

Identity Construction in the Digital Age: The Influence of Social Media on the Self-Perception of Ecuadorian Adolescents

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ABSTRACT:

Introduction: Identity construction in the digital era is a complex process in which social media plays a central role during adolescence. The objective of this study was to analyze the influence of these platforms on the personal and cultural identity of Ecuadorian adolescents, with emphasis on self-perception, self-esteem, and sense of belonging. Its relevance lies in understanding how digital environments affect youth psychosocial development in Latin American contexts, where cultural dynamics shape the appropriation of digital practices.

Methods: The study was conducted using a quantitative approach, with a correlational scope and a non-experimental design. A total of 350 adolescents between 13 and 18 years of age from public and private educational institutions in Ecuador participated. Two structured questionnaires were administered, validated by expert judges and showing adequate reliability (0.87 for the Adolescent Identity Scale and 0.89 for the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale). Data analysis was performed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multivariate analysis, in accordance with the stated objectives.

Results: The results showed that intensive use of platforms such as TikTok and Instagram is associated with higher levels of social comparison, directly affecting self-perception. An ambivalent relationship with self-esteem was also observed: digital feedback reinforces confidence in some cases, but promotes dissatisfaction in others. Likewise, social media constitutes a space for identity expression and support for adolescents from minority groups, such as the LGTBBIQ+ community.

Conclusions: In conclusion, the influence of social media on adolescent identity is not uniform, but depends on factors such as gender, intensity of use, and cultural context. This study provides situated evidence on Ecuadorian adolescents and contributes to the international debate on identity and digital life.

Keywords: adolescence, digital identity, self-esteem, social media, self-perception.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, adolescence has shifted from being a stage characterized primarily by physical interaction and school and family environments toward a digital space permeated by social media, platforms that are not only means of communication but also contexts for identity construction (Guo & Cheung, 2023; Valkenburg et al., 2022). In the Ecuadorian context, where adolescents interact amid a mixture of cultural, social, and technological tensions, the intensive use of social media such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and WhatsApp has had a notable impact on the way these young people perceive and construct their personal and cultural identity. In particular, their forms of self-perception are shaped by exposure to idealized images, globalized social norms, and the search for external validation, which constitutes the core of the research problem addressed in this study.

The problem is therefore defined as the need to understand how the dynamics inherent to social media are influencing identity construction and self-perception among Ecuadorian adolescents. Although related research exists, such as Pérez's (2024) study on social media as a mirror for adolescent identity development, Soh et al.'s (2024) study related to personal identity development in a technological context, and Conte et al.'s (2024) systematic review of the impact of TikTok on adolescent mental health, it is essential to articulate updated theories with a local approach and rigorous analysis that allows the particularities of the Ecuadorian context to be understood.

Based on the foregoing, the main objective of this study was to comprehensively analyze how social media influences the construction of the personal and cultural identity of Ecuadorian adolescents, emphasizing its effects on self-perception, self-esteem, and sense of cultural belonging. The specific objectives are: (1) to identify the mechanisms through which social media promotes social comparison and affects self-perception; (2) to assess the impact on the self-esteem of Ecuadorian adolescents according to gender and cultural context; and (3) to recognize

the potential for socialization and identity reaffirmation in digital environments, particularly among young people belonging to vulnerable or minority communities, as is the case with LGBTBIQ+ adolescents, who may find spaces for expression and emotional support online according to Montag et al. (2024) and Noon et al. (2021).

In accordance with this, the justification for this study lies in the growing relevance of the topic to adolescents' mental health, personal development, and cultural cohesion. In Ecuador, digital access among young people has grown steadily, and although this increase offers opportunities, such as access to information and spaces for creativity, it also entails significant risks. It has been documented that adolescent girls, in particular, face greater pressure regarding appearance and external validation when using networks such as TikTok and Instagram, negatively affecting their psychological well-being (García, 2024). In addition, harmful content may contribute to eating disorders or self-harm (as warned by prosecutors in other contexts), suggesting that digital influence is not merely symbolic but may have serious clinical consequences (Avci et al., 2024; Peters et al., 2024). Understanding this reality from an Ecuadorian perspective makes it possible to design educational interventions, promote critical digital literacy, and guide public policies that are sensitive to youth identity and contemporary challenges.

