processes. The Erikson theory was propounded by Erik H. Erikson in Mid-20th century which he proposed as part of his eight stages of psychosocial development in Childhood and Society. According to him, Human development unfolds across eight life stages, each involving a psychosocial crisis.

Identity and Role Confusion is particularly relevant to identity formation during adolescence and extending into young adulthood, people explore values, beliefs, goals, and social roles. A successful resolution creates a coherent sense of self that persists into adulthood. Social media creates new platforms for ongoing identity exploration and self-presentation well into adulthood. People upload curated profiles, adopt digital personas, or participate in communities that help them redefine values and social roles in a publicly visible way. Rather than only offline relationships shaping identity, feedback on social media (likes, comments) can affirm, challenge, or reshape self-conceptions. Imagine an adult posting about a new career path or hobby on LinkedIn or Instagram. The feedback they receive praise, critique, or more engagement becomes part of how they see themselves and influences their narrative about who they are and what matters to them as a person.

James Marcia's ego-identity status framework extends Erikson's ideas, suggesting that identity exploration and commitment can reoccur across adulthood. Adults may revisit identity domains (for example career, relationships) and use new tools like social media to negotiate them. Marcia (1980) explains identity formation as a developmental process shaped by two key dimensions which are exploration which is the extent to which individuals examine and evaluate different values, beliefs, and goals and commitment which is the degree of personal investment and engagement in those choices. Based on the interaction of these dimensions, four identity statuses are identified and they include; **Identity**

diffusion that occurs when adolescents neither actively explore options nor commit to any identity domain, **Moratorium** which describes a phase in which adolescents are deeply involved in exploring various alternatives but have not yet made firm commitments, **Foreclosure** which refers to a situation where commitments are made without prior exploration, often by adopting choices imposed by others and finally, **identity achievement** is reached when adolescents, following a period of active exploration, make clear and self-chosen commitments within a particular identity domain (Marcia, 1980). As Marcia (1980) pointed out, a certain level of exploration and commitment is required to develop a stable identity. Different statuses of identity development (diffusion, moratorium, foreclosure, and achievement), based on the degree of exploration and commitment, are expressed in digital spaces (Cingel et al., 2022; Raiziene et al., 2022; Shankleman et al., 2021).

This theory is relevant to present study because it shows Adults use social media to experiment with values, roles, or communities online (for example joining interest groups, exploring new career identities, expressing political views). A person in moratorium might try various online personas or niche communities before finding a stable identity (for example fitness influencer or artist or educator). Those with identity achievement may use social media to consolidate and showcase values they are deeply committed to. An adult that is curious about environmental activism might join social justice circles on Facebook or TikTok. Through engagement and deeper reflection, they could integrate these activist values into their core identity, using posts and communities to refine and express who they are.

Digital Self-Presentation theory

Self-presentation theory describes how individuals manage impressions others form of them. Self-presentation theory suggests individuals strategically manage impressions in social contexts. Digital self-presentation refers to how people strategically control the online impressions they make on others. This idea traces back to Erving Goffman's (1956/1959) foundational work on self-presentation and impression management in social interactions which was later adapted into digital contexts by communication scholars. Social media intensify these dynamics by enabling curated profiles and audience feedback.

Computer-Mediated Communication Theories

The hyperpersonal model of communication was conceived in the 1990s and has driven much of the research into online impression management (Scott & Fullwood, 2020). The hyperpersonal model was first developed in 1996 and revised in 2007 by Joseph B. Walther. This model illustrates how computer-mediated communication (CMC) can lead to intensified self-presentation and relationship formation dynamics through selective disclosure and editing of posts (for example selective profile curation). Mediation tools like profile bios, photos,

emojis, and hashtags enrich self-expression but also introduce pressures to perform idealized versions of self. CMC affords greater control over messages than face-to-face interaction, enabling users to edit, delete, or amplify details before sharing (Walther, 2007). This model explains why online identity can be more idealized than offline identity because users shape how they are seen rather than how they actually are. Adults may use this affordance to present professional, social, or relational identities that align with aspirational self-images, affecting self-esteem and roles in society (Scott & Fullwood, 2020).

