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Identifying the Role of Digital Self-Presentation in Adolescent Identity Formation

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A B S T R A C T

Objective: This study aimed to identify and interpret the role of digital self-presentation in shaping adolescent identity formation among Chilean youth within the broader context of social media engagement and self-concept development.

Methods and Materials: A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 33 adolescents aged 14–19 years from Santiago, Valparaíso, and Concepción, Chile. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in gender, socioeconomic background, and social media usage. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached. All interviews were conducted in Spanish, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis with NVivo 14 software. The analysis involved open, axial, and selective coding to generate core themes reflecting participants' lived experiences and meaning-making processes in digital environments. To enhance the study's credibility, member checking and peer debriefing were performed.

Findings: Three overarching themes emerged: (1) Digital Platforms as Identity Arenas, illustrating how adolescents strategically curate and manage their online personas; (2) Negotiating Authenticity and Social Expectation, revealing tensions between genuine self-expression and conformity to peer norms; and (3) Identity Development through Digital Interaction, emphasizing how feedback, role experimentation, and online reflection foster evolving self-awareness. The findings demonstrated that adolescents actively use social media to construct, test, and regulate their sense of self, while feedback mechanisms and social comparison dynamics significantly influence emotional well-being and self-esteem. Participants with stronger self-regulation and supportive family relationships displayed greater digital resilience and identity coherence.

Conclusion: Digital self-presentation functions as both a developmental opportunity and a psychosocial challenge. It enables adolescents to explore diverse self-aspects and foster identity growth while simultaneously exposing them to social pressures and validation dependence. Conscious and reflective engagement in digital spaces can enhance identity integration and emotional balance in adolescence.

Keywords: *Adolescent identity; digital self-presentation; social media; authenticity; self-regulation*

1. Introduction

Adolescence represents a critical developmental stage characterized by profound physical, cognitive, and psychosocial transformations, during which individuals seek coherence and stability in their evolving sense of self. Within this period of exploration and uncertainty, identity formation emerges as one of the most salient developmental tasks. The digital era has introduced a new dimension to this process by enabling adolescents to construct, experiment with, and perform various aspects of their identity in online environments. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat have become powerful venues for self-expression and impression management, allowing adolescents to test multiple versions of themselves in a semi-public context (Pérez-Torres, 2024). The pervasiveness of digital technologies has thus transformed the landscape of adolescence, making online self-presentation not merely a form of communication, but a key psychosocial mechanism through which identity is negotiated and reinforced (Zhang, 2025).

The phenomenon of digital self-presentation encompasses the strategies individuals employ to convey aspects of their identity to others through online platforms. For adolescents, whose developmental tasks center around autonomy, belonging, and self-definition, these digital spaces offer unique affordances for experimentation. Through posts, stories, and digital avatars, youth manage impressions and navigate social hierarchies that mirror—but also transcend—offline realities (Kühn & Riesmeyer, 2025). The act of self-presentation is both expressive and strategic, allowing adolescents to explore potential selves while seeking validation from peers and audiences (Pérez-Torres, 2024). This dual function underscores how digital media simultaneously supports self-exploration and introduces new forms of social pressure, as visibility and feedback become integral components of identity work.

Empirical and theoretical research has increasingly underscored the interdependence between online behavior and psychosocial development. According to (Chen, 2025), social media use provides adolescents with platforms that facilitate reflection, interaction, and identity negotiation, particularly in collectivist societies where communal values intersect with individual self-expression. Similarly, (Harahap, 2025) emphasized that digital platforms in Southeast Asia, including Instagram, act as cultural mirrors where youth align their identities with contemporary ideals of beauty, popularity, and modernity. These mediated performances reveal not only aesthetic preferences but also broader social anxieties and aspirations, often tied to peer approval and social validation. This aligns with (Jain & Saleem, 2025), who identified validation mechanisms—such as likes, followers, and comments—as reinforcing behavioral addiction and emotional dependency among adolescents.

