

# Research on the Influence of Social Media Use on the Construction of Adolescents' Digital Psychology

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**Abstract:** According to the 56th report of the China Internet Network Information Center, as of June 2025, there were about 1.123 billion internet users in China, and among them, the group aged 6 to 19 was approximately 209 million. At the same time, according to a survey of 8,394 minors in 31 provinces by Beijing Normal University, the use rate of social platforms was as high as 81.75%. Both sets of data from the surveys jointly show that modern teenagers' social life, entertainment and self-expression have been deeply intertwined with digital platforms, and their psychological growth cannot be separated from the construction of the social media environment. Based on the above dimensions, this paper will examine the particular paths through which social media use affects the digital psychological construction of teenagers, and evaluate the application space of digital literacy education as an intervention measure. According to the above research, the effects of social media on the mental development of young people are not uniformly positive or negative; rather, they vary depending on how they are used and which platforms are used. Clarification of the mechanism of this interaction process provides a basic reference for the construction and optimisation of online protection policies for minors.

**Keywords:** Social Media, Adolescents, Digital Psychological Construction, Self-Identity, Social Comparison.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, as social media has developed and spread rapidly over the past two decades, many young people have shown signs of depression or other mental illnesses [1]. According to the OECD report in 2026, the mental health problems of young people have been worsening for the past ten years. Among the 11 countries with comparable data from 2012 to 2022, the relevant indicators in 9 of them have fallen by an average of 3% to 16% each year. China is also a place for learning. The 56th report by CNNIC shows that as of June 2025, the number of internet users in China has reached 1.123 billion, and about 209 million of these are aged 6 to 19. At the same time, a survey of 8,394 minors in 31 provinces by Beijing Normal University showed that the use rate of social platforms was as high as 81.75%. According to the above data, social media has been integrated into the daily life of teenagers to some extent.

It is difficult to directly attribute the reasons for teenagers' mental health problems to how long they have been using social media based on theory. Recently, meta-analyses and extended studies have shown that the connection between social media use and mental health is not suitable for a single-line-model explanation. The problem is how, when and through what channels a certain use will affect this system. Therefore, the research subject can be modified to investigate how social media affects the mental health of adolescents, either positively or negatively; that is to say, it is not about determining whether it is "good" or "bad".

Digital psychological construction refers to the way adolescents strive to achieve their goals of psychological growth, such as self-awareness, social cognition and emotional regulation, in the digital age. Contrary to the traditional view that psychological development is a slow process in a physical environment, the perspective of digital psychological construction now holds that social media and other digital spaces have become "second sites" for teenagers' psychological growth. Teenagers are consumers and

producers of culture in their free time. To learn how this construction process works, we need to understand it better before we can address the problem of digital well-being for young people.

## 2. Social Media as a New Arena for Self-identity Construction

During adolescence, people begin to wonder who they are and how they fit in. In the past, the answer came mainly from daily life at home, school and among friends, and gradually formed an idea of oneself. With the advent of social media, this long-standing problem of "public and private, reality and performance, instantaneous expression and permanent traces" has been further complicated.

After being on social media, people's senses of self have changed in three ways. The first is "ability to modify". Offline speaking and doing are irreversible, but on social platforms, one can repeatedly consider what pictures to post, what captions to use, and what tone to take. Although this operating space provides teenagers with more freedom of expression, there is a certain price; the "self" they present to others and their true "self" in their hearts may become increasingly distant. Avci et al. (2025) have studied 32 research papers on almost 20,000 adolescents. Based on the above results, the honest ones were more aware of themselves on social media; on the other hand, those who posted idealised pictures regularly may not have been able to live up to those ideals in real life. Whether social media helps people know themselves or makes them lose themselves is not determined by how long they have been using it [2].

Secondly, the feedback is delayed to some extent. Likes, comments and followers are all pre-packaged scores that constantly tell teenagers how others feel about them. It can make them feel more aware of their lives, but there is also the risk that these figures may cause them to lose self-esteem. A study of 398 young Chinese people over eight months found that the number of likes and comments predicted changes in

their subsequent depression and anxiety. Now, feedback also serves to present information and, at the same time, shapes a young person's self-esteem [3].

The third is that there are more choices, but they are less deep. Social media offers many lifestyles and values for teenagers, providing an all-new scope of identity exploration. However, this exploration is mainly skimming the surface and pasting; it has not sunk in deeply through thought. The above review also found that teenagers who actively use social media are indeed exploring their sense of self, and those who only watch without participating have had little such effect. Identity will not be granted by the platform; instead, one needs to build it gradually. In other words, the construction of self-identity in the digital world is, in fact, a continuous negotiation by teenagers over how to use the tools provided by platforms to express themselves authentically.