Social Media and Adult Identity Processes: Benefits and Opportunities

Adults use social media for both self-expression and self-narration that is, telling a story about who they are, what they value, and what they aspire to be. Many individuals curate posts to affirm personal interests, achievements, and relationships, which can strengthen a sense of continuity and coherence in self-identity. A large empirical study of Facebook users found that authentic self-expression on social media correlates with greater life satisfaction and subjective well-being a central component of a coherent identity in adulthood. Users whose online self-presentation aligned with their offline personality reported higher satisfaction with life (Bailey, Matz, Youyou, & Iyengar, 2020). Studies found that adolescents who frequently used social media, actively shared content, and participated in leisure-related online activities demonstrated greater clarity and confidence in their sense of identity (Lee et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2021). Platforms' visual and textual affordances enable diverse modes of self-expression. For example, curated fashion content and personal style posts may signal identity commitments, values, and group affiliations in adulthood. One study focusing on young adults found that adherence to social media-driven fashion standards correlated strongly with self-identity constructs. Similarly, research on self-presentation intensity and self-concept clarity indicates that social media self-presentation practices (both positive and authentic) can enhance clarity of self-concept as individuals reflect on and integrate experiences and self-images shared online (Zou, Zhang, & Wang, 2025). Emerging adulthood overlaps with early adult identity consolidation, making this evidence informative for adult development.

Identity exploration and formation

A quantitative study of young adults (18–30) found a significant positive correlation between social media use and identity formation suggesting these online activities contribute to how adults build and express their identity (Kehinde-Awoyele & Oyewole, 2024). However, differences between online and offline identities also emerged. Reviews consistently report that what adults do on social media matters more for identity outcomes than how much time they spend online. Active engagement, self-presentation choices, and reflective posting are more linked to identity clarity than mere screen time. Social media contributes to identity development by providing interactive features that enable users to explore and

negotiate both their individual and collective identities (Kehinde-Awoyele & Oyewole, 2024). Similarly, Boyd and Ellison (2023) note that ongoing engagement on social platforms allows users to continuously reconstruct their self-understanding in response to changing social expectations and cultural norms. A systematic synthesis of existing studies indicates that identity development is influenced less by the sheer amount of time spent on social media and more by the specific activities individuals engage in while using these platforms and play a role in identity development (Avci, Baams, Kretschmer, 2025).

Impression Management (Authentic and Idealized Self-Presentation)

Research on emerging adults (college freshmen) shows nuanced effects as findings revealed the diverse associations between online self-presentation and identity development at the college transition that is authentic online self-presentation is linked with higher self-esteem and identity clarity, while deeper strategic performance can relate to lower clarity, especially without awareness or mindfulness (Yang, Holden & Carter, 2017). Authentic expression tends to support stronger identity clarity and well-being. In summary, social media appears to play a significant role in identity exploration for individuals who engage actively, as presenting oneself in ways that reflect one's authentic self helps strengthen self-concept clarity. Platforms that encourage spontaneous sharing (for example BeReal) have been examined for how they reduce staged self-presentation and foster more authentic identity expression, though effects vary by context. Idealized or highly curated selves can undermine coherent identity and create tension between online and offline self-views.

Social Comparison, Feedback, and Validation

One of the strongest mechanisms linking social media to adult identity is social comparison adults evaluate themselves based on others' curated posts. This process can influence self-esteem and identity certainty, especially when feedback (likes, comments) becomes a metric for social validation. Individuals who received feedback from their audience experienced a strengthening of their self-concept clarity (Bell, 2019). Research shows validation dynamics, such as approval indicators, shape self-perception and self-worth, potentially heightening anxiety when users tie their self-value to online reception (Marquès-Donoso, Carrasco, Martínez-Hernández & Revuelta, 2025). Comparison can also prompt identity exploration by exposing adults to alternative ways of thinking and behaving, but upward social comparisons often increase self-doubt and uncertainty. Extended exposure to idealized content online can prompt individuals to alter their appearance (Ceilutka, 2022), reinforce the internalization of beauty standards (Rüther, Jahn & Marksteiner, 2023)., and heighten feelings of frustration or rejection when perceived gaps between the ideal and the self emerge (Da Silva & Pires, 2019). Moreover, contact with idealized or deceptive online content can skew perceptions of both the self and others

(Samoilova, 2023) while excessive engagement may increase anxiety and erode self-esteem by tying personal value to social validation and group approval Saiphoo, Halevi & Vahedi, 2020).

Positive Opportunities and Social Connectedness

Social media can serve as a space of belonging and community for adults with shared interests, identities, or life experiences (e.g., professional groups, hobby communities). Van der Velden et al. (2023) argue that social media platforms allow individuals to connect with others who share similar interests, fostering online communities that offer emotional support and promote a feeling of belonging. These environments offer social support, validation, and opportunities to express facets of identity that might not be visible offline. During this time, heavy use of digital media has been associated with adolescents' psychological well-being, revealing both adverse outcomes such as heightened anxiety and depressive symptoms and positive effects, particularly in helping them sustain social connections during periods of isolation (Marciano, Ostroumova, Schulz, Camerini, 2022). At the same time, social media contributes to the construction of collective identities and promotes community involvement (Avci, Baams & Kretschmer, 2024) while simultaneously exposing users to digital violence and offering platforms for safe interaction, self-expression, and social cohesion across diverse groups (Gonzáles-Tenelema, et al 2024; Zelenin, 2024; Collins, 2024; Echesony, 2024). Affirming interactions such as supportive feedback from peers can strengthen identity commitments and contribute to self-acceptance.