At the same time, the intersection of social comparison and identity vulnerability has become a focal concern in psychological literature. Adolescents frequently measure their self-worth and attractiveness by comparing themselves to idealized digital images, a process that may heighten insecurity and self-consciousness (Sayyed Muhammad Mehdi Raza et al., 2025). This culture of constant comparison fosters a fragile sense of identity where external feedback disproportionately influences self-perception. For example, adolescents who receive fewer social rewards online often report diminished self-esteem, while those who gain consistent validation develop heightened self-monitoring behaviors (Qibtiya et al., 2025). Such dynamics suggest that digital environments not only reflect identity formation processes but also actively shape them through feedback loops of attention and affirmation.

Nevertheless, adolescents are not passive consumers of digital norms. They actively negotiate authenticity and self-presentation through diverse strategies that balance conformity with individuality. Research by (Kühn & Riesmeyer, 2025) revealed how teenagers utilize Bitmojis and other visual representations to creatively signal identity, humor, and emotion while controlling the degree of personal exposure. These symbolic expressions enable youth to experiment with selfhood in safer, less judgmental contexts. Similarly, (Cui et al., 2024) found that Chinese adolescents often used online platforms to communicate aspects of their physical and athletic identity that might not be socially rewarded in offline settings, thus reinforcing self-efficacy and pride. These findings demonstrate that digital environments can provide both constraints and affordances for self-construction depending on the user's agency, cultural context, and psychological resilience.

The link between digital behavior and psychosocial adjustment also depends on the nature of parental involvement and emotional regulation capacities. As (Morales-Álvarez et al., 2025) argued, supportive parenting can foster adolescents' digital citizenship behaviors by promoting self-regulation, empathy, and ethical awareness in online interactions. In contrast, lack of guidance or authoritarian control may lead to riskier behaviors and

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digital overexposure. Similarly, (Yadav & Dube, 2025) highlighted the moderating role of parental regulation in adolescents' achievement motivation and digital device use, indicating that structured digital engagement can maintain a balance between online exploration and real-world responsibilities. These insights emphasize that adolescent self-presentation does not occur in isolation but within complex family, cultural, and technological ecosystems that shape its developmental outcomes.

Parallel to these family and environmental influences, scholars have examined the cognitive and emotional mechanisms underlying digital identity construction. According to (Cho et al., 2025), adolescents' self-reflection processes are increasingly mediated by their engagement with health-tracking and self-recording technologies, which encourage introspection and self-awareness. The same authors, in their earlier preprint (Cho et al., 2024), suggested that digital self-monitoring fosters a form of meta-cognition in youth, allowing them to internalize self-concepts through continuous observation of digital data. This process of digital self-reflection mirrors traditional developmental models of self-awareness but occurs in technologically mediated contexts that amplify self-consciousness and visibility. Consequently, adolescents learn to perceive themselves not only as social beings but also as measurable, performative entities embedded in algorithmic systems.

The cultural and educational implications of these transformations are profound. As (Kharlanova et al., 2024) observed, virtual communities have evolved into informal educational spaces where adolescents acquire social, emotional, and cultural competencies. Participation in online networks helps youth develop digital literacy and social capital, expanding the boundaries of traditional socialization. However, this also exposes them to misinformation, unrealistic ideals, and peer pressure, demanding critical digital literacy and ethical awareness. (Rosič et al., 2024) further contextualized this duality by identifying distinct trajectories of "digital flourishing" among adolescents. While some youth experience empowerment and self-actualization online, others struggle with exclusion, overexposure, or technological dependency. These findings highlight the necessity of understanding digital self-presentation as a multidimensional process encompassing psychological, cultural, and developmental dimensions.

