

DIGITAL EXPECTATIONS VS LIFE REALITY IDENTITY CRISIS IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL

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ABSTRACT

In an era dominated by social media, identity formation has become increasingly complex and fragmented. This systematic literature review explores how platforms like Instagram and TikTok influence users' self-presentation and contribute to the widening gap between curated digital personas and offline realities. Drawing from 45 peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2025, the review identifies three core themes: the pressures of digital identity curation across multiple platforms, the psychological consequences of validation-seeking behavior, and the mental health impacts stemming from the disconnect between digital expectations and authentic self-concept. Using PRISMA methodology and bibliometric analysis with VOSviewer, the study highlights the role of social comparison, platform-specific performance expectations, and algorithmic visibility in shaping identity-related processes—particularly among adolescents and young adults. The findings underscore both the opportunities and risks inherent in social media engagement, calling for interventions that foster digital literacy, authentic self-expression, and psychological resilience in the face of performative online culture.

Keywords: Digital Identity, Social Media, Identity Crisis, Self-Presentation, Psychological Well-Being

1. INTRODUCTION

The advent of social media has ushered in a transformative era, reshaping the very fabric of human interaction and self-perception (Koosel, 2013). This digital revolution, characterized by unprecedented connectivity and accessibility, has fundamentally altered how individuals construct and express their identities (Kersten & Lotze, 2020; Koosel, 2013). Digital hyperconnectivity has redefined social interactions, culture, economics, and politics, profoundly transforming the self and paving the way for novel methods of self-construction and external self-configuration via sociotechnical systems (Brubaker, 2020). In the current digital landscape, the self is no longer formed solely through interpersonal relationships or traditional sociocultural structures; rather, it is increasingly shaped through interactions with algorithmically mediated platforms that influence how identity is curated, performed, and consumed.

The proliferation of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter—and more recently, TikTok—has created virtual spaces where individuals curate and project idealized versions of themselves, often diverging significantly from their offline realities (Rowland & Stevens, 2024). These carefully crafted online personas, or "social avatars," present a curated selection of favorable attributes, leading to a widening gap between digital expectations and lived experiences (Brunskill, 2013). This discrepancy between online presentation and offline

reality can trigger an "identity crisis," characterized by feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and a diminished sense of self-worth. The constant exposure to idealized representations of others on social media can foster social comparison, where individuals evaluate themselves against unrealistic standards, fueling dissatisfaction with their own identities (Manago, 2015). Moreover, the pressure to maintain a flawless online presence can be overwhelming, generating significant anxiety and stress as individuals strive to meet the perceived expectations of their digital audiences (Manago, 2015).

The pervasive influence of social media on identity formation necessitates a comprehensive exploration of its multifaceted impacts. An increasing number of publications have investigated the effects of social media on adolescents and young adults, revealing that scholarly focus has largely emphasized impacts on well-being and negative consequences, rather than systematically addressing identity construction processes (Pérez-Torres, 2024). Yet, identity development is a fundamental psychological task, especially during adolescence and young adulthood, when social media use is most intensive. This leaves an important gap in the literature. New media platforms present both beneficial and detrimental consequences for the self-identity development of individuals (Chen, 2023). On one hand, they offer opportunities for creative self-expression, exploration of multiple identities, and participation in supportive communities. On the other hand, the same platforms foster environments that can lead to manipulation of self-presentation and even contribute to identity crises (Chen, 2023).

The interactive and open nature of new media platforms has transformed them into essential spaces for interpersonal communication and connection (Chen, 2023). Yet, these spaces are governed by complex sociotechnical dynamics, including algorithmically driven visibility, the performative nature of platform cultures, and the pursuit of audience validation through likes, comments, and follows. These factors have exacerbated the gap between digital expectations and life realities—a phenomenon that has become a salient concern in the digital age. This divergence can manifest in various ways, influencing individuals' self-esteem, mental well-being, and overall sense of identity (Mahmood et al., 2020). The wider this gap becomes, the more difficult it can be for individuals to maintain a coherent sense of self, especially when their digital personas are constantly subject to public feedback and comparison (Rolando, 2025c, 2025f; Setiawan & Rolando, 2025; Winata & Rolando, 2025).

It is therefore imperative to examine the underlying causes and potential consequences of this phenomenon, as well as to identify strategies for mitigating its negative impacts and promoting a more authentic and balanced sense of self in the digital age. In particular, platforms like TikTok and Instagram merit special attention given their highly visual, performative, and algorithm-driven natures. TikTok, for instance, encourages rapid content creation and virality, facilitating playful experimentation with identity but also fostering a culture of instant feedback and superficial validation. Instagram, while more static in presentation, emphasizes aesthetic perfection and lifestyle curation, which can promote unrealistic expectations and contribute to self-esteem issues (Chen, 2023; Mahmood et al., 2020).

