Social Media as Self-Reflection: Transforming Student Identity in the Digital Era

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the role of social media on the self-identity development of university students in the digital era. Using a descriptive qualitative method, this research investigates how social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Twitter and Facebook shape students' self-expression and identity construction. Data was gathered through in-depth interviews and a comprehensive literature review. The research reveals that social media provides a space for university students to experiment with self-identity outside of traditional social norms. However, it also poses challenges, such as social pressure and a potential gap between digital and real identities. Key findings suggest that social media can have both positive and negative impacts on students' identity formation. On the one hand, social media enables the development of self-confidence; on the other hand, it can cause social anxiety due to constant comparison with others. The research highlights the importance of wise use of social media in the context of identity formation, taking into account the psychological and social impacts that may arise.

Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technology has transformed various aspects of life, including how individuals construct and express their self-identity. As a key component of this digital landscape, social media plays a pivotal role particularly for students in the critical stage of identity exploration. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and Facebook serve as spaces for self-expression, communication, and the reinforcement of desired identities (Azizah, 2023). One of the largest populations of internet users is teenagers. This shows that their private space is already integrated with the public space. Social media is a means of self-expression, usually focusing on sharing information about oneself on various social media sites. For example, statuses, photos, videos, chats, comments, etc. The purpose is only for other people who use the account to know.

Social media has become one of the places that can help teenagers find their identity. In addition, teenagers see social media as an ideal tool to try and explore their identity search because the way they interact and communicate with it is not too difficult or intimidating.

Social media can be addictive because of its ease of use. Traditionally, self-identity forms through social interactions and personal experiences. However, in the digital age, it is increasingly shaped by students' online self-presentation. Social media has evolved beyond a mere communication tool into a platform for crafting and curating self-image. On one hand, it offers freedom to experiment with identity without rigid social constraints. On the other hand, it introduces pressures such as idealized beauty standards, popularity metrics, and achievement benchmarks tied to "likes" and "followers" (Putra & Kurniawan, 2022).

As digital natives, students are profoundly influenced by social media content and interactions. Through social media, they can construct a self-image that they consider ideal or in line with current popular norms. However, there is a risk that this digital identity may deviate from their true identity, impacting their emotional and psychological well-being (Aji dan Rahayu, 2024). Data from the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII) shows that internet users in Indonesia accounted for 34.9 percent of the population in 2014, with 88.1 million people out of Indonesia's 252.4 million inhabitants; this figure rose to 28.6 percent in 2015 (APJII, 2019). In West Sumatra Province, internet users accounted for 35%, or 1.8 million people out of a population of 5 million, and continued to increase year on year (APJII, 2019). Digital identity theory was used in this study. This theory is crucial to understanding how people form their identities online. This theory states that digital identity consists of many things, such as how people choose to show themselves and how they interact online (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). How individuals "play roles" in social interactions was described by Goffman (1959) in "Self-Presentation in Daily Life". This also applies to digital identity. According to Gofman, this theoretical approach is used to understand how people present themselves on social media, choose to share information, and build an ideal self-image in the era of digital disruption.

Self-identity is defined as an individual's awareness of identifying and giving meaning to themselves as a distinct person, possessing relatively strong beliefs, and playing a significant role in societal life. Adolescents form their identity by integrating previous identities and creating new psychological structures with distinctive characteristics or traits that they perceive and consider true about themselves. Those who have a sense of self-identity exhibit a number of characteristics. These characteristics include self-concept, self-evaluation, self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-confidence, responsibility, commitment, perseverance, and independence. These characteristics complement and support one another to form a synergy, which causes a person to become more mature.

This challenge leads to conflicts between digital identity and personal identity, which can be stressful for students in their daily lives. Many studies have shown that social media plays a role in identity formation, but its influence can be positive or negative, depending on how individuals utilize it. For example, social media can be a tool for developing self-confidence and a strong sense of identity when used wisely, but it can also be a source of social anxiety if used to constantly compare oneself to others (Wulansari et al., 2024). Based on this phenomenon, this article aims to explore the role of social media in the formation of students' self-identity in the digital era, as well as the impact of this phenomenon on their psychological and social well-being.

Method

This research employed a qualitative research design with a descriptive approach, aiming to explore the influence of social media on self-identity development among adolescents and young adults . The study focused on individuals aged 12 to 17 years (junior and senior high

school students) in Lampung, as well as university students from various regions. The qualitative approach was chosen to gain in-depth understanding of participants' subjective experiences, values, and behavioral changes related to social media use. The research design aligns with a case study methodology, which allows for an intensive examination of a specific phenomenon within its real-life context.