### **3. Reconstruction of the Social Comparison Mechanism and Psychological Costs**

In the formation of self-concept, one often learns by comparing with others. In short, comparison is using other people as a mirror to see oneself. In the past, this mirror mainly included classmates and neighbours; they were people one met in daily life. Now, social platforms have brought the lives of thousands of strangers within reach of teenagers and changed the ecology of comparison.

The first change is that the objects of comparison have been expanded infinitely. Previously, the lives of others were those that one could not see from one's own place. Now, with a single swipe, polished travel photos, the daily life of internet celebrities, and certificates and awards from friends all appear on the screen. They have been trimmed and beautified; they are far removed from the actual conditions of life, but they have become the most commonly used "templates" for comparison. They are not particular people around one, but edited projections.

The second is that comparisons occur much more often now. In the past, comparisons of people were based on actual contact and happened infrequently. Now, every time an application is opened or every time one swipes down, there is a potential comparison object. One after another are the updates of others' activities, and comparison has gone from being an occasional occurrence to a continuous background noise. Teenagers are forced to live in a busy manner and cannot be free at that time [4].

Frequent upward comparisons are emotionally damaging. Many studies have found that people who continuously compare themselves with others who have done better on social media are more likely to feel jealous and depressed, and their sense of well-being declines. The reason is simple: repeatedly seeing others live better gradually forms a judgment in one's heart that "I am not as good as them". This sense of loss does not fade quickly and gradually turns into a vague self-denial.

Comparisons are not entirely without defects. At the very least, it is not in that state cognitively. The above review also indicated that the people who make comparisons on social media are indeed thinking more about who they are and what kind of person they wish to be. However, the study also found that those who are accustomed to comparing themselves with others often have a more unstable sense of self and greater identity diffusion.

Therefore, the behaviour of comparison is also a two-edged sword. Whether it can be turned into a positive driving force for identity development depends on the reference system of comparison and how an individual handles the results of comparison—if the reference is specific individuals in real life that can be reached, comparison may motivate the will to improve oneself; if the reference is a highly refined virtual image on social media, comparison is more likely to lead to self-doubt [5].

### **4. Emotional Regulation and Psychological Exhaustion in the Digital Environment**

The development of the capacity to regulate emotions is needed at this time in life. Social Media are new tools and new risks.

The first one is self-evident. When they are lonely or anxious, teenagers can find someone to talk to on social media, seek resonance in interest groups, or read some light content to ease their stress for a short time. According to the survey of 845 teenagers, they have been feeling good and more joyful since receiving positive feedback online. Social media has lowered the threshold for participation in mental health awareness. Xu and Chen (2025) conducted a study in the Journal of Medical Internet Research on 855 high school students to find that electronic health literacy and mental health literacy work together through the mediating factor of psychological electronic health literacy, and teenagers with higher levels of both have better outcomes in using online psychological support [6].

There are indeed some good effects, but there is also a defect. The feedback from social media is too fast; therefore, there is a rush to vent emotions, seek attention and praise, etc. In the past, one had to deal with negative emotions on their own for a while and only sought someone to talk to at a suitable time. Now that there are convenient instant outlets available, some people have gradually lost the habit of self-regulation in their emotions.

Algorithm recommendations are also relatively complicated. The recommendation system is not neutral either; its purpose is to make users stay on the platform longer and longer. In 2026, a field study was conducted at BMC Public Health on 27 adolescents aged 14-19 to propose the concept of "algorithmic structural exposure" [7]. In other words, the algorithm determines what kind of content teenagers will be exposed to, how frequently they will be shown, and how emotionally stimulating that content is. The more likely it is to cause an emotional response, the more likely it is to be promoted; anger, anxiety and excitement are all included. Those who are still learning to regulate their emotions will continue to be in this environment and their emotions will be repeatedly provoked, weakening their adaptation ability gradually.

There is also a hidden cost on social platforms: "emotional labour". Teenagers must manage their own emotions and, at the same time, maintain a positive image, meet the expectations of others, and keep up with the mood of the group. These are relatively minor problems, but they are continuously tiresome to address. Fatigue will naturally occur at some time. Problems with emotional regulation in adolescents can be attributed to changes in their social environment and other sources of emotional stimulation or self-regulation resources for them. The Space for the

development of emotional regulation ability is relatively small at this time.

## 5. The Tension between Digital Self-Representation and Psychological Consistency

The duty to promote a good image is, in fact, a type of self-censorship. Self-representation is the conscious presentation that a person makes to help others see them in a certain light. In the era of social media, what used to be an immediate occurrence in person has now moved to the digital world, and it can be planned in advance and modified repeatedly. Therefore, the sense of self for young people has become increasingly disconnected from reality.

Self-representation on social media has shown some new features in recent years [8].