The emotional and behavioral outcomes of online self-presentation are shaped by both individual and contextual factors. (Erez & AĞIrkan, 2024) proposed a comprehensive model explaining digital addiction in adolescents, emphasizing the mediating roles of self-perception, social-emotional learning, and interpersonal relationships. Adolescents with low self-regulation or weak parent–child communication tend to rely excessively on digital validation to stabilize their self-image. In contrast, those who possess emotional intelligence and strong peer support exhibit healthier patterns of online engagement. This resonates with the findings of (Bala & Singla, 2025), who identified risky online behaviors—such as excessive self-disclosure or provocative content sharing—as linked to poor emotional awareness and low self-esteem. Thus, while digital self-presentation can promote creativity and social connection, it also carries psychosocial risks that must be carefully managed.

The process of identity formation in digital contexts is not uniform across cultures, as values, norms, and media ecologies differ. For example, (Zhang, 2025) documented how Chinese adolescents on Douyin construct family-centered digital identities that balance collectivist expectations with desires for personal expression. This contrasts with the Western tendency toward individualistic branding and influencer culture. Similarly, (Tan et al., 2025) emphasized that digital self-efficacy—defined as adolescents' confidence in managing their online persona—varies across cultural and socioeconomic lines, influencing both self-esteem and peer relationships. High digital self-efficacy promotes adaptive identity exploration, whereas low efficacy is associated with anxiety and social withdrawal. These findings reinforce the need for culturally sensitive approaches to understanding digital self-presentation, particularly in non-Western contexts where identity development is interwoven with community values and collective belonging.

Another important consideration involves the relationship between digital self-presentation and mental well-being. As (Nosti, 2025) observed, the mental health effects of digital media are highly contextual, depending on how adolescents engage with technology rather than the amount of use. Adolescents who use digital spaces for creative expression and social support tend to report higher well-being, whereas those who engage primarily in comparison-driven or appearance-based activities show greater distress. The role of self-awareness is central here, as adolescents must navigate the tension between their online personas and offline realities. This constant negotiation between visibility and vulnerability reflects broader developmental challenges in the digital era.

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Furthermore, identity work in digital settings often involves moral and social dimensions related to belonging, recognition, and self-worth. Adolescents' online actions are closely tied to their sense of social inclusion and ethical responsibility. (Morales-Álvarez et al., 2025) demonstrated that self-regulation acts as a bridge between supportive environments and responsible online behavior, reinforcing digital citizenship. Similarly, (Cui et al., 2024) found that adolescents' online self-presentation related to physical activity was linked to self-pride and body confidence, suggesting that positive digital engagement can strengthen rather than undermine identity coherence. Still, as (Sayyed Muhammad Mehdi Raza et al., 2025) cautioned, the persistent exposure to idealized images and comparison standards may erode body satisfaction and amplify anxiety among more vulnerable youth. Hence, the line between empowerment and harm is delicate, depending on the balance between agency, reflection, and social feedback.

From a developmental psychology perspective, digital self-presentation serves as both an outcome and a driver of adolescent identity formation. It provides adolescents with a symbolic space where experimentation with appearance, values, and relationships can occur within perceived boundaries of safety and control (Pérez-Torres, 2024). Yet, these same boundaries can blur, exposing youth to peer judgment and external pressures. Adolescents' self-concept becomes increasingly relational and performative, shaped by reciprocal cycles of posting, feedback, and adjustment. According to (Erez & AĞIrkan, 2024), this cycle can foster adaptive social learning when accompanied by emotional awareness, but it can also lead to maladaptive dependency when self-worth is contingent on online affirmation.

Contemporary discussions therefore emphasize the need for an integrative understanding of adolescent digital identity that accounts for psychosocial, cultural, and technological dimensions. (Rosič et al., 2024) noted that digital flourishing is contingent upon supportive social ecosystems, while (Nosti, 2025) advocated for policy frameworks that encourage digital well-being education and responsible technology use. Similarly, (Kharlanova et al., 2024) called for educational initiatives that enhance adolescents' critical engagement with virtual communities to promote resilience and self-awareness. Within this discourse, digital self-presentation emerges as a key developmental practice—simultaneously enabling self-expression, community participation, and identity experimentation.