Risks and Challenges

Self-doubt, Identity Confusion and Distress

Intensive self-presentation and constant comparison can diffuse a coherent sense of self, especially when different platforms encourage divergent personas. Managing multiple online identities may fragment adults' sense of continuity and consistency, contributing to identity confusion. Social media has thus become a space for constructing multiple versions of the self, aligned with role theory and the management of different facets of social identity (Ruiz, Oberst, Carbonell-Sanchez, 2013). One study reported that time spent on social media was associated with identity-related distress among users (Cyr et al.,2015). Appearance-based comparisons on social media were linked to increased body dissatisfaction (Fioravanti et al.,2022), while specific forms of engagement such as social comparison and both active and passive use were associated with symptoms of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress (Keles et al., 2020). Adolescents who portray a fabricated version of themselves online, rather than their true selves, are more likely to experience reduced self-concept clarity (Davis, 2013; Fullwood et al., 2016; Richardson, 2016; Yang et al., 2017; Pangrazio, 2019)

Pressure to Conform

The curated nature of social media focused on likes and trends may pressure users toward conformity and idealisation, which can undermine authentic self-expression. Zengin and Yiğit (2023) argue that the pressure to conform to idealised portrayals can lead to the creation of fragmented or inconsistent self-concepts. These pressures can also disproportionately affect individuals who equate digital performance with self-worth. Recent studies indicate that excessive use of social media can have harmful effects on mental health, including reduced attention, lowered self-esteem, and emotional dysregulation (Ramadhan et al.,2024; Du et al., 2024; Varela et al., 2024; Sevilla-Fernández, et al., 2025).

Strategies for Navigating Social Norms and Expectations Affecting Social Media Authenticity

Over the last twenty years, social networking platforms have become integral to people's daily lives, serving as key spaces for communication, entertainment, and learning. This widespread use has led international organisations to advocate for more mindful and responsible engagement with digital environments. Navigating the expectations and norms of social media to uphold authenticity requires a complex strategy, incorporating aspects of self-presentation, social influence, and online communication. In this setting, authenticity signifies how closely a person's online identity matches their genuine self, values, and convictions, rather than being predominantly influenced by outside pressures or the quest for social approval (Burgess, Poell, Marwick, 2017).

One fundamental approach is cultivating self-awareness and being intentional. People need to begin by recognising their values and defining what authenticity means to them before they can effectively express it online. This requires a deliberate choice to favour true self-expression over adhering to trends or expectations that seem popular. For example, instead of posting solely for the sake of gaining likes, an authentic individual may choose to share experiences that truly resonate with them, regardless of whether they are mainstream or unconventional. This concept aligns with Goffman's dramaturgical theory, where individuals shape their impressions; however, in terms of authenticity, the "performance" is more reflective of their backstage self (Jansson-Boyd, 2015).

An important approach is selective engagement and awareness of the audience. Social media channels often feature a varied audience, each possessing its own norms and expectations. Maintaining authenticity can be achieved by recognising who you are interacting with and adjusting your content accordingly, all while staying true to core values. This does not imply being insincere, but rather involves determining suitable levels of openness and expression for different social groups (Bakić-Mirić, 2018). Additionally, the ability to withstand social comparison and the desire for validation are crucial. Social media frequently encourages a climate of upward social comparison,

where people measure themselves against idealised portrayals of others, resulting in the urge to conform or showcase an unrealistic persona. Authenticity necessitates resisting this influence and acknowledging that online indicators such as likes and followers do not determine one's value or true identity. This requires developing a robust sense of self-esteem that is not reliant on external approval and understanding the curated nature of the majority of online material (Rössler, 2017). Moreover, it is crucial to engage in strategic self-disclosure and establish boundaries. Being authentic does not require total openness. People have the option to select which parts of their lives to reveal and which to keep private, thus preserving control over their online story. This requires setting personal limits concerning the kind of content shared, the posting frequency, and the degree of interaction with others. This intentional choice enhances a more genuine online presence by ensuring that the content shared is a thoughtful reflection rather than a spontaneous response to social pressures (Greene & Burleson, 2003).

