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A Conceptual Analysis of Adolescent Social Media Use and the Formation of Self-Worth: Also on the Pursuit of Low-Cost Happiness

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Abstract. Social media deeply shapes adolescents' self-positioning and self-worth, yet existing research focuses mainly on risks like addiction, overlooking positive motivations behind behaviors, such as "passive viewing." Drawing on social comparison theory, self-discrepancy theory, Aristotle's philosophy of happiness, and Dewey's perspective on free choice, this paper analyzes the psychological mechanisms that social media influence adolescents' self-positioning and self-identity development; and comprehensively examines the relationship among adolescent social media use, self-worth formation and the pursuit of low-cost happiness. The findings show that upward comparison, idealized images, and algorithms intensify self-doubt and comparative anxiety, while likes, interest-based communities, and self-expression foster identity, belonging, and emotional satisfaction. Notably, "passive viewers" may make bounded-rational choices—pursuing low-cost, controllable happiness when real-life interaction is costly and psychological energy is limited. Therefore, families, schools and society should not simply label social media use as addiction or escapism. Instead, interventions should address underlying psychological needs by enhancing real-life support, improving media literacy, expanding self-worth sources, and providing meaningful activities—helping adolescents build stable self-perception in the digital age.

Keywords: Social Media, Self-positioning, Self-worth, Philosophy of Happiness, Reality Ontology

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of internet technology, social media has become an indispensable part of adolescents' daily lives. According to data from the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), as of 2023, netizens aged 10-19 accounted for over 15% of the total, with the vast majority active on social platforms such as Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and Weibo. Adolescents are in a critical stage of self-awareness awakening and social role exploration, making their self-positioning and value judgments susceptible to external evaluations and social comparisons. Social media through mechanisms, such as "likes", "comments," and "shares," quantifies, amplifies, and continuously presents others' evaluations, thereby profoundly affecting adolescents' self-perception.

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Notably, a considerable number of adolescents do not actively post or interact on social media but exist in a state of "lurking" or "passive viewing." This phenomenon suggests that the appeal of social media stems not only from external interactions and immediate feedback, such as likes and comments, but also from a lower-cost, lower-risk, and more controllable form of psychological gratification. For adolescents with fluctuating self-esteem, limited social experience, and constrained psychological resources, "passive viewing" may not merely represent passive addiction but rather a rational choice for attainable happiness in contexts where real-life social interactions are expensive, the risk of judgement is significant, and the pursuit of meaning is precarious. Although existing research has noted adolescents' "lurking" or "passive use" behaviors, it often focuses on behavioral descriptions, such as usage frequency, duration, or single psychological variables (e.g., social anxiety, introversion), yielding fragmented results and lacking unified theoretical integration.

To deeply understand the psychological mechanisms of this influence, this study relies on social comparison theory and self-discrepancy theory as core psychological frameworks. Social comparison theory helps explain how adolescents assess their own status and worth by comparing themselves with others on social media [1]. Self-discrepancy theory can be employed to examine how idealised representations on social media intensify teenagers' "actual-ideal" self-discrepancy, resulting in adverse emotions such as self-doubt and anxiety [2]. The study subsequently incorporates Aristotle's philosophy of happiness and Dewey's theory of free choice to re-examine the fundamental reasons for social media's persistent allure among adolescents, focusing on "the type of happiness adolescents seek" and "the conditions under which they make choices.

Based on the above theoretical framework, this study will explore the following question: Through which psychological mechanisms does social media influence adolescents' self-positioning and self-identity development? Second, what dual effects does social media have on adolescents' self-worth? Third, what protective factors and coping strategies might play a positive role in mitigating the self-identity pressure brought by social media? Fourth, from the perspective of the philosophy of happiness, why do adolescents tend to prioritize social media as a source of self-worth over real-life social interaction?

This paper employs literature review and conceptual analysis, combining existing empirical research and relevant theories to comprehensively examine the relationship among adolescent social media use, self-worth formation, and the pursuit of low-cost happiness. The findings will help families, schools, and society better understand adolescents' psychological needs and behavioral motivations, providing a theoretical basis and practical guidance for their healthy development.

2. The relationship between social media and adolescent self-positioning

2.1. Deviation in self-positioning through social comparison mechanisms

Social comparison theory suggests that individuals lacking objective standards evaluate their own abilities and opinions by comparing themselves with others [1]. In the social media environment, adolescents are often exposed to others' "curated images" – carefully staged photos, edited life snippets, and deliberately presented moments of success. Since this content typically highlights others' highlight reels, adolescents are more likely to use them as reference points, leading to frequent upward social comparisons.

Research indicates that frequent upward comparison can lead adolescents to underestimate their own value, creating a cognitive bias of "not measuring up to others" [3]. For instance, when adolescents see peers showcasing exquisite lives on Xiaohongshu or others receiving numerous likes

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on Douyin, they tend to misinterpret these "highlight reels" as others' normal lives, thereby generating dissatisfaction with and negation of their own ordinary lives.