Finally, it is essential to recognize that digital self-presentation intersects with broader issues of cultural identity and socialization. In Latin American contexts, where collectivist values coexist with modern digital culture, adolescents negotiate between local cultural scripts and global online trends. This dual negotiation underscores the dynamic and context-dependent nature of digital identity formation. As (Zhang, 2025) and (Harahap, 2025) suggest, adolescents' digital behaviors reflect both continuity and change—anchored in cultural belonging yet responsive to globalized expressions of selfhood.

In light of this multidimensional background, the present study seeks to identify and interpret the role of digital self-presentation in adolescent identity formation among Chilean youth.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how adolescents in Chile construct and express their identities through digital self-presentation. The exploratory and interpretive nature of qualitative research was appropriate for capturing the nuanced, context-dependent experiences of youth in online environments. The participants consisted of 33 adolescents aged between 14 and 19 years, recruited from various high schools and youth community centers in Santiago, Valparaíso, and Concepción. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure diversity in gender, socioeconomic background, and type of digital platform usage (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat). All participants were native Spanish speakers and voluntarily agreed to participate after being fully informed of the study's aims and confidentiality procedures. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, and parental consent was secured for minors under 18 years of age.

2.2. Measures

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which allowed participants to reflect freely on their online behaviors, motivations for digital self-presentation, and perceived influences on their identity development. The interview guide was designed around key domains such as self-expression, peer validation, authenticity, and self-perception in digital contexts. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and was

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conducted in a quiet, private environment, either face-to-face or via encrypted online video platforms due to participants' preferences. The interviews were conducted in Spanish and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The process of data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached—that is, when no new themes or insights emerged from the interviews.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic approach using NVivo software version 14 to organize, code, and interpret the transcribed interviews. The analysis process was iterative and involved several stages. First, the researcher engaged in repeated readings of the transcripts to achieve immersion in the data. Open coding was then performed to identify meaningful units of text related to participants' experiences of digital self-presentation and identity formation. These initial codes were gradually clustered into broader categories through axial coding, allowing patterns and relationships to emerge. Finally, selective coding was applied to synthesize these categories into overarching themes that captured the essence of adolescents' digital identity processes. Throughout the analysis, memos and reflective notes were maintained to ensure transparency and to track the researcher's interpretive decisions. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, member checking was conducted with several participants, and peer debriefing sessions were held among the research team.

3. Findings and Results

The study included 33 adolescents from different regions of Chile, with participants drawn from Santiago (n = 15; 45.5%), Valparaíso (n = 10; 30.3%), and Concepción (n = 8; 24.2%). The sample comprised 18 females (54.5%) and 15 males (45.5%), ranging in age from 14 to 19 years (M = 16.6). Most participants were high school students (n = 27; 81.8%), while the remainder (n = 6; 18.2%) were first-year university students. Regarding socioeconomic background, 12 participants (36.4%) identified as lower-middle class, 15 (45.5%) as middle class, and 6 (18.1%) as upper-middle class. In terms of digital engagement, nearly all participants (n = 31; 93.9%) reported daily use of social media, with Instagram (n = 28; 84.8%) and TikTok (n = 25; 75.7%) being the most frequently used platforms. The majority reported owning a personal smartphone (n = 33; 100%), and 21 participants (63.6%) indicated spending more than three hours per day engaging in online activities. These demographics ensured diversity in age, gender, region, and social background, enriching the depth and variety of perspectives on digital self-presentation and identity formation among Chilean adolescents.