Nevertheless, this study has some limitations. First, the cross-sectional nature of the approach (although an observational or diagnostic design would be preferable) may fail to capture dynamic processes in real time. Second, the heterogeneity of digital access between urban and rural areas of the country, as well as socioeconomic variables, could bias the sample and make generalizations difficult. Furthermore, self-perception is an intimate and sensitive construct; its measurement through surveys or interviews may be affected by social desirability bias. Finally, given the emerging nature of the topic, specific theoretical references concerning the Ecuadorian context remain scarce; therefore, it will be necessary to

supplement them with recent Latin American or international references, always assessing their validity within the national cultural framework.

Regarding the theoretical foundation, this study is based on social comparison theory, which understands that adolescents evaluate their own worth according to what they observe in others, particularly on digital platforms where carefully curated images predominate. This process is intensified when quantifiable feedback (likes, followers, and comments) mediates the identity experience—a techno-social dimension that expands the original construct. Contemporary theories of media-mediated cultural identity are also considered, according to which social media can both erode and reaffirm cultural roots; Ecuadorian empirical evidence shows that frequent use of Facebook and WhatsApp may distance adolescents from their traditional cultural identity (Peters et al., 2024). In addition, concepts of digital identity and youth subjectivity (Conte et al., 2024) are integrated, addressing how adolescents construct digital narratives of themselves, shaping a form of “subjectivity” in dialogue with platforms, not only with physical realities.

In summary, this research seeks to contribute to the academic and social understanding of how social media influences identity construction and self-perception among Ecuadorian adolescents, providing inputs for educational interventions, mental health strategies, and cultural policies that promote critical, conscious, and culturally grounded use of digital environments.

2. Methodology

- Method

The present research adopts a quantitative, non-experimental, descriptive-correlational, and cross-sectional approach, which allows the influence of social media on identity construction and self-perception among Ecuadorian adolescents to be systematically analyzed. This methodological design was selected because the main purpose is to identify relationships between variables rather than manipulate them, and to observe phenomena at a specific point in time (Hernández et al., 2014).

According to Bisquerra (2009), descriptive-correlational studies are appropriate when the aim is to establish relationships between psychosocial factors, such as self-perception and social media use, without altering the participants' natural environment. In this sense, the intention is not only to describe the magnitude of the phenomenon, but also to understand how digital platforms mediate identity and emotional processes during Ecuadorian adolescence.

- Participants

The sample consisted of 350 Ecuadorian adolescents between 13 and 18 years of age, enrolled in educational institutions in the cities of Quito, Guayaquil, and Cuenca, which made it possible to incorporate diverse urban contexts. Participants were selected through purposive non-probability sampling, considering accessibility and their relevance to the study.

An effort was made to achieve a balance between males and females, as well as to include adolescents who identify within the LGTBIQ+ spectrum, in order to address heterogeneity and ensure representation of diverse identity experiences.

Table 1. Distribution of participants by sex and age.

Age (years)	Males	Females	LGTBIQ+	Total
13–14	40	42	6	88
15–16	56	60	14	130
17–18	58	62	12	132
Total	154	164	32	350

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Inclusion criteria were: being an adolescent between 13 and 18 years of age, residing in Ecuador and enrolled in a formal educational institution, having access to social media at least five times per week, and providing informed consent (from parents or legal representatives in the case of minors). Exclusion criteria were as follows: students with a previous diagnosis of severe psychological disorders (e.g., schizophrenia or major depression), as these conditions could bias responses; adolescents without frequent access to social media; and participants who did not complete the questionnaires in full.

- **Procedure**

The study was conducted in three main phases:

Phase 1: Instrument design and validation. Standardized scales adapted to the Latin American context were selected. The Adolescent Identity Scale (AIM), previously adapted to the region, was used to measure self-perception and digital identity. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), widely validated in Spanish-speaking samples, was administered to assess self-esteem. A social media use questionnaire developed by the researchers was also included, with items exploring frequency, intensity of use, and motivations. This instrument underwent content validation through expert judgment by three psychologists and two sociologists, obtaining a content validity index (CVI) of 0.89.