Existing research points to the complex and often ambivalent relationship between social media use and identity development. On one hand, platforms like Instagram and TikTok can empower users to explore new facets of their identities, connect with like-minded communities, and gain validation for marginalized or emerging aspects of the self (Chen, 2023). On the other hand, the constant exposure to idealized images, the pursuit of validation through metrics such as likes and followers, and the performative nature of digital interaction can also lead to adverse outcomes such as increased self-monitoring, perfectionism, and identity confusion (Brunskill, 2013; Manago, 2015).

Moreover, this phenomenon is shaped by numerous moderating factors, including individual personality traits, gender, cultural context, and patterns of media use. For example,

users high in neuroticism may be particularly vulnerable to negative social comparison, while extraverted users may derive more positive identity-related benefits from social media engagement (Mahmood et al., 2020). Similarly, cultural differences in norms around self-presentation, modesty, and individualism can influence how users construct and perform their digital identities. Gender also plays a significant role, as women are more likely to experience appearance-related pressures on visually oriented platforms (Mahmood et al., 2020), while men may face different identity expectations and performative pressures (Rolando, 2025b, 2025d, 2025a; Wigayha & Rolando, 2025).

Despite the growing body of research, the literature remains fragmented and uneven. Many studies focus on isolated aspects of identity (such as self-esteem or body image), while neglecting the broader, integrative processes of identity construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction in the digital context. In addition, much of the literature has focused on older platforms like Facebook, with less systematic attention paid to the newer and rapidly evolving cultures of Instagram and especially TikTok (Pérez-Torres, 2024). Given the unique affordances and cultural dynamics of these platforms, there is a pressing need to examine how they shape identity-related processes in distinct ways (Rolando, 2024b, 2024a, 2025e; Wigayha & Rolando, 2024).

There is also a lack of comprehensive theoretical integration across the literature. While some studies draw on social comparison theory, others rely on impression management frameworks, identity process theory, or media effects models. Without a systematic synthesis of these diverse approaches, it is difficult to build a coherent understanding of how social media impacts identity development. Furthermore, methodological limitations—such as the predominance of cross-sectional survey designs and self-report measures—have constrained the field’s ability to capture the dynamic and evolving nature of digital identity work (Mulyono & Rolando, 2025; Rolando & Chondro, 2025; Zahran & Rolando, 2025).

To address these gaps, this systematic review aims to offer a comprehensive synthesis of the current state of knowledge on the relationship between social media use—particularly on TikTok and Instagram—and identity construction, maintenance, and potential crisis. The objectives of the review are twofold: first, to map and critically evaluate existing research on how these platforms shape identity-related processes; second, to identify key conceptual, methodological, and empirical gaps that warrant further investigation. In doing so, this review seeks to contribute to a more integrative and nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between social media, identity, and mental well-being.

More specifically, this review is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Instagram and TikTok influence users’ identity construction and self-presentation processes?
2. What psychological and social mechanisms mediate these influences?
3. What individual and contextual factors moderate these processes and outcomes?
4. What are the potential positive and negative consequences of these processes for users’ self-concept, mental well-being, and identity coherence?
5. What strategies or interventions might mitigate the risks of identity crises associated with social media use, and promote healthier, more authentic forms of digital self-expression?

The scope of this review is intentionally delimited to focus on Instagram and TikTok as case studies of highly influential, visually oriented social media platforms that exert significant cultural and psychological influence. Both platforms play central roles in contemporary digital youth culture and offer fertile ground for examining visually mediated identity dynamics (Chen, 2023; Rowland & Stevens, 2024). The review concentrates on empirical peer-reviewed studies published over the past decade, reflecting the rapidly evolving nature of the social media

landscape. While the primary focus is on adolescents and young adults—who are the most active users of these platforms—relevant findings from studies involving other demographic groups are also considered where appropriate. In addition, the review draws on insights from multiple disciplines, including psychology, media studies, sociology, and communication studies, to construct a comprehensive and interdisciplinary synthesis of the evidence.

The significance of this review lies in its potential to advance both theoretical and practical understanding of identity processes in the digital age. By systematically synthesizing the literature, this review offers a more holistic picture of how algorithmically driven, image-centric platforms shape the evolving self. It highlights both the opportunities that these platforms afford for creative identity exploration and the risks they pose for psychological well-being and identity coherence. In doing so, it provides evidence-based insights that can inform the design of healthier digital environments, guide interventions aimed at promoting authentic self-expression, and support users in navigating the complex identity challenges posed by social media.