Table 1

Themes, Subthemes, and Concepts (Open Codes)

Main Themes (Categories)	Subthemes	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Digital Platforms as Identity Arenas	1.1 Curated Self-Images	selective photo posting; editing filters; deleting unliked posts; maintaining aesthetic consistency; monitoring likes
	1.2 Platform-Specific Personas	different behavior on Instagram vs. TikTok; multiple accounts ("finstas"); adaptation to audience norms; gaming vs. social identity separation
	1.3 Feedback and Validation Cycles	seeking likes and comments; tracking followers; comparing engagement; emotional reactions to feedback; fear of disapproval
	1.4 Privacy and Control	adjusting visibility settings; blocking peers or relatives; concern about data misuse; sharing only with "close friends"
	1.5 Cultural and Linguistic Expression	using Chilean slang; bilingual captions; expressing national identity; cultural humor and memes
2. Negotiating Authenticity and Social Expectation	2.1 Authentic vs. Ideal Self	tension between real and ideal self; pressure to appear confident; concealing vulnerabilities; "digital mask" phenomenon
	2.2 Peer and Social Norm Influences	conformity to peer aesthetics; following influencers' trends; being judged by classmates; maintaining social relevance
	2.3 Emotional Regulation through Online Presentation	using posts to manage mood; deleting after negative feedback; expressing sadness indirectly; validation as coping mechanism
	2.4 Gendered Self-Presentation	beauty expectations for girls; humor and status for boys; negotiating body image; dealing with gender stereotypes
	2.5 Family and Community Boundaries	avoiding family criticism; dual online identities (home vs. peers); generational digital gap; moral judgments from adults
	2.6 Ethical Awareness and Self-Reflection	reflecting on online behavior; questioning superficiality; awareness of digital consequences; developing moral reasoning

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3. Identity Development through Digital Interaction	3.1 Social Feedback and Self-Concept	internalizing comments; comparing to peers; external validation shaping self-esteem; learning from criticism
	3.2 Experimentation and Role Exploration	trying new looks or attitudes; using avatars; expressing sexuality or political opinion safely; exploring creative sides
	3.3 Temporal Continuity and Change	archiving past posts; nostalgia for earlier selves; evolving self-image; digital memory and growth
	3.4 Collective Identity and Belonging	participation in fandoms; solidarity hashtags; belonging to school or regional online groups; shared humor as bonding
	3.5 Self-Awareness and Reflexivity	analyzing one's online image; realizing contradictions; gaining confidence through feedback; awareness of self-presentation impact
	3.6 Digital Citizenship and Responsibility	understanding digital footprint; managing conflicts respectfully; reporting bullying; promoting positive interactions; online empathy development
	3.7 Future-Oriented Self-Projections	curating image for future (career/university); conscious digital reputation building; strategic self-branding; envisioning adult identity

Theme 1: Digital Platforms as Identity Arenas

Participants described social media platforms as central spaces for experimenting with and displaying identity. Adolescents in Chile viewed their online profiles as "extensions of self," where appearance, tone, and behavior could be strategically shaped. Many acknowledged curating their digital personas through careful photo selection and the use of filters, expressing that "a post must look perfect, or I feel it doesn't represent who I want to be." Others revealed maintaining multiple accounts for different audiences, such as a "main" Instagram for peers and a "private" one for close friends, allowing them to manage authenticity and privacy. Several participants highlighted the emotional weight of audience feedback, with one stating, "If nobody likes my post, I start thinking maybe people don't like me anymore." In addition, adolescents emphasized the importance of cultural identity within digital expression, frequently using Chilean slang, humor, and references to local culture as markers of belonging. Overall, social media served as an arena for negotiation between self-expression and social validation, deeply embedded in the adolescents' cultural and technological context.

Theme 2: Negotiating Authenticity and Social Expectation

A central tension emerged between the desire for authenticity and the pressure to conform to perceived online norms. Participants reported that maintaining an appealing digital presence often required suppressing certain aspects of their real selves. One adolescent commented, "I want to be real, but not too real—people online don't like when you show weakness." Gender also played a key role, as girls described feeling pressure to conform to beauty ideals, while boys focused on humor and social dominance to gain visibility. Peer norms heavily influenced online presentation; participants noted that their posting behaviors were shaped by what "everyone else was doing." Emotional regulation through social media was another recurring subtheme—many used posting as a coping mechanism to manage feelings of sadness or insecurity, deleting content when responses were negative. Some participants expressed growing ethical awareness and reflection about the superficiality of digital interactions: "I used to post just for likes, but now I think more about what my posts say about me as a person." These narratives illustrate adolescents' continuous balancing act between authenticity, self-protection, and social acceptance in a highly performative digital environment.