Phase 2: Data collection. The instruments were administered digitally through online forms, following coordination with the directors of the educational institutions. Administration lasted an average of 25 minutes and was accompanied by school counselors, who supervised the process to ensure the reliability of responses.

Phase 3: Processing and quality control. After data collection, the data were cleaned by removing incomplete or inconsistent records. Internal reliability coefficients were calculated for the scales used, obtaining a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87 for the Adolescent Identity Scale and 0.89 for the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, reflecting adequate internal consistency.

The procedure was guided by ethical criteria for research involving human participants, respecting confidentiality and anonymity. Informed consent was ensured, and participants were offered the option of withdrawing from the study at any time without academic consequences.

- **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 27. First, descriptive analyses of frequencies, means, and standard deviations were performed to characterize the participants' sociodemographic profile and social media use patterns.

Second, correlational analyses (Pearson's coefficient) were used to identify the relationship between variables such as time spent using social media and self-perception, consistent with the first specific objective. Subsequently, Student's *t*-tests and analysis of variance (ANOVA) were applied to compare self-esteem levels according to gender and cultural context (specific objective 2). Finally, to address the third specific objective, multiple regression analysis was used to determine the extent to which factors such as minority-group membership (e.g., LGTBIQ+) or predictive digital interaction are related to greater identity reaffirmation.

The significance level adopted was $p < 0.05$. To ensure internal and external validity, the methodological recommendations proposed by Bisquerra (2009), who emphasizes the importance of instrument reliability and sample representativeness, and by Hernández et al. (2014), who stress the need for statistical analysis consistent with research objectives, were followed.

3. Results

The presentation of results follows the sequence established in the specific objectives and the procedure described in the methodology. First, a descriptive characterization of the participants and their social media use patterns is provided. Subsequently, findings related to the three specific objectives are presented: (1) identifying the mechanisms through which social media promotes social comparison and affects self-

perception; (2) assessing the impact on self-esteem according to gender and cultural context; and (3) recognizing the potential for socialization and identity reaffirmation in digital environments, especially among minority groups such as LGBTQ+ adolescents.

- General Characterization of Participants

Descriptive analysis showed that the participants' mean age was 15.8 years ($SD = 1.4$). Regarding gender, 44% were males, 46.8% females, and 9.2% identified within the LGBTQ+ spectrum. On average, adolescents reported using social media for 4.2 hours per day ($SD = 1.7$), with TikTok, Instagram, and WhatsApp being the most frequently used platforms.

Table 2. Average daily hours of social media use by platform

Platform	Mean (hours)	SD
TikTok	1.6	0.9
Instagram	1.3	0.8
WhatsApp	0.9	0.7
Facebook	0.3	0.4
Other	0.1	0.2
Total	4.2	1.7

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

This overview confirms that adolescents do not limit themselves to a single social network, but diversify their digital presence, thereby expanding sources of social comparison and external feedback.

- Specific Objective 1: Identify the mechanisms through which social media promotes social comparison and affects self-perception

Correlational analyses revealed significant associations between time spent using social

media and scores on the Self-Perception Scale. Specifically, a moderate negative correlation was found between daily time spent on Instagram and positive self-perception ($r = -.38$; $p < .01$). Similarly, a weaker negative correlation was observed with time spent using TikTok ($r = -.29$; $p < .05$).

Table 3. Correlations between social media use time and self-perception

Platform	R	p
Instagram	-.38	<.01
TikTok	-.29	<.05
WhatsApp	-.12	.08
Facebook	-.05	.31

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

These data suggest that the greater the exposure to platforms based on images and short videos, the lower the tendency toward positive self-concept evaluation. This interpretation is consistent with social comparison theory, in which constant exposure to idealized models

generates contrasts that negatively affect personal perception.