2.2. The conflict between ideal and reality from the perspective of self-discrepancy theory

Self-discrepancy theory divides self-concept into three parts: the actual self (traits one actually possesses), the ideal self (traits one wishes to possess), and the ought self (traits one should possess) [2]. The idealized images prevalent on social media, especially those of peer "influencers" displaying perfect appearances, affluent lives, and outstanding achievements, continuously raise the standard for adolescents' "ideal self."

When the discrepancy between the actual and ideal selves becomes too large, adolescents experience negative emotions such as disappointment, frustration, and shame. This self-discrepancy is continuously amplified in the social media environment because algorithms push more similar content based on users' browsing habits, forming an "information cocoon of idealized images" [4]. Adolescents are unknowingly drawn into an unattainable frame of reference, leading to a persistent deviation in self-positioning.

2.3. The special situation of "passive viewers"

It is particularly noteworthy that many adolescents do not use social media by frequently posting, commenting, or interacting, but instead engage in "lurking" or "passive viewing", they browse others' content but rarely or never post actively and seldom interact directly with others. Superficially, this group seems to avoid the risk of being evaluated. Still, they are equally exposed to others' filtered, beautified life presentations and thus are not immune to social comparison.

Compared to active posters, "passive viewers" rarely receive likes, comments, or responses through self-expression, and their self-worth is more likely based on observing and comparing themselves to others. In other words, they exist in a state of "high exposure, low expression, low feedback": constantly exposed to idealized images while lacking direct recognition from others. For adolescents with unstable self-worth, this usage pattern may make their self-positioning more passive and exacerbate self-doubt, comparative anxiety, and fluctuations in self-worth.

3. The dual impact of social media on self-worth

3.1. Positive effects: sources of identity and belonging

Social media does not only have negative effects. For many adolescents, active and purposeful use of social media is a crucial channel for gaining identity and belonging. Positive feedback, such as likes, comments, and private messages, can directly enhance adolescents' self-worth, making them feel noticed, recognized, and accepted [5].

For adolescents who feel lonely or marginalized in real life, social media provides a platform to reconnect. They can find like-minded peers in interest-based communities, express themselves through creation and sharing, and build confidence through received feedback. Research shows that moderate, active and strategic social media use is associated with higher levels of self-esteem [6].

3.2. Negative effects: comparative anxiety and fluctuations in self-worth

The negative impacts of social media are equally not to be ignored. "Like culture" causes adolescents' self-worth to rely too heavily on external evaluations, forming a pattern of emotional

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fluctuation in which they are happy when liked and anxious when not [7]. This external dependence weakens adolescents' internal standards for value judgment, making it difficult to establish a stable, independent sense of self-worth.

Furthermore, the "filtered life" phenomenon, i.e., the beautified and screened lives presented by others, creates a false standard of reality. Adolescents internalize this standard unconsciously, measuring themselves against unrealistic criteria, leading to persistent self-dissatisfaction and self-doubt. Studies have found a positive correlation between time spent on social media and symptoms of depression and anxiety, especially among adolescents who frequently engage in social comparison [8].

3.3. Boundary conditions of the dual effects

The impact of social media is not uniform; various factors moderate it. An individual's self-esteem level, social support system, media literacy, and usage pattern (active vs. passive) can all affect the direction and intensity of social media's effect on self-worth.

Adolescents with low self-esteem and a lack of real-life support are more susceptible to the negative effects of social media. In contrast, those with high media literacy and conscious management of their usage are more likely to benefit from it. This finding suggests that the focus of intervention should not be "banning use" but cultivating adolescents' discernment skills and emotion regulation strategies.

4. Analysis of motivations for adolescent immersion in social media: a happiness choice perspective

4.1. The dual aspects of happiness: eudaimonic and hedonic happiness

To understand why adolescents are willing to invest significant time in social media, even merely as "lurkers" or "passive viewers," we must first return to a more fundamental question: What is happiness?

In the traditions of happiness psychology and philosophy, two orientations towards happiness are typically distinguished. The first is eudaimonic happiness, represented by Aristotle's "eudaimonia," emphasizing that happiness derives from self-realization, the practice of virtues, the development of one's potential, and the pursuit of life meaning [9]. This kind of happiness requires individuals to constantly question "how should I live", to bear the responsibility of making choices in reality, and to endure uncertainty, frustration, and delayed gratification.

The second is hedonic happiness, which defines happiness as the maximization of pleasant experiences and the avoidance of pain and discomfort, emphasizing immediate relaxation, pleasure, and positive emotional experiences [10]. The two forms of happiness are not mutually exclusive; however, individuals frequently must make trade-offs and decisions due to constrained time, cognitive, and emotional resources.