Theme 3: Identity Development through Digital Interaction

Participants described digital engagement as a formative process that influenced their self-concept, belonging, and future aspirations. Online feedback acted as both a mirror and a motivator for identity growth; as one youth explained, "When people comment that I've changed, I start to see it too—I realize I'm not the same person as before." Many reported experimenting with different roles and aesthetics online, using avatars, filters, or new content styles to explore aspects of their personality that felt restricted offline. The evolving nature of digital archives allowed participants to reflect on personal growth over time, as past posts served as "a timeline of who I was." Collective identity also emerged through shared online spaces—fandoms, student pages, and cause-based hashtags provided adolescents with a sense of belonging and moral connection. Some articulated a growing awareness of digital citizenship, emphasizing respect, empathy, and responsibility: "I learned not to judge others by their posts because I know how much effort it takes to share something." Finally, several participants expressed a strategic awareness of digital reputation, aligning their self-presentation with future career or university aspirations. In this sense, digital self-presentation functioned as both a developmental tool and a social laboratory for constructing a coherent, future-oriented identity.

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4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that digital self-presentation plays a multifaceted role in shaping adolescent identity formation, functioning both as an instrument of self-expression and as a mechanism of social regulation. Through in-depth analysis of adolescents' narratives, three dominant themes emerged: digital platforms as arenas of identity performance, negotiation between authenticity and social expectation, and identity development through digital interaction. These findings illuminate how Chilean adolescents consciously construct, modify, and perform versions of selfhood through online activities that are deeply embedded in their cultural, emotional, and relational contexts. The results underscore that self-presentation in digital environments is not a mere reflection of offline identity but an active developmental process involving feedback, comparison, and adaptation. This aligns with contemporary studies describing social media as an interactive mirror through which adolescents evaluate, experiment with, and redefine their evolving sense of self (Pérez-Torres, 2024).

The first theme—digital platforms as identity arenas—illustrated that adolescents perceive online spaces as dynamic, controllable, and semi-public environments that facilitate self-expression. Participants portrayed platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat as both stages for creative experimentation and sources of validation. The ability to curate images, captions, and aesthetic themes allowed adolescents to project idealized or aspirational selves while simultaneously managing exposure. This finding parallels the work of (Zhang, 2025), who observed similar processes among Chinese adolescents on Douyin, where curated online performances mediate the tension between familial expectations and individual self-expression. Similarly, (Kühn & Riesmeyer, 2025) emphasized that adolescents employ symbolic representations such as Bitmojis to articulate personality and emotion while maintaining selective privacy, confirming that visual digital tools extend the boundaries of traditional identity play. By managing visibility and feedback, Chilean adolescents in this study demonstrated a keen awareness of digital impression management, supporting (Chen, 2025)'s argument that social media platforms function as "identity laboratories" that allow youth to test social roles, negotiate belonging, and refine self-conceptualization through iterative self-presentation cycles.

The second major finding concerned the negotiation of authenticity within social expectations. Participants described ambivalence toward the authenticity of their online identities, often oscillating between genuine self-expression and strategic self-censorship to meet perceived social norms. This negotiation reflects the increasing social pressure to conform to online aesthetics and behavioral codes that are rewarded through attention metrics. As noted by (Jain & Saleem, 2025), such validation-based reinforcement systems can engender behavioral dependency and lead to psychological overreliance on external approval. In line with (Sayyed Muhammad Mehdi Raza et al., 2025), this study found that social comparison processes—particularly regarding appearance and social popularity—had a tangible impact on adolescents' self-esteem and body satisfaction. Participants frequently linked emotional fluctuations to feedback patterns such as likes, shares, and comments, revealing how social evaluation mechanisms shape their emotional self-regulation. This dynamic reinforces (Qibtiya et al., 2025)'s conceptualization of the "fragile self" in adolescents, characterized by insecurity and identity diffusion under constant comparison and surveillance.