However, it is worth noting that WhatsApp did not show a statistically significant relationship with self-perception, suggesting that networks with a more communication-oriented rather than

visual focus do not have a notable influence on this aspect.

- Specific Objective 2: Assess the impact on the self-esteem of Ecuadorian adolescents according to gender and cultural context

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed statistically significant differences in self-esteem levels according to gender ($F(2, 347) = 4.62$; $p < .05$). Females presented slightly lower self-esteem scores than males, while LGTBIQ+ adolescents reported lower levels than both groups.

Table 4. Mean self-esteem scores by gender

Group	Mean	SD
Males	29.4	5.1
Females	27.8	5.6
LGTBIQ+	26.2	6.0

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

These results suggest that social pressure perceived through social networks may affect female adolescents and those who belong to minority communities more strongly. However, it is important to note that, although the differences are statistically significant, the effect sizes fall within a moderate range, indicating that other contextual and personal factors may also intervene in the construction of self-esteem.

Regarding cultural context, adolescents from Quito and Guayaquil presented slightly lower self-esteem levels than those from Cuenca. This difference could be related to the intensity of

social media use in larger urban contexts, where exposure to globalized and competitive models is greater.

- Specific Objective 3: Recognize the potential for socialization and identity reaffirmation in digital environments

Multiple regression analysis included minority-group membership (LGTBIQ+), level of social media interaction, and self-perception as predictor variables. The model was significant ($R^2 = .21$; $F(3, 346) = 8.47$; $p < .001$), indicating that these factors explain approximately 21% of the variance in perceived identity reaffirmation.

Table 5. Multiple regression model for identity reaffirmation

Predictor variable	B	t	p
LGTBIQ+ membership	.23	3.56	< .01
Interaction level	.19	2.97	< .01
Self-perception	.28	4.41	< .001

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

These results indicate that, although self-perception remains a central factor in identity reaffirmation, belonging to minority communities and interaction on social networks also play a relevant role. For LGTBIQ+ adolescents, digital platforms appear to be spaces where they find social support, recognition, and the opportunity to express themselves freely, which contributes to strengthening personal and

cultural identity in a context that can often be exclusionary in offline life.

However, the findings show that intensive use of highly visual social networks, such as Instagram and TikTok, is associated with a decrease in positive self-perception, especially among vulnerable groups. At the same time, the potential of digital platforms as settings for socialization and identity reaffirmation is also evident,

particularly for adolescents seeking alternative spaces of belonging.

Regarding self-esteem, the results indicate differences according to gender and minority-group membership, confirming that not all adolescents are affected in the same way. The fact that female adolescents and LGTBIQ+ youth show lower levels suggests the need for specific programs aimed at these groups, promoting critical and reflective use of social media.

Likewise, although the regression model explains a moderate percentage of the variance in identity reaffirmation, it is clear that social media constitutes a relevant, though not exclusive, factor. Other elements, such as family support, the school environment, and opportunities for community participation, could complement the explanation of this process.

In summary, the results do not allow us to categorically state that social media deteriorates the identity or self-esteem of Ecuadorian adolescents, but they do show that its influence is significant and heterogeneous, depending on the type of platform, gender, and cultural context of young people.

4. Discussion

The analysis of the findings of this study demonstrates how social media constitutes a complex setting for identity construction among Ecuadorian adolescents, where dynamics of self-perception, self-esteem, and cultural belonging converge. These dynamics, far from being unidirectional, are shaped by mechanisms of social comparison, the influence of the digital audience, and the specific forms of interaction with platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. In this regard, the results are consistent with the systematic review by Avci et al. (2025), who argue that identity development during adolescence cannot be understood without considering the centrality of digital environments. Similarly, this study found that social networks do not operate solely as communication channels, but also as spaces of symbolic validation in which adolescents develop narratives about themselves.

Social comparison emerges as a cross-cutting theme in the discussion. Noon et al. (2021) emphasized that comparisons on Instagram are differentially related to identity processes, depending on developmental stage and frequency of exposure to aspirational content. The findings analyzed here show that social comparison was a recurrent factor in shaping self-perception, although with nuances according to gender and cultural context. These nuances confirm the need to approach social media not only as settings of cultural homogenization, but also as spaces in which identity differences are amplified.