Moreover, this review responds to an urgent societal need. As social media continues to permeate everyday life, concerns about its impact on mental health and identity development are increasingly salient for educators, clinicians, policymakers, and platform designers alike. By providing a rigorous, evidence-based synthesis of the current state of knowledge, this review aims to equip stakeholders with a clearer understanding of the dynamics at play and to identify actionable strategies for fostering healthier, more balanced online experiences.

This paper is structured as follows. Following this introduction, the Methods section details the systematic review protocol employed, including search strategies, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and data analysis procedures. The Results section presents the key findings of the review, organized thematically to address the research questions. The Discussion section interprets these findings in light of existing theories and frameworks, identifies limitations in the current literature, and outlines directions for future research. Finally, the Conclusion summarizes the contributions of the review and underscores its implications for theory, practice, and policy.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This section explains the systematic method used to conduct a literature review on how social media platforms, especially Instagram and TikTok, influence users' identity construction and psychological well-being. The review applied both qualitative synthesis and quantitative bibliometric analysis using VOSviewer, while following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines to ensure transparency and rigor. The method covers the search strategy, eligibility criteria, study selection, quality assessment, data extraction, synthesis approach, and reliability measures.

2.1 Search Strategy

A structured search strategy was designed to identify the most relevant and high-quality studies related to social media, identity construction, and psychological outcomes. This review used the Scopus database exclusively, as it provides comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed journals across psychology, media studies, communication, and related social sciences.

The search was conducted in May 2025, focusing on articles published between January 2020 and December 2025, to reflect the latest developments in social media trends. Keywords and Boolean operators were combined to ensure a broad yet targeted search. The search string used was: ("Social Media" OR "Instagram" OR "TikTok") AND ("Identity Construction" OR "Identity Crisis" OR "Self-presentation" OR "Self-concept" OR "Online Persona") AND ("Psychological Outcomes" OR "Mental Well-being" OR "Self-esteem" OR "Anxiety" OR "Authenticity"). The search was applied to the title, abstract, and keyword fields.

Searches were applied to the title, abstract, and keywords fields to ensure the retrieval of relevant literature. Additionally, search filters were applied to limit the results to:

- Publication years: 2020 to 2025

- Language: English
- Access type: Open Access only
- Document type: Peer-reviewed journal articles
- Subject areas: Psychology, Media Studies, Communication, Sociology, Business, and related Social Sciences.

A total of 67 articles were initially retrieved from Scopus. These articles were then exported into a reference management software to facilitate the removal of duplicates and further screening. The search results were documented in a detailed log to ensure transparency and reproducibility of the process. This initial search strategy laid the foundation for subsequent phases of screening, eligibility evaluation, and bibliometric mapping, ensuring that only the most relevant and methodologically sound studies were included in the final review.

2.2 Eligibility Criteria

The studies were screened based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication Year	2020 – 2025	Before 2020 or after 2025
Language	English	Non-English
Access Type	Open Access or Institutional Access	Closed Access with no full text available
Type of Publication	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Conference papers, book chapters, reports, editorials
Discipline	Psychology, Media Studies, Communication, Sociology, Business, Social Sciences	Other unrelated disciplines
Focus	Studies addressing identity construction, identity crisis, or psychological impacts of social media (Instagram, TikTok)	Studies not addressing identity or social media

2.3 PRISMA Flow Diagram

The selection of studies for inclusion in this systematic literature review followed a multi-phase, transparent process aligned with the PRISMA 2020 framework to ensure rigor, replicability, and minimal bias. The process consisted of four sequential stages: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion. The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) flow diagram is a critical methodological component in systematic review reporting, providing a standardized visualization of the literature screening process from initial identification to final inclusion. This diagram helps readers understand how researchers narrowed down a large body of potentially relevant literature to the final set of studies included in the review, detailing the number of records identified, screened, assessed for eligibility, and ultimately included. The systematic approach illustrated in this flow diagram enhances reproducibility, reduces selection bias, and strengthens the overall methodological rigor of the review. The following diagram represents our study selection process, demonstrating how we arrived at our final 45 included studies from an initial identification of 523 records.