Gaps and Directions for Future Research

Most existing systematic reviews focus on adolescents as there is a shortage of lifespan research explicitly addressing adults and later identity development in digital contexts. While studies with adults exist, systematic work specifically on mid-life or older adults is limited thereby reflecting a gap in the literature. Future studies should explore the effects of social media influencers on the identity of adults. Most studies are cross-sectional, making it difficult to say whether social media causes identity change or simply reflects ongoing identity processes hence more longitudinal and experimental studies are needed to distinguish cause from consequence, explore cultural differences, and examine how identity processes evolve with age. Much research depends on surveys, which can be influenced by self-perception biases. This is consistent with the views of Avci, Baams & Kretschmer (2025) that most studies on social media use and identity development are predominantly cross-sectional hence there is need for a well-designed longitudinal study to better understand the relationship.

Discussion of Findings

Theories of identity development show that identity is developed across the lifespan of the individual and social media help create idealized profile based on the individual's preference. Social media help to show to the world who adult is and can make or mar the identity formation process. Social media promotes coherence in identity formation, identity exploration, diversity in self-expression, offers opportunity for connection, self-expression, introspection, feedback and validation of self-image. The embrace of new values, broadening of identity, social comparison and refining of self-presentation are all facilitated by social media. Finding is consistent with that of Schlenker (2003) who opined that the formation of identity and shaping of beliefs (self-concept), values, and behaviors can be influenced by social interactions with others as an audience. Also, Hollenbaugh (2021)

suggests that the effectiveness of self-presentation may be used as feedback to influence future impression management. Social comparison promotes self-knowledge, self-improvement, and self-evaluation in adolescence (Lajnef, 2023). In the same vein, Kehinde-Awoyele & Oyewole (2024) results underscore the benefits of social media in creating a sense of belonging and supporting identity exploration. In digital spaces, adolescents can interact, display, and receive feedback about themselves, immediately contributing to the formation of their self-concept and exploration of their identity (Shankleman et al., 2021; Cingel et al., 2022).

According to majority of the studies on social media have been limited to the influence on well-being and the negative consequences rather than on identity (Shankleman et al., 2021). However present study explores both negative and positive consequences on identity. The risks and challenges of social media may include self-doubt, identity confusion and distress, pressure to conform amongst other mental effects vis-à-vis low self-esteem, fractured self-concept, reduced attention and so on. According to Thomas and Hancock, (2022), reliance on social validation through values such as likes and comments can lead to external self assessment, contributing to mental health problems such as increased anxiety and self-esteem.

The exchange that occurs in online communities can facilitate the dynamics of identity construction, offering opportunities to explore, maintain, or reconsider their commitments (Crocetti, 2017; Branje et al., 2021; Noon et al., 2023). These risks and challenges will be reduced when people start embibing true self-expression, develop a strong awareness of their audience, resist social comparison and the need for external approval, practice self-disclosure and set firm boundaries on content shared. Kehinde-Awoyele & Oyewole (2024) found support systems, such as counseling and peer support groups, could address identity challenges by helping individuals build authentic identities and navigate the pressures of social media. However, it is necessary to expand research on the effects of social media influencers on the identity of adults. Also, there is need for more experimental and longitudinal studies on the topic rather than survey. Social media enhances a sense of connection with others and increases peer relationships that are more extensive than they are realized in the real world.

Conclusion

Social media has undeniably become a dominant force in shaping adult identity formation and self-presentation. Its platforms provide opportunities for connection, exploration, and self-expression, but they also introduce unique pressures that blur the lines between authentic and curated identities. Social media shapes identity development and self-expression in adulthood through mechanisms of self-presentation, social feedback, and reflective engagement. Theories of identity development, such as Erikson's psychosocial model and Marcia's identity status framework, remain relevant

in understanding how adults navigate challenges of self-definition in the digital age. At the same time, dynamics such as self-disclosure, impression management, and social comparison reveal both the empowering and constraining effects of online engagement.

While social media enables adults to experiment with different aspects of identity and receive immediate feedback, it can also heighten vulnerability to negative evaluations, unrealistic comparisons, and identity diffusion. While research shows positive associations between authentic online expression and identity clarity, there are also risks related to idealized portrayals and social comparison. Authenticity therefore emerges as a central challenge balancing the desire for validation with the need for genuine self-expression. For many, social media is not just a reflection of identity but an active space where identity is constructed, negotiated, and performed. In conclusion, social media's influence on adult identity formation is profound and multidimensional. Its role can be positive when used mindfully to foster self-discovery, social support, and cultural understanding. However, without critical awareness and self-regulation, it may contribute to stress, low self-esteem, and fractured self-concepts. However, due to limitations in existing studies, more longitudinal research with diverse adult samples is needed to fully understand causality and the long-term effects of digital self-expression on adult identity. Future research should continue to explore strategies that empower individuals to harness social media for personal growth while safeguarding psychological well-being. By recognising both its opportunities and risks, adults can navigate digital spaces in ways that strengthen rather than destabilise their sense of self.

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