Regarding the impact on self-esteem, García's (2024) research on the body image of adolescent females is consistent with the evidence obtained, indicating that constant exposure to idealized representations of the body can generate personal dissatisfaction. However, it was also observed that, for certain groups, social media constitutes a space for positive reinforcement, similar to what was described by Guo and Cheung (2023), who found that adolescents' subjective well-being is conditioned by both the type of interaction and the content consumed. This dual nature—risk and opportunity—highlights the ambivalent character of social media in processes of youth psychological development.

The role of TikTok in identity experiences is particularly significant. Conte et al. (2025) documented that short-video environments produce differentiated effects on adolescent mental health depending on the intensity of use and the content to which users are exposed. This perspective corresponds with the findings of the present research, in which TikTok emerged as a highly participatory space, especially among males, and simultaneously as a setting where social comparison and the search for approval intensify. The convergence between the two studies suggests that the immediacy and virality characteristic of this platform exacerbate processes of social validation that affect self-esteem.

The data obtained also indicate that social media serves an emotional support and identity reaffirmation function for adolescents belonging

to minority groups, which is consistent with Pérez (2024), who describes these platforms as a “digital mirror” in which young people not only observe themselves, but also negotiate and reaffirm their sense of belonging. This capacity of social media to become communities of support is particularly relevant in contexts where LGTBQ+ adolescents encounter limited opportunities for in-person expression, as observed among the Ecuadorian participants.

When considering problematic social media use, the findings are consistent with the analysis by Montag et al. (2024), who warn that intensity and lack of regulation in consumption may lead to negative consequences, particularly when there is emotional dependence on online feedback. In the sample analyzed, adolescents with higher levels of connection time also showed more indicators of personal dissatisfaction, without this necessarily implying a disorder, but rather a sign of psychological vulnerability. This aspect highlights the importance of understanding social media use as a spectrum ranging from healthy appropriation to problematic use.

With respect to audience influence mechanisms, the contributions of Peters et al. (2021) are particularly relevant. These authors indicate that the perception of being observed by an audience, even an imaginary one, affects the construction of adolescent self-concept. Consistently, the findings of the present study show that the presence of followers and the possibility of receiving immediate feedback intensify self-awareness, which may translate into both opportunities for self-exploration and risks of emotional overexposure.

The discussion cannot overlook the cultural dimension, in which Soh et al. (2024) emphasize that digital identity should be understood as a process contextualized within specific cultural and social dynamics. From this perspective, the experience of Ecuadorian adolescents shows how social media becomes a space where global references converge with local practices. This intersection generates, on the one hand, tensions between traditional and digital identities and, on the other, opportunities for cultural

hybridization, which is particularly relevant in societies undergoing transformation.

Finally, when these findings are contrasted with the umbrella review by Valkenburg et al. (2022), a consistent pattern can be observed: the impact of social media on mental health and identity development is heterogeneous and highly dependent on contextual and differential factors, such as age, gender, cultural belonging, and type of use. In this sense, the results of this study contribute to strengthening understanding of the relationship between social media and adolescence by providing evidence from a Latin American context that is often underrepresented in international literature.

5. Conclusion

The present study provided a broad understanding of the influence exerted by social media on the identity construction of Ecuadorian adolescents, demonstrating the complexity of self-perception, self-esteem, and cultural belonging processes in the digital era.

First, it was identified that social media functions as a setting for social comparison, where adolescents make judgments about themselves based on the references they consume and with which they interact. This mechanism affects self-perception differently, with more pronounced impacts among those who intensively use platforms such as Instagram or TikTok.

Second, adolescent self-esteem was found to be closely linked to digital approval dynamics. The data showed that online feedback can reinforce self-confidence, but can also generate dissatisfaction when idealized standards are not achieved. This finding highlights the dual nature of social media as both a space of opportunity and a source of risk.

Likewise, it was recognized that social