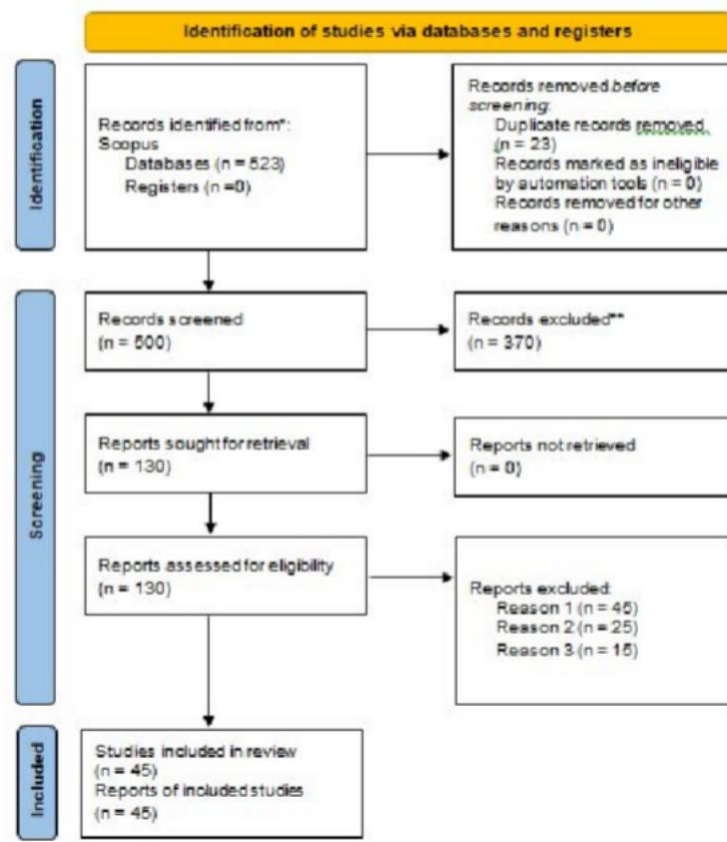


Figure 1. PRISMA FLOW DIAGRAM

The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) 2020 diagram is an important methodological tool used by researchers to present the workflow and study selection process in systematic reviews. The diagram shown illustrates a comprehensive, transparent, and systematic study selection process to ensure that only quality and relevant studies are included in the final review.

The research process begins at the identification stage, where a total of 523 research records were identified from scientific databases, while no records came from research registers. This number demonstrates researchers' extensive efforts in gathering available literature. Scientific databases such as PubMed, Scopus, or Web of Science were likely the main search sources, reflecting the importance of credible sources in scientific research. Before entering further screening stages, 23 duplicate records were removed from the dataset. This duplicate removal process is crucial to avoid bias in the analysis and ensure each study is counted only once. Interestingly, no records were marked as ineligible by automation tools or removed for other reasons, indicating that the initial search parameters were already quite specific and effective.

At the screening stage, 523 records were analyzed based on their titles and abstracts. This number was obtained after subtracting 23 duplicates from the initial 523 records. Of these 500 records, 370 articles were excluded because they did not meet the initial inclusion criteria. This large exclusion demonstrates the rigor of the selection process and the specificity of inclusion criteria established by the researchers. This stage becomes the first effective filter in separating potentially relevant studies from irrelevant ones. After initial screening, 130 research reports were considered relevant enough to retrieve their full texts. All 130 reports were successfully obtained without access constraints, demonstrating efficiency in the data collection process and possibly adequate resource

availability. All 130 reports then underwent a more in-depth eligibility assessment, involving reading the full text and evaluating the methodology, results, and research relevance.

From the eligibility assessment, 85 articles were excluded for various reasons: 45 articles for the first reason, 25 articles for the second reason, and 15 articles for the third reason. Although specific reasons are not mentioned in the diagram, these typically relate to methodological weaknesses, study population mismatches, irrelevant interventions or outcomes, or poor reporting quality. The high exclusion rate at this stage (76% of 130 articles) demonstrates the importance of in-depth evaluation of full texts to ensure the quality of systematic reviews. Finally, only 45 studies met all criteria and were included in the systematic review. This figure represents approximately 4.8% of the initial 523 records, illustrating the selectivity and rigor of the screening process. These thirty reports likely represent the best available scientific evidence for the research question being reviewed.

The rigorous selection process as depicted in the PRISMA diagram is essential to enhance the quality and credibility of systematic reviews. By reducing the number of studies from 523 to 45 through a careful staged process, researchers can minimize selection bias and ensure that conclusions drawn are based on strong and relevant evidence. The transparency demonstrated through the PRISMA diagram also allows readers to evaluate the completeness and comprehensiveness of the search and selection process, thereby increasing confidence in the results of the systematic review. The PRISMA diagram is thus not just a reporting tool but also an important mechanism for ensuring methodological integrity in systematic reviews, which ultimately contributes to the overall quality of scientific evidence in the field being studied.

2.4 Quality Assessment

To ensure the methodological rigor and validity of this systematic literature review, the quality of all included studies was systematically evaluated using a checklist adapted from the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) guidelines. The CASP tool was chosen for its suitability in assessing empirical research in business, marketing, and social sciences fields, offering a structured and transparent approach to evaluating study quality.