Firstly, it is relatively selective. Most of what teenagers post is positive and interesting; they seldom post anything negative or embarrassing. Occasionally post something is acceptable; however, doing so every day is not. Externally, what others see is a reduced image, and the received information lacks much of the real content; internally, one is more likely to pay attention to the refined version and use it to demand from oneself, drifting further and further away from the true self [9].

Second, after it has been posted, one cannot be deleted. Offline, once a conversation or action has concluded, it is finished. Social media is not the same; posted content will remain and can be viewed again later. What was posted earlier may seem childish or embarrassing when viewed a few years later. This "digital archive" can help people review changes, but it is also a burden; if they wish to delete something, they cannot do so, and if they do not wish to forget something, they also cannot forget it.

Third, what to post and how to present it are increasingly dictated by the platform. WeChat Moments has one set of rules, Xiaohongshu has another, and Douyin is different. The Rules of the Platform Differ. Teenagers use many platforms and show different personalities on each. With time, they no longer know who they are. Avci and others (2025) have conducted a review that also found that people who frequently compare themselves to others on social media show more pronounced exploration of identity and identity confusion. Whether teenagers are being their true selves or playing a role for others on social media has a psychological impact on them.

## 6. Digital Literacy Education: From Passive Response to Active Construction

Given that the effects of social media on the psychological growth of young people vary based on how they are used and who they are, a single way cannot be employed to address this problem. Intervention strategies should not only be reduced to the simplistic measures of "shortening the use time" or "prohibiting access". Recently, many countries have introduced social media bans for minors one after another. In November 2024, the Australian Federal Parliament passed the "2024 Cybersecurity (Minimum Age for Social Media) Amendment Act", and on December 10, 2025, it took effect, banning minors under the age of 16 from opening accounts on the 10 main platforms of Facebook, Instagram and TikTok. However, the results were not good: about 70% of minors still

have accounts, and the compliance rate among the 14-to 15-year-old group is only about 27%, with widespread use of methods such as lying about age, borrowing parents' accounts, and using VPN to bypass restrictions [10].

Therefore, it is difficult to deal with the problem of teenage entanglement in social media through external control alone. Another type of sustainability is to enhance people's digital literacy so they know how to use information technology well. The goal of digital literacy education should not be limited to "discerning harmful information" and "controlling screen time", but should help teenagers develop an independent method of psychological construction.

At the conceptual level, we need to help teenagers learn about the basic operating mechanisms of social media, how algorithms organise the distribution of information, what effects quantified feedback has on self-awareness, and how platform design influences usage behaviour; thus, they can become active and reflective users rather than passive ones. One should be able to maintain a sense of emotional detachment in the face of strong emotions and set emotional boundaries in the use of social media at the same time. At the behaviour level, encourage people to use it for specific purposes rather than scrolling aimlessly. Based on the above analysis, active use is linked to a broader exploration of self, and passive use has relatively weak effects.

Digital literacy education should not be viewed as a "vaccination-style" protection measure but rather as an empowering path; by understanding the digital environment, a psychological construction method that meets one's own development needs can be gradually formed [11]. Schools can introduce digital literacy classes; instead of merely restricting, families need to guide young people's lives online offline; and platforms should revise their algorithm logic to curb the excessive consumption of young people's attention. Therefore, the three parties-families, schools and platforms-need to work together and cannot achieve this goal alone.

## 7. Conclusion

The four paths through which social media affects the psychological development of adolescents in this paper are self-identity construction, social comparison, emotion regulation and digital self-presentation. Also explored the possible space for digital literacy education. Research has shown that there is no single norm for right and wrong on social media; rather, a system of values in the virtual world has emerged. Teenagers are both active builders of their own images and choices for presentation, comparison groups and platform functions, as well as passive recipients of algorithm recommendations, quantitative feedback, and platform rules. One should be aware of the above connections to know how social media affects the psychology of young people.

The two sides of coping strategies are no longer "restriction" and "permission". Only limiting the use time will not address the root cause. It is less about how long to use and more about how to use. However, one cannot give in entirely either. Teenagers' self-regulation ability is still in the process of development, and they are thus at a disadvantage in the algorithm environment based on retention logic. A more feasible way is to promote in two directions: build a protective system such as age verification and content filtering, and at the same time, strengthen digital literacy education. First help teenagers learn about the working mode of the digital environment and then set some personal rules.

Limitations of this study. Due to the limitations of the

problem scope, it was not possible to determine the different effects of the platforms precisely, and the moderating role of macro factors such as family upbringing and school philosophy was also not fully explored. Future research will need to collect more tracking data to clarify the causal relationship and extend the scope from individuals to society and culture. The Psychology of teenagers is always rooted in their family, school and society. Only from this many sides can we gain an overall understanding, and thus more practical intervention measures will be based on a solid theoretical foundation.

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