Data were collected through a combination of in-depth semi-structured interviews, field observations, and document analysis. The interviews were conducted with 20 participants, including high school students and university students who are active users of social media platforms. The selection of participants employed purposive sampling based on their relevance to the research objectives. Interviews were carried out via online platforms such as WhatsApp and Instagram to ensure accessibility and convenience. Field observations and secondary data (literature studies and documents) were used to complement and triangulate the findings. All participants gave informed consent, and ethical considerations were addressed following standard qualitative research protocols (Mirza et al., 2023).

The data analysis was conducted through thematic analysis, involving data familiarization, coding, identification of recurrent themes, and interpretation. Themes were drawn inductively from the interview transcripts and supporting documents. The data were analyzed manually using coding techniques to identify patterns in how social media affects emotional states, behavior, and value orientation. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the study applied data triangulation, researcher reflection (reflexivity), and member checking. This methodological rigor ensures the validity and reliability of the qualitative insights presented in the study.

Findings

Studies show that social media plays an important role in students' self-reflection and identity formation in the digital age. An online survey and in-depth interviews with 100 students from various universities showed that 82% of respondents actively use social media to express their aspirations, values, and outlook on life. Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) have become important platforms for students to showcase their social and personal identities. The majority of respondents (76%) stated that they consciously create content that reflects who they are or who they want to present to the digital public. This indicates a process of self-branding and identity construction. Interestingly, however, 64% of respondents also said that this process made them clearer about their personal values and life goals. In other words, digital practices are now more reflective than performative.

Putri et al., (2023) research shows that many teenagers use multiple types of social media simultaneously, as indicated by the research results showing that 42.7 percent of teenagers use Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram. This indicates that most teenagers use Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram more frequently than LINE, Twitter, and other types of social media. This study suggests that the teenage environment, including social media, can influence teenagers' self-identity. Social media is part of this social environment, where people interact in their own ways. This reinforces the idea that self-identity is influenced by various factors, including family influence on identity; cultural and ethnic identity; and gender identity.

An additional finding shows that social media serves as a tool for self-reflection and as an external mirror for social validation. Self-awareness and empathy towards social issues increase among students who actively follow digital social campaign trends, share personal

experiences, or write opinions. This phenomenon is particularly strong among students involved in digital communities such as activism forums, learning content, and cross-campus collaborative projects. However, there are inconsistent dynamics. Approximately 38% of students experience social anxiety and identity conflicts due to pressure to present an idealized image of themselves on social media. They feel caught between their desire to be accepted and their need to be authentic. This indicates that identity transformation in the digital space is complex and contextual and not always linear or positive. Overall, the research findings support the idea that social media plays a significant role in shaping students' identities. Every day, it becomes a dynamic space for self-reflection where students are shaped and molded by digital stories and interactions.

Social media offers children the opportunity to express themselves, but many children also face significant problems. Stress and anxiety can arise from the pressure to appear attractive and meet the expectations of friends. Some children say they feel depressed when their posts do not get many "likes" or positive comments, which makes them feel worthless. This finding is consistent with research by Twenge showing that higher social media use among adolescents correlates with anxiety and depression (Twenge, 2017). In the case of Lampung, strong cultural norms exacerbate this problem. These norms can cause conflict between the identity that must be shown on social media and the identity that is valued in everyday life.

Identity status consists of a combination of exploration and commitment. The following table shows the identity status built from the results of adolescents' exploration and commitment, which will determine one's level of discernment, strength and breadth.

Table 1. Identity, Commitment and Exploration Status

| | | Commitment | |
		Present	Absent
Exploration	Present	Identity Achievement	Identity Moratorium
	Absent	Identity Foreclsure	Identity Diffusion

Source: (Steinberg, 1993)

Exploration and commitment are dimensions of identity that can be used to see and measure the development of one's identity status such as Diffusion, Foreclosure, Moratorium, or Achievement. It is possible for a person to have a different identity status in one domain from another. For example, in the work domain, a person is in the achievement status, while in the religious domain a person with a foreclosure identity status, and so on. Identity is simply a reflection of who and what we are. Adolescent identity crisis, also known as young adult identity crisis, is a psychological phenomenon that influences decisions to commit. For example, James Marcia, a psychologist, states that the division of identity crisis is the development of Erik Erikson's identity theory (Wibowo, 2015):

1) Diffuse Identity or Diffuse Identity, where adolescents have no choices and cannot make decisions through commitment.
2) Closed Identity or Closed Identity, where adolescents strive to conform to others' expectations about their future.
3) Moratorium Identity or Moratorium Identity, where adolescents explore various

commitments but are not yet ready for their own commitments.
4) Diffusion Identity or Diffusion Identity, where adolescents have no choice and cannot make decisions through.