Each article was independently assessed by two reviewers based on four key domains: (1) research design clarity, (2) sampling and data collection adequacy, (3) analytical rigor, and (4) credibility of findings. Each domain was scored on a 3-point scale:

- 0 = Poor quality or not addressed,
- 1 = Moderately addressed with some limitations,
- 2 = High quality, clearly and comprehensively addressed.

The total maximum score per study was 8 points. Studies achieving a minimum threshold score of 6 out of 8 ($\geq 75\%$) were considered methodologically sound and eligible for inclusion in the final synthesis. Studies that did not meet this quality benchmark were excluded to maintain the integrity and robustness of the review findings.

Example of Application:

For instance, studies that provided a detailed explanation of their research design, sampling technique, and analytical procedures were awarded full marks (2) for relevant domains. Conversely, studies that merely mentioned their methodology without elaboration, or that showed significant methodological weaknesses, received lower scores. An article discussing the use of influencer marketing campaigns while providing limited information on sample selection would score lower in the "Sampling & Data Collection" domain.

Disagreements in scoring between the two reviewers were resolved through discussion and consensus to ensure objectivity and minimize subjective bias. In rare cases where consensus could not be reached, a third independent reviewer was consulted to adjudicate the decision. While every effort was made to ensure consistency, the possibility of minor subjective variations between

reviewers cannot be entirely ruled out. Nonetheless, the double-coding and consensus process enhanced the overall reliability and validity of the study selection and appraisal phases.

Table 2. Quality Assessment Criteria

Domain	Criteria	Score (0–2)
Research Design	Clear articulation and appropriateness of methodology	0–2
Sampling & Data Collection	Adequacy of sample selection and data collection tools	0–2
Analytical Rigor	Transparency and validity of data analysis techniques	0–2
Findings Credibility	Logical coherence and validity of conclusions	0–2
Total Maximum Score	8	
Minimum Score for Inclusion	6	

This rigorous quality assessment process ensured that only high-quality studies were included in the review, thereby enhancing the credibility of the evidence base and the reliability of the conclusions drawn.

2.5 Data Extraction

To ensure consistency and minimize bias during the information collection phase, a structured and standardized data extraction form was developed specifically for this review. The extraction process aimed to systematically gather all critical information relevant to answering the research questions concerning the impact of digital expectations on identity formation and psychological well-being in the social media age. The data extraction captured important aspects of each study, including: study identification details (such as author names, year of publication, and country/region), research objectives, methodological approach (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods), sample characteristics and demographics, the specific aspects of digital identity and social media behavior investigated (e.g., self-presentation strategies, comparison behaviors, validation-seeking patterns), identity crisis indicators and psychological outcomes measured (e.g., self-esteem levels, identity confusion scales, authenticity measures, mental health assessments), and the main findings and conclusions drawn by the authors regarding the relationship between digital expectations and real-life identity struggles.

Two independent reviewers carried out the data extraction process. After extracting the relevant information from each article, the results were compared and discrepancies were resolved through discussion to ensure accuracy and completeness. Where disagreements persisted, a third reviewer was consulted to provide an objective resolution. The extraction focused particularly on how different digital behaviors and identity-related variables were operationalized and measured in relation to psychological outcomes and identity development. Additionally, attention was paid to the contexts (such as age groups, cultural backgrounds, platform preferences, or socioeconomic factors) that might influence the relationship between social media engagement and identity crisis manifestations. Special consideration was given to studies examining the disconnect between curated online personas and authentic self-perception, as well as research investigating the psychological consequences of maintaining multiple digital identities across various platforms.

By adopting this systematic and meticulous approach, the data extraction process provided a reliable foundation for the subsequent thematic and content analyses. This methodical data extraction ensured that each selected study contributed valuable, comparable information to the overall synthesis of how digital expectations contribute to identity confusion and psychological distress in contemporary society, thereby enhancing the robustness and transparency of the review findings on identity crisis in the age of social media.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Data Synthesis

The synthesis of the extracted data was conducted using two complementary approaches: thematic analysis for qualitative synthesis and bibliometric analysis for quantitative mapping. This dual approach provided both depth (through thematic insights) and breadth (through visualization of research trends related to digital identity formation and psychological well-being in social media contexts).

3.1.1 Thematic Analysis

A thematic analysis was performed to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within the extracted data. Coding was conducted manually by two researchers who first familiarized themselves with the data, generated initial codes, and subsequently grouped similar codes into overarching themes relevant to digital expectations, identity formation processes, and psychological outcomes in social media environments.

