Navigating Digital Selves: Social Media, Self-Image, and Identity Formation among Adolescents in the Educational Technology Era

Indah Novania Adhana[1*]

[1]Economics Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Pamulang University, South Tangerang, Indonesia

Abstract: Social media creates a complex space for adolescents to negotiate their identity, which often results in dual self-image and social pressure. This study aims to understand the phenomenon of self-image and social identity formation among adolescents through social media. Using a qualitative approach, this study analyzes the responses of 12 female respondents aged 18-24 years in Indonesia, collected through an online survey. The results show dualism in self-construction, where adolescents tend to present a boulder and more curated version of themselves on social media compared to their quieter real lives. In addition, social pressure and comparison emerge as the most significant impacts, which often trigger feelings of inferiority and insecurity. However, social media also plays a positive role in boosting self-confidence and motivating self-development. Over time, adolescents show an evolution in digital awareness by becoming more selective in sharing information. This study concludes that social media functions as a double-edged sword for adolescent identity, requiring balance and good digital literacy to navigate its positive and negative impacts.

Keywords: Adolescents, self-image, social comparison, social identity, social media.

Introduction

In the digital age, social media has become an integral part of adolescents' lives, functioning not only as a means of communication but also as a main stage for identity exploration and construction. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter/X allow users to present themselves in a customized version, often highlighting the most interesting and perfectly curated aspects of their lives (Twenge, 2017). This phenomenon raises crucial questions about how adolescents' self-image and social identity are formed, especially when there is a discrepancy between the "self" displayed online and the "self" in the real world.

Previous research has shown that social media can have positive effects, such as increasing social support and self-confidence (Best et al., 2014). However, it also provides a platform for constant social comparison, which can lead to decreased mental health, anxiety, and dissatisfaction with oneself (Vogel et al., 2014). Adolescents, who are in a critical stage of identity formation (Erikson, 1968), are particularly vulnerable to these influences. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the emergence of Fear

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of Missing Out (FoMO), which is the anxiety of missing out on experiences or information that others are experiencing (Przybylski et al., 2014).

Although many studies have discussed the impact of social media, few have focused on in-depth qualitative narratives of adolescents' life experiences, particularly in the Indonesian context. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by answering the question: How do adolescents in Indonesia experience and understand the formation of their self-image and social identity through interactions on social media? This study is expected to provide richer and more contextual insights into the dynamics of digital identity among adolescents.

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological study design, which aims to understand the meaning behind individuals' life experiences of a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The phenomenon studied is the formation of adolescents' self-image and social identity on social media.

The participants in this study were 12 female adolescents aged 18 to 24 years old, coming from various cities in Indonesia such as Jember, Majalengka, Denpasar, and Tangerang. Participants were selected purposively, namely those who actively used social media for at least two hours per day, had at least one active account on a popular platform, and were willing to participate. Data were collected through an open online questionnaire distributed via Google Form. The questionnaire consisted of five main open-ended questions exploring: (1) the initial reasons for using social media, (2) the differences between online and offline self-image, (3) experiences of social pressure or comparison, (4) the influence of social media on self-perception, and (5) lessons learned.

The data obtained was analyzed using thematic analysis techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process included: (1) rereading the analysis of all responses to understand the entire data set, (2) identifying initial codes from interesting responses, (3) grouping the codes into potential themes, (4) reviewing and refining the themes, and (5) defining and naming each theme. To maintain confidentiality, all respondent identities were anonymized.

Result and Discussion

Based on thematic analysis of the survey data, four main themes were found that describe the experiences of adolescents in shaping their self-image and social identity on social media.

Dual Self

Self-Image Construction in Digital and Physical Spaces The first prominent theme is the dualism of self-image. Most respondents reported significant differences between their self-image in the real world and on social media. In the real world, many described themselves as "quiet" or "shy." In contrast, on social media, they feel more courageous to express themselves, showing their "narcissistic" side, or sharing content that does not directly reflect who they are. One respondent stated, "In the real world, I'm quiet, lol, but since I started college yesterday, I've been trying not to be quiet anymore... on social media, I'm a bit narcissistic, I also like to upload whatever I want." This phenomenon is in line with Goffman's dramaturgy theory (1959), in which social media functions as a "front stage" where individuals perform their best, while the "back stage" is a more authentic real life. This curated identity construction is also in line with the concept of digital identity, where individuals have the freedom to shape and present themselves across a spectrum (Papacharissi, 2011).

Social Pressure and Comparison as Dominant Impacts

Social Pressure and Comparison as Dominant Impacts The second theme is social pressure stemming from comparison. Almost all respondents admitted to feeling stressed or making social comparisons when viewing other people's posts on social media. The sources of pressure varied, ranging from the number of followers, academic or career achievements, luxurious lifestyles, to physical appearance. One respondent shared their experience, "Back when I was in high school, I was really insecure to the point of hating myself. I always felt insecure seeing my friends' stories of them always hanging out with their gang. "These findings reinforce Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) and the concept of FoMO (Przybylski et al., 2014), which explain that individuals have a natural tendency to compare

themselves to others, which often leads to feelings of inferiority. Recent studies also show that exposure to idealized body images on social media platforms like Instagram significantly contributes to body dissatisfaction (Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2019).

Double-Edged Impact

Between Increased Self-Confidence and Psychological Burden The third theme shows the ambivalent nature of social media's influence. Social media's influence on how teens view themselves is double-edged. On the one hand, social media has a positive impact. Respondents reported that they became "more confident," "more concerned about their appearance," and motivated to "improve themselves" after seeing positive content. On the other hand, negative effects such as feelings of inferiority, overthinking, and pressure to appear perfect are also very real. One respondent concluded, "Quite a lot. I became more concerned about my appearance and the way I speak. But I also learned to be confident and appreciate myself." This shows that social media is a complex environment that can trigger personal growth as well as psychological stress. These findings are in line with research showing that the impact of social media on adolescent well-being is individual and not uniform (Beyens et al., 2020).

Evolution of Awareness

From Oversharing to Digital Selectivity, the fourth theme is the development of digital awareness over time. Interestingly, as their experience grew, respondents showed progress in their digital literacy. There was a growing awareness of the importance of being more selective in sharing personal information. They learned that "not everything has to be advertised." One respondent stated, "I realized that I don't have to share everything, even with people who are close to me. I have mostly online friends, so sometimes I confide in them more. But now I am more selective." This change indicates an adaptive learning process, in which adolescents gradually develop coping strategies to understand the complexity of digital social interactions in order to protect their mental well-being. Awareness of privacy and the importance of authenticity are key to this evolution (Ruotsalainen & Rönkkö, 2018; Valkenburg et al., 2022).

Conclusion

This study concludes that social media plays a complex and multidimensional role in shaping the self-image and social identity of adolescent girls in Indonesia. Four main findings, namely self-image dualism, the dominance of social pressure, ambivalent impacts, and the evolution of digital awareness, illustrate that social media is not a monolith that only has positive or negative impacts. Instead, it is a dynamic space where adolescents continuously negotiate, understand, and reinterpret their identities.

The implications of this research are very important. For parents and educators, it is important to facilitate open communication with adolescents about their online experiences, not only by restricting access, but also by building digital literacy and mental health. For adolescents themselves, awareness of the dual impact of social media can encourage them to become more critical and wise users. Further research is recommended to involve participants with greater gender diversity and use quantitative approaches to measure the correlation between the intensity of social media use and levels of self-confidence and anxiety, as suggested in a recent review.

Author Contributions
Conceptualization, methodology, validation, formal analysis, investigation, data curation, writing and preparation of the original draft, writing and review, and editing. The authors have read and approved the published version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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