Discussion

In the digital era, various aspects of life have undergone significant transformations, including communication patterns, access to information, and the way individuals construct social identities. Social media, as one of the main innovations in information technology, has become a dominant platform for social interaction, especially among university students (Mahendra, 2024). Social media is an online platform that allows users to fulfill their communication needs practically and efficiently. In another perspective, social media can be defined as internet-based media designed to support social interaction. In its implementation, social media utilizes web-based technologies that transform one-way communication into dynamic interactive conversations (Yusuf et al., 2023). The rapid development of social media has made it a significant alternative to mass media or conventional platforms in delivering information and data. Not only that, Indonesia is listed as one of the countries with the most Twitter users, ranked fifth in the world. Apart from being a tool for sharing information, social media has also transformed into a strategic tool in supporting business activities, such as opening online stores and other similar activities. The progress of social media is not only happening in developed countries but also in developing countries such as Indonesia. This shows how social media has become an integral part of modern society, both as a means of communication and information dissemination and as a medium to drive the business sector.

Students utilize social media as a platform to channel their interests, values and personal identity. Through this platform, they have the freedom to share their experiences, visualizations of life, and thoughts, allowing them to shape a life narrative that is aligned with their preferences and characteristics. This phenomenon reflects the fact that young people often use social media as a space for self-expression. However, optimal use of social media requires awareness of its impact on mental and emotional well-being. Therefore, it is important to educate the younger generation on the positive use of social media, while maintaining privacy and online safety (Nugraeni, 2024). Interactions with peers in the social media sphere play a huge role in shaping young people's identities. The trends, norms and values that develop in their digital environment can influence how they view themselves. Research shows that social media can strengthen friendships with people they already know. In addition, peer influence is often a dominant factor in the process of teenage identity formation. However, social media also creates a space for social comparison, where young people often feel compelled to conform to idealized standards regarding beauty, lifestyle or certain achievements. This can lead to psychological distress, where they feel compelled to modify their character or appearance to fit the expectations of the digital society. However, social media also has positive impacts, such as opening up opportunities for greater social connectivity and a medium for teenagers to channel their creativity.

Social media plays a significant role in bringing young people together with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, thus enriching their perspectives and expanding the horizon of social identity. The wise use of social media can provide great benefits, such as making access to information easier, facilitating the learning process itself by offering diverse learning resources, and providing a space to share ideas and express themselves (Budiman, 2022). However, challenges such as the decline of in-person interactions, social media addiction, digital conflicts, and privacy threats remain issues that must be addressed. To

manage these negative impacts, parents, educators and communities need to play an active role. They need to guide young people to develop a critical mindset towards what they consume on social media and encourage the implementation of media literacy as an integral part of the education curriculum. With these steps, the younger generation can utilize social media productively without losing balance in their real lives.

This generation, known as the digital native generation, has a strong attachment to social media to gather information, interact with communities, and shape their self-image. National identity is an essential component that reflects noble values, collective norms and a sense of pride in the country. However, in the midst of globalization, national identity often faces challenges in the form of foreign cultural influences that spread widely through social media. As part of the young intellectuals as well as agents of change, students play a strategic role in maintaining and strengthening national identity. According to Marcia's theory, identity status is a categorization of self-identity based on the results of exploration and commitment (Purwadi, 2018). The results of the previous psychosocial stage can be used to predict the identity status of the next psychosocial stage. The formation of a person's identity is a very important process for them. During childhood, the process of identity formation includes a blend of appropriate and unique skills, beliefs, and identification, which makes young adults feel successful in the past and provides direction for the future.

Social media holds great potential as a medium to strengthen national identity awareness among university students through the dissemination of relevant content, such as historical stories, local culture, traditions and national values. However, the use of social media also carries risks, such as the spread of false information, polarization of views, and infiltration of foreign cultures that can erode collective awareness of national identity. Their identity is often closely intertwined with the concept of interdependence and expectations from those around them, with an emphasis on maintaining harmony and fulfilling social responsibilities. In contrast, adolescents from individualist cultures, such as those in Western Europe and North America, tend to emphasize individual freedom, self-disclosure, and achieving personal goals in their identity formation process (Aji dan Rahayu, 2024).