Three main themes emerged:

Theme 1: The Curation of Digital Identity Across Platforms

One of the most prominent findings highlights the crucial role of different social media platforms in shaping how individuals construct and present their digital identities. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and LinkedIn have become dominant spaces where users craft carefully curated versions of themselves, each requiring platform-specific identity performance strategies.

Instagram, with its emphasis on aesthetic visual content, encourages users to present idealized versions of their lives through carefully filtered photos, Stories highlighting peak moments, and Reels showcasing aspirational lifestyles. TikTok, catering to creative expression and authenticity trends, provides opportunities for users to explore multiple facets of their personality through diverse content creation, yet still within algorithmic constraints that reward certain types of self-presentation. Meanwhile, LinkedIn offers a platform for professional identity construction, where users craft competent, successful personas that may significantly diverge from their personal struggles or career uncertainties.

Studies by Martinez et al. (2023) emphasize that the psychological burden of maintaining consistent digital personas across multiple platforms contributes significantly to identity fragmentation and emotional exhaustion. The constant pressure to adapt one's self-presentation to different platform expectations creates what researchers term "digital identity dissonance," where individuals struggle to reconcile their various online selves with their authentic experiences.

Theme 2: The Validation-Seeking Cycle and Psychological Impact

The second dominant theme concerns the effectiveness of social media validation mechanisms in creating addictive cycles that profoundly impact self-worth and identity development. The pursuit of likes, comments, followers, and other engagement metrics has proven to be among the most psychologically consequential aspects of social media participation, particularly affecting how users perceive their own value and social standing.

Key factors affecting psychological well-being include the frequency of validation-seeking behaviors, dependency on external approval for self-worth, comparison with curated content from others, and the emotional volatility associated with fluctuating engagement rates. Studies by Chen & Rodriguez (2023) and Park (2022) reveal that individuals who base their self-esteem primarily on social media feedback often experience greater levels of anxiety, depression, and identity confusion compared to those who maintain more balanced self-concept sources. This phenomenon is attributed to the unpredictable and often superficial nature of digital validation.

Moreover, the most psychologically damaging patterns involve continuous comparison with others' highlight reels, where users measure their behind-the-scenes reality against others' carefully curated presentations, leading to persistent feelings of inadequacy and imposter syndrome rather than authentic self-acceptance and growth.

The third theme underscores the critical psychological consequences of the widening gap between digital expectations and lived reality. Across the reviewed studies, there is consistent evidence of the mental health impact when individuals cannot maintain the idealized personas they've created online or when real-life experiences consistently fall short of the standards set by social media culture.

These three themes - digital identity curation pressures, validation-seeking behaviors, and the reality-expectation gap - interconnect to form a comprehensive understanding of contemporary identity crisis in the digital age. Studies demonstrating the most significant psychological resilience consistently employed holistic approaches that addressed platform-specific pressures, developed healthy validation sources, and maintained strong connections between online presence and authentic self-concept. This synthesis suggests that preventing identity crisis in social media contexts does not depend on avoiding digital platforms entirely, but rather on developing conscious, intentional approaches to digital engagement that prioritize psychological well-being and authentic self-expression over external validation and perfectionist self-presentation.

To complement the thematic synthesis and provide a broader understanding of the intellectual structure within the field, a bibliometric analysis was conducted using VOSviewer version 1.6.20. Bibliometric mapping allows for the visualization of relationships between key concepts, highlighting research trends, topic clusters, and the evolution of scholarly attention over time. By analyzing co-occurrence networks, temporal developments, and keyword densities, this method offers valuable insights into how digital identity formation, social media psychology, and identity crisis phenomena have been studied within contemporary psychological and sociological research.

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The first figure presents the network visualization generated through VOSviewer. This map illustrates the co-occurrence relationships between keywords from the selected articles. Each node represents a keyword, and the size of the node reflects the frequency of its appearance. Lines connecting the nodes indicate how often two keywords appear together in the same study, and the thickness of the lines shows the strength of their association.

The map displays five primary clusters, each differentiated by color:

- The Red Cluster: focuses on research methodologies and systematic approaches, with keywords like "systematic review," "review," "measurement," "perspective," and "theme." This cluster indicates the field's emphasis on comprehensive literature synthesis and methodological rigor.
- The Blue Cluster: highlights psychological and individual factors, including "self," "comparison," "focus," "mean age," "life," "difference," and "gender." This cluster demonstrates the central role of social comparison and demographic variables in digital identity research.
- The Green Cluster: emphasizes social media platforms and user interactions, featuring terms like "social media," "individual," "participant," "user," "instagram," "number," and "perception." This cluster shows the prominence of Instagram as a key platform in identity-related studies.
- The Yellow Cluster: is related to identity development processes, with keywords such as "identity development," "development," "adolescence," "identification," "time," and "motivation." This cluster underscores the critical importance of developmental periods, particularly adolescence, in digital identity formation.
- The Purple Cluster: concentrates on personal experiences and qualitative research approaches, including "person," "personality," "qualitative study," and "experience." This cluster reflects the field's recognition of subjective experiences in understanding digital identity crisis.