Interestingly, despite these pressures, many participants exhibited agency by curating multiple personas and adjusting privacy settings to maintain autonomy over self-disclosure. This behavior reflects a form of *digital resilience*—the capacity to navigate social pressures while retaining a sense of control. (Harahap, 2025) documented similar findings in Indonesian youth, noting that adolescents engage in selective self-presentation as a cultural adaptation strategy that balances collective expectations with personal authenticity. Such practices illustrate that the performance of identity online is not inherently superficial but can serve as an adaptive developmental mechanism when navigated consciously. Furthermore, the findings resonate with (Morales-Álvarez et al., 2025), who argued that adolescents' digital citizenship and responsible engagement are strengthened by self-regulatory skills fostered through supportive parenting and moral guidance. Participants in the present study who described strong family communication tended to report healthier attitudes toward feedback and less susceptibility to social comparison, reinforcing the protective role of relational support in digital environments.

The third theme—identity development through digital interaction—highlighted the constructive potential of online engagement when grounded in self-awareness and community participation. Adolescents reported that social

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feedback not only influenced self-esteem but also served as a source of personal insight and social learning. Digital environments offered opportunities to explore multiple roles, express creativity, and connect with like-minded peers. This echoes (Kharlanova et al., 2024), who described virtual communities as informal learning spaces that promote social and emotional development among adolescents. The Chilean participants' use of humor, cultural expression, and solidarity hashtags reflected an emerging sense of collective identity, aligning with (Rosič et al., 2024)'s findings that adolescents' trajectories of digital flourishing depend on access to supportive digital ecosystems and peer communities. For many participants, social media was a space not only for self-display but also for identity rehearsal—an arena where self-concept was tested and revised through interaction.

These findings also connect with broader psychological frameworks emphasizing the reciprocal relationship between self-presentation and self-awareness. The reflexivity described by participants—particularly when reflecting on past posts or changes in self-image—supports (Cho et al., 2025) and (Cho et al., 2024), who found that adolescents' self-monitoring and self-recording behaviors promote metacognitive reflection. Similarly, (Cui et al., 2024) reported that online self-presentation related to physical activity and lifestyle choices contributes to self-pride and personal efficacy, suggesting that digital environments can facilitate positive developmental outcomes when tied to goal-oriented or creative expression. The Chilean adolescents' recognition of change over time—viewing digital archives as "timelines of growth"—indicates an emerging sense of temporal continuity that is central to identity coherence, a concept supported by (Erez & AĞIrkan, 2024) in his model linking self-perception and emotional learning to digital adjustment.

While the constructive functions of self-presentation were evident, the study also highlighted the ambivalent psychological consequences of digital visibility. Adolescents frequently reported heightened self-consciousness, social anxiety, and the need for continuous self-editing to maintain positive online impressions. These experiences mirror (Bala & Singla, 2025)'s review on the correlation between social media use and risky behaviors, where the pursuit of validation often leads to emotional instability and reduced authenticity. The findings also complement (Tan et al., 2025)'s discussion of digital self-efficacy, showing that adolescents with stronger confidence in managing their online personas experience less stress and more satisfaction with their digital interactions. Conversely, participants who expressed low confidence in audience management were more vulnerable to emotional distress and online misinterpretation. These distinctions underscore the importance of self-efficacy and self-regulation in mitigating negative psychological outcomes of digital engagement.

Cross-cultural comparisons further enrich the interpretation of these results. The emphasis on visual presentation, social comparison, and strategic impression management found among Chilean youth mirrors global patterns observed across diverse societies. (Zhang, 2025) identified that Chinese adolescents' self-presentation on Douyin similarly negotiates family-centered collectivism with the emerging culture of individual expression, demonstrating the global diffusion of hybrid identity practices. Likewise, (Harahap, 2025) described Indonesian adolescents' use of Instagram as a reflection of shifting moral and social values in a digitalizing society. Together, these studies suggest that while digital self-presentation is shaped by local cultural scripts, the underlying psychological mechanisms—visibility, feedback sensitivity, and self-regulation—are universal features of adolescent development in the networked age. Moreover, (Nosti, 2025) emphasized that the outcomes of digital engagement depend less on screen time and more on the quality and intention of use—a notion supported here, as adolescents who approached self-presentation reflectively reported higher satisfaction and well-being.