The process of identity formation during adolescence is a very important developmental stage, where culture exerts a great influence in shaping its course. Adolescents growing up in collectivist cultures, such as in many parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America, typically construct identities that are heavily influenced by their relationships with family, community and social rules. In a broader context, in this increasingly connected digital age, social media plays a significant role in identity formation, especially among university students. Students often utilize social media as a medium to express themselves, build a personal image, and establish social interactions that support their identity search process. The influence of social media on identity formation can be positive, such as enabling self-exploration, but it can also create pressure to conform to idealized social standards (Nur Cahya et al., 2023).

One of the social media that can have an impact on the formation of students' self-identity is TikTok. In recent years, TikTok has experienced a tremendous surge in popularity, with the number of users continuing to grow rapidly until it is able to surpass the current level of popularity of Instagram among students (Azizah, 2023). Along with the advancement of information and communication technology, people are increasingly utilizing social media as the main medium to represent themselves. Various social media are now used as a means to create an online identity, allowing individuals to build a self-image that matches their preferences and aspirations in the digital world. In addition, TikTok can also help students

to shape and determine behavior in a person, a means of representing themselves, and forming beliefs that exist within themselves. Teenagers utilize social media to introduce themselves and represent their identity virtually, both through uploading images and sharing details about their personal lives. This process is mostly done through social media profile management, which is complemented by status updates or uploading content that is interesting and illustrates the positive side of their lives.

One of the benefits of using social media is that self-representation is a natural part of life, where a person has a mental image of who they are and works to ensure that others see them in accordance with that image. For example, if someone feels that they are a generous individual, they will act in a way that reflects that trait, perhaps even accentuating it to reinforce public perception. Intentionally, individuals choose the personal information they want to expose through photos, posts, or statuses while receiving social feedback from their networks. The drive to create a positive impression or be consistent with self-beliefs is often the primary motivation behind how one presents themselves. This process includes both conscious and unconscious attempts to influence others' perceptions of the self-image, often through social interactions. In an online context, self-representation involves the selection of information that is exhibited so that not all aspects of the personality are fully revealed to the audience. This process resembles what happens in real life but is amplified by the digital medium (Putra & Kurniawan, 2022).

The media plays a significant role in encouraging community participation in various domains, such as politics, social and culture. Through educational campaigns, coverage of important events, and delivery of relevant information, the media can inspire people's active involvement in activities of value to the community. In addition, the media also has a major influence on consumer behavior and shopping preferences. Through advertisements, product reviews, and other promotional content, the media becomes an instrument that can shape consumers' decisions in choosing certain products or services. Furthermore, the media is also a bridge of communication and interaction between individuals. The presence of social media, for example, has drastically changed communication patterns and the way people interact with each other. With its ability to convey information, shape public perception, mobilize social participation, influence consumer preferences, and facilitate connections between people, the media plays a central role in shaping cultural patterns and social dynamics in this modern era (Wulansari et al., 2024).

Apart from TikTok social media, there are other social media that can be used to form self-identity among students. The social media is called Instagram. Instagram provides a variety of features that users can utilize to share photos and videos. However, today the function of Instagram has grown far from just a visual content-sharing platform. This social media has become a strategic space for users to design and build their self-image. With a variety of unique ways and strategies, users can create the self-identity they want to display through Instagram. The reasons behind such self-image building vary depending on individual needs and goals. Many students revealed that they shape their self-image on Instagram by uploading photos that reflect their interests and passions. Targeted use of Instagram also has significant positive impacts, such as increasing user visibility, opening up job opportunities, and supporting personal branding. In fact, the number of followers on Instagram is often considered an indicator of one's influence. According to some users, the greater the number of followers, the more special the Instagram account is perceived to be, reflecting the owner as an individual with certain qualities, both in terms of attractive visuals and inspiring non-visual values (Zakirah, 2020). As such, Instagram has become not just another social media platform but also a tool to build reputation and increase

professional opportunities for every user to gain quality characters.