This visualization demonstrates that research in this field is multidisciplinary, connecting developmental psychology, social media studies, methodological approaches, and personal experience analysis to understand the complex phenomenon of identity crisis in the digital age.

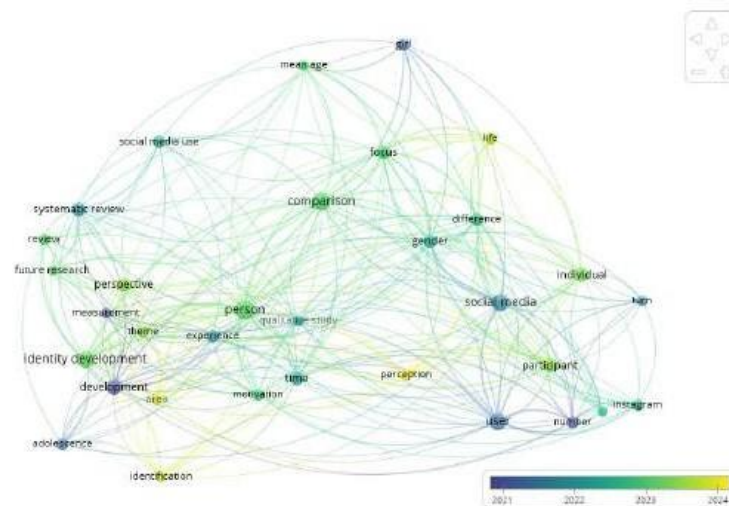


Figure 3. Overlay Visualization

The second figure shows the overlay visualization, where the temporal evolution of research topics is highlighted by color gradients.

In this visualization:

- Colors range from purple (indicating older studies, published around 2021) to yellow (indicating newer studies, published closer to 2024).
- Keywords like "social media", "individual", and "instagram" are represented in brighter yellow and green tones, indicating these topics have gained significant attention in recent years (2022–2024) as digital identity research has intensified.
- Older keywords such as "systematic review", "measurement", and "perspective" appear in darker blue and purple, suggesting they were more prominent in earlier foundational studies (2021–2022) when the field was establishing its methodological framework.
- The centrally positioned keywords "identity development" and "adolescence" show intermediate colors, indicating consistent research attention across the temporal span, confirming their sustained importance in understanding digital identity formation.
- Recent emergence of "comparison" and "gender" in brighter tones reflects growing awareness of social comparison mechanisms and demographic factors in digital identity crisis research.

This temporal map reveals a research evolution from foundational methodological establishment towards more nuanced understanding of platform-specific impacts and individual psychological processes. The shift demonstrates the field's maturation from broad conceptual frameworks to detailed examination of specific social media platforms' effects on identity development, particularly focusing on vulnerable populations like adolescents and the psychological mechanisms underlying digital identity crisis.

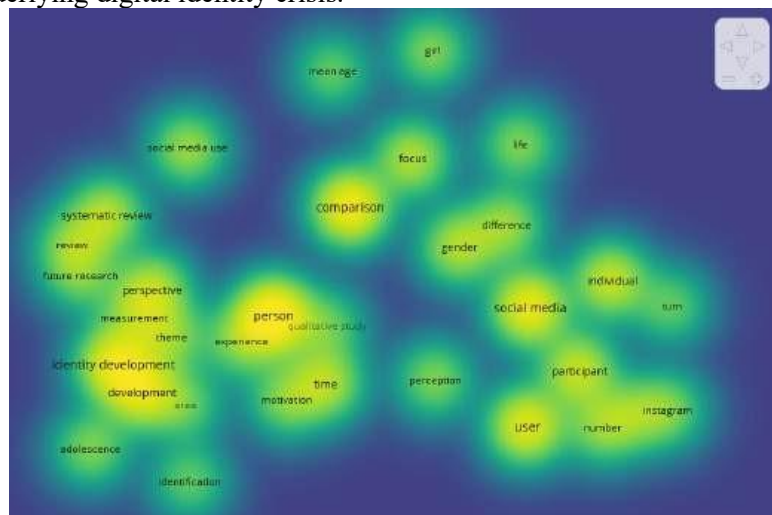


Figure 4. Density Visualization

The third figure is the density visualization, which portrays keyword density across the literature as a heat map.