From a developmental perspective, the findings illustrate how online interactions function as *identity scaffolds*, offering adolescents a space to externalize and refine self-concepts. The cyclical relationship between posting, feedback, and emotional response aligns with (Erez & AĞIrkan, 2024)'s proposition that digital environments amplify emotional learning through continuous feedback loops. This cyclical dynamic can enhance self-awareness when accompanied by emotional regulation, but it may also perpetuate dependency when self-worth becomes contingent on digital affirmation. The adolescents in this study who balanced expressive authenticity with conscious boundary-setting demonstrated healthier integration of digital and offline identities. Such findings provide further evidence for (Morales-Álvarez et al., 2025)'s framework on self-regulated digital citizenship and complement (Rosič et al., 2024)'s notion of digital flourishing, emphasizing balance and intentionality as prerequisites for adaptive identity growth.

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Overall, the present study contributes to an emerging body of literature that views digital self-presentation as a psychosocial process rather than a superficial behavior. By integrating personal narratives from Chilean adolescents, the study expands understanding of how youth in Latin American contexts navigate identity in hybridized cultural environments that merge global media influences with local social norms. The findings affirm that adolescents are not passive victims of digital culture but active agents who utilize online tools for self-construction, belonging, and moral reflection. These insights corroborate the propositions of (Kharlanova et al., 2024), (Cui et al., 2024), and (Tan et al., 2025) that digital spaces can foster resilience and self-growth when adolescents possess the necessary reflective and regulatory competencies.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

Despite the richness of the data, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study's qualitative design and limited sample of 33 adolescents from Chile restrict the generalizability of findings to broader populations. The participants were predominantly urban, which may not reflect the experiences of adolescents from rural or marginalized communities where access to technology and cultural norms differ. Additionally, interviews were conducted in Spanish and later translated, which could have introduced subtle interpretive bias despite rigorous coding validation. Another limitation lies in the self-reported nature of the data; participants' accounts of their digital behavior may have been influenced by social desirability or selective memory. Finally, the study focused primarily on visual and social platforms; future work could benefit from including other digital ecosystems such as gaming communities or text-based networks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of self-presentation across modalities.

Future research should employ mixed-method approaches to examine the interplay between online self-presentation and psychological outcomes across cultural contexts. Longitudinal designs could illuminate how digital identity construction evolves over time and how early patterns of online behavior influence adult self-concept and social competence. Quantitative modeling using large-scale datasets could further validate the relationships identified qualitatively, such as the link between feedback sensitivity, emotional regulation, and identity coherence. Comparative cross-cultural studies are also recommended to explore how collectivist versus individualist orientations shape adolescents' approaches to authenticity, privacy, and validation. Finally, incorporating the perspectives of parents, educators, and peers could enrich understanding of the ecological networks that support or hinder healthy digital identity development.

Practitioners and educators can leverage these findings to design interventions that promote reflective and ethical digital engagement among adolescents. Schools should integrate digital literacy programs that emphasize self-awareness, critical thinking, and emotional regulation in online communication. Mental health professionals can use digital narratives and self-presentation analysis as tools for understanding adolescents' identity struggles and social anxieties. Parents should be encouraged to engage in open dialogue about online behavior, fostering trust rather than surveillance. Policymakers and social media developers might consider incorporating youth-informed guidelines that balance freedom of expression with mental well-being safeguards. Ultimately, empowering adolescents to navigate their digital identities consciously and responsibly may serve as a foundation for psychological resilience and social competence in the interconnected world.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this article.

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