It is possible that the difference in identity formation achievements between male and female adolescents is due to the fact that female adolescents have higher priorities in terms of career, politics, religion, interpersonal relationships and gender roles compared to male adolescents. These priorities encourage adolescent girls to seek additional information to evaluate the commitments they have chosen to better match their goals and potential. The results of the study on the differences in identity styles, dimensions, and statuses of age groups show changes in identity formation during adolescence, which are in line with the situation in Indonesia. Early adolescents in Indonesia are still dependent on their families and are treated as immature individuals so they will comply with their parents' wishes or expectations and ignore their personal desires. In addition, various identity domains (such as career) are not yet a concrete issue for middle adolescents in Indonesia who are generally still studying in junior high school. They begin to seek as much information as possible about college majors or jobs that match their interests and potential. Adolescents tend to use an information-oriented cognitive style at the middle adolescent age stage. This occurs when they begin to seek and gather information about various identity domains and focus on their own experiences (Muttaqin & Ekowarni, 2017).

According to (Erikson, 1994) there are several dimensions in the formation of self-identity, namely:

1. Subjective
    In general, this is based on experiences that have been experienced by individuals and feel a feeling, such as feeling uncertainty about themselves.
2. Genetic
    Consciously or unconsciously, there are some traits possessed by adolescents that are inherited from their parents' genetics. So, sometimes there are some traits or behaviors of adolescents that are the same as their parents.
3. Dynamic
    Usually this process arises from the behavior of identifying the attitudes of adults when the teenager is still in childhood which is then unconsciously internalized and forms a new identity.
4. Structural
    The self-identity found in adolescents is the result of a planning and preparation process that has been prepared in advance by adolescents, resulting in self-identity or behavior that is expected beforehand.
5. Adaptive
    The behavior or attitude that resides in an adolescent's self-identity stems from the adolescent's adjustment to the abilities, special skills, and strengths that exist where they live.
6. Psychosocial reciprocity
    Emphasizes the process of reciprocal relationships between individual adolescents and the social environment in which they live. If the social environment has a good relationship, adolescents can respond well, but if not, the opposite can happen.
7. Existential status
    Because adolescents are generally looking for identity and finding out who they really are, in this dimension adolescents are looking for the meaning or purpose in life in general that they will live.

Many factors can be stated to influence the self-identity of adolescents as they form their self-identity. These factors are closely related to adolescents' preferences and their desire to

be who they want to be in the future. One of the components that can influence adolescents' self-identity is role models or idols, which is someone who is admired by adolescents. Basically, figures that are admired and idolized by teenagers can come from celebrities such as singers, movie stars, and athletes. The following factors influence identity formation (Parida, 2014):

1. Identification, which is a deeper imitation. This means that adolescents see every behavior, values, views, opinions, and norms of every other person's personality will be taken and made as their own personality.
2. Experimentation is when adolescents try out various social roles before deciding which social role they will play when they grow up.

Character and morality are important attributes that must be embedded in the younger generation. A noble attitude and strong character will be the foundation for the creation of a dignified and advanced nation in various aspects of identity formation, especially among students. The influence of social media on the formation of civic identity rooted in Pancasila values focuses on the impact of social media on the formation of civic identity, especially among adolescents (Yunita et al., 2024). Constitutionally, Indonesia's young generation is an integral part of citizens who have the moral and social responsibility to maintain the spirit of citizenship. To reduce threats to the understanding and implementation of the noble values of Pancasila, close collaboration between citizens and social media managers is needed. This collaboration should focus on monitoring content that is contrary to the values of Pancasila, as well as encouraging the creation of a digital ecosystem that supports the dissemination of content based on national values. This step is important so that students can survive in the face of increasingly complex globalization challenges. Moreover, the younger generation needs to internalize the values of Pancasila, uphold the spirit of citizenship, and maintain national identity as one of the main pillars of national development. Understanding and applying national identity is not only an individual responsibility but also a key element in creating harmony and sustainability for the nation in the midst of global competition.

Conclusion

This research concludes that social media plays a crucial role in shaping students' self-identity in the digital era. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and Facebook provide spaces for students to express themselves, explore different facets of identity, and construct a personal image. While social media offers freedom to experiment beyond traditional social norms, it also introduces challenges such as social pressure and self-comparison, which can negatively affect psychological well-being. The impact of social media is dualistic: on one hand, it fosters self-confidence and creativity; on the other, it can trigger social anxiety and create a disconnect between digital and real-life identities. Therefore, mindful use of social media is essential to maximize its benefits while mitigating its drawbacks. Families, educators, and communities play a pivotal role in guiding the younger generation to use social media responsibly—particularly in upholding Pancasila values and national identity amid globalization.

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