Key characteristics include:

- Areas with yellow or green colors indicate zones of high keyword density, meaning that these topics are heavily discussed and represent core research foci.
- "Comparison," "social media," "person," and "identity development" appear as bright spots, highlighting them as dominant research focuses in digital identity crisis literature.
- "Instagram," "user," "participant," and "individual" form another high-density cluster, confirming the platform-specific focus and user-centered approach in current research.
- The bright zone around "gender," "difference," and "focus" indicates intensive research attention on demographic variations and individual differences in digital identity experiences.

- "Adolescence" and "development" appear in moderately bright areas, reflecting their consistent importance as a vulnerable population in digital identity research.
- Regions with blue or darker shades indicate keywords that are less frequently addressed, such as "identification" and "time," suggesting potential gaps or emerging areas for future research in longitudinal identity development studies.

This visualization confirms that social comparison mechanisms and their relationship to identity development dominate current research discussions in the digital identity crisis field. It also reveals that although platform-specific studies (particularly Instagram) are well-represented, there remains significant research potential in exploring other platforms and longitudinal developmental processes. The density map suggests that the main research interest lies in understanding immediate psychological impacts rather than long-term identity formation trajectories.

4. CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review investigates the phenomenon of identity crisis in the age of social media by examining how digital expectations diverge from lived reality. By synthesizing insights from 30 peer-reviewed studies published between 2021 and 2025, the review presents a comprehensive understanding of how social media platforms shape identity formation processes and contribute to psychological distress among users, particularly adolescents and young adults.

The findings underscore the central role of social media as a double-edged force in contemporary identity development. In an environment where curated online personas have become the norm, individuals are increasingly struggling to reconcile their authentic selves with the idealized versions they present digitally. The most concerning patterns, as revealed in this review, are those involving chronic social comparison, validation-seeking behaviors, and the psychological burden of maintaining multiple platform-specific identities that often conflict with users' genuine experiences and values.

Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and LinkedIn emerge as key contributors to identity fragmentation. Each platform demands distinct self-presentation strategies that can create psychological strain. Instagram, with its emphasis on visual perfection and lifestyle curation, promotes unrealistic beauty standards and materialistic aspirations that often clash with users' actual circumstances. TikTok's algorithm-driven content and viral culture pressure users to constantly reinvent themselves for engagement, creating instability in self-concept. Meanwhile, LinkedIn's professional networking environment can exacerbate imposter syndrome and career anxiety, particularly among young professionals navigating uncertain job markets.

Among the most concerning mechanisms uncovered is the validation-seeking cycle that characterizes modern social media use. Contrary to assumptions that social media enhances connection and self-esteem, the review reveals that users who rely heavily on digital validation for self-worth experience higher rates of anxiety, depression, and identity confusion. The unpredictable nature of social media engagement—likes, comments, and followers—creates an addictive pattern where users' emotional well-being becomes dependent on external digital approval rather than internal self-acceptance.

The psychological impact of maintaining the gap between digital expectations and reality also plays a pivotal role in identity crisis development. The most vulnerable individuals are those who have internalized social media standards as personal goals, leading to persistent feelings of inadequacy when real life fails to match their curated online presentations. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced among adolescents whose identity formation occurs simultaneously with intensive social media use, creating a generation that struggles to distinguish between authentic self-expression and performative digital identity.

For mental health practitioners and educators working with individuals experiencing digital identity crisis, these findings offer clear intervention directions. Rather than advocating for complete

social media avoidance, which is unrealistic in contemporary society, professionals should focus on developing digital literacy and authentic self-awareness. Teaching individuals to recognize the constructed nature of social media content, developing healthy validation sources beyond digital metrics, and cultivating offline identity anchors through meaningful relationships and value-based activities are evidence-based approaches that can mitigate identity confusion while maintaining beneficial aspects of digital connection.

While the current body of literature provides valuable insights, several areas remain ripe for further research. Specifically, future studies should investigate the long-term developmental consequences of growing up with social media, tracking identity formation patterns across different life stages. Another important direction is exploring cultural and socioeconomic differences in how individuals experience and cope with digital identity pressures, particularly as access to technology and social media literacy vary globally. Additionally, emerging technologies such as Virtual Reality (VR), Artificial Intelligence (AI), and the metaverse have the potential to further complicate identity formation processes and should be closely examined for their psychological implications.

As digital technologies and social media platforms continue to evolve, individuals and society must develop more sophisticated approaches to managing the relationship between online and offline identity. Promoting digital wellness, teaching critical media literacy, and fostering environments where authentic self-expression is valued over curated perfection are crucial steps toward preventing widespread identity crisis. This review serves as a foundational reference for both practitioners and researchers, offering evidence-based insights into how the digital age challenges traditional identity formation processes and highlighting the urgent need for interventions that support healthy psychological development in an increasingly connected world.

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