4.2. Social media use behavior as a controllable choice under constrained conditions

Dewey, in "Experience and Education," points out that freedom is not a state without constraints but the ability to make meaningful choices within a specific context [11]. Using this as a reference, adolescents' social media use behavior should not be attributed to "addiction" or "lack of self-control" but understood as a controllable choice under limited conditions.

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These "limited conditions" specifically include: adolescents' still-developing real-life social experience, limited psychological energy, weak tolerance for uncertainty, high need for immediate compensation, and developing sense of self-worth. Under these constraints, choosing social media—a predictable domain, controllable, allows easy exit, and provides clear, immediate feedback—is not irrational behavior but an adaptive, strategically sound choice under bounded rationality. They may well know that real-life interaction could offer deeper satisfaction. Still, after assessing the costs and risks, they make the most reasonable and bearable choice available at the moment.

4.3. Why adolescents prefer "passive viewing" to real-life interaction: an explanation for continued use motivation

In-person social interactions force individuals to expose themselves to others' observation and judgment, alongside potential negative outcomes. Such interactions generally demand constant mobilization of attention, empathy, self-monitoring and other mental faculties, which continuously deplete one's limited psychological energy. In contrast, social media delivers fleeting pleasure and instant self-validation that can be accessed repeatedly at minimal cost. Passive viewing carries low social risks, requires little mental investment, and allows users to disengage at any time. For this reason, it ought not to be simplistically pathologized as social escapism; instead, it should be recognized as adolescents' bounded-rational choice given their constrained psychological resources.

4.4. Protective factors in existing research

Research indicates that the following factors can buffer the negative impact of social media on adolescents' self-worth:

First, a stable real-life social support system. As Valkenburg and Peter [5] point out in their integrated model, there is a close interaction between adolescents' online communication behavior and the quality of their real-life social relationships. Adolescents with solid real-life support rely less on online feedback, while those lacking offline support treat likes and comments as substitutes for self-worth.

Second, improving media literacy is another protective factor. Studies show teens with high media literacy suffer less harm from social media. As Turkle [12] argued, the real danger of digital media is mindless immersion in filtered online content, which causes anxiety and self-doubt. Cultivating teenagers' ability to reflect critically on online content can effectively ease such negative impacts and help them build healthy self-identity and real communication.

Building multiple sources of self-worth—establishing confidence in various areas, such as academics, arts, sports, and volunteer service—can help adolescents effectively resist the self-negation triggered by "comparative disadvantage" in a single domain.

4.5. Difference between passive endurance and active regulation

Regrettably, the majority of adolescents choose to employ tactics of passive endurance instead of active regulation when confronted with self-identity pressures stemming from social media. They know scrolling through social media causes anxiety, but don't know how to stop; they feel the pressure of comparison, but don't know how to change their frame of reference.

Active regulation strategies include: limiting usage time, actively curating who to follow (unfollowing accounts that cause anxiety), reducing singular upward comparison with idealized

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images and instead focusing on personal progress, real-life experiences, and diverse value standards, seeking meaning in real-life activities, etc. These strategies require learning and practice.

4.6. Collaborative guidance from family, school, and society

At the family level, parents should monitor their children's social media use, engage in dialogue rather than simply prohibiting, help children learn positive ways to use the internet, and establish healthy online boundaries.

At the school level, schools must to incorporate media literacy into their curricula to assist adolescents in cultivating discernment abilities and emotional management techniques, enabling them to identify the disparity between idealised representations on social media and their authentic self.

At the societal level, all sectors should push platforms to optimize algorithms, reduce the recommendation of anxiety-inducing content, and create a healthier online ecosystem; simultaneously, provide more low-threshold, meaningful real-life activity spaces for adolescents.

5. Conclusion

This paper sorts out multiple mechanisms through which social media affects adolescents' psychology. Polished online content triggers constant social comparison, with passive viewers at an even greater disadvantage in this process. Social media exerts both positive and negative influences on self-worth, as idealized online images widen the gap between adolescents' actual and ideal selves and trigger emotional fluctuations. Most teenagers lack sufficient media discernment and emotion regulation skills, while stable offline social support and high media literacy can serve as protective factors. From the perspective of happiness studies, deep eudaimonic happiness in real life comes with heavy psychological social costs, whereas social media offers low-cost, easily controllable hedonic pleasure. Adolescents' heavy reliance on social media is essentially a rational cost-benefit trade-off rather than a mere lack of self-control.

Moving beyond the superficial approach of merely restricting screen time, this paper draws on the philosophy of happiness to explain teenagers' underlying motives for using social media, distinguishes the cost gap between superficial online pleasure and profound offline happiness, and frames adolescents' passive online viewing as a bounded-rational choice instead of simple escapism. Families, schools and society ought to pay more attention to young people's psychological demands, real-life circumstances and pursuits of well-being. They should jointly create more accessible offline activities that deliver positive feedback and a sense of belonging. Meanwhile, cultivating adolescents' media literacy and emotional regulation abilities will help them develop positive and stable self-perception and achieve healthy development in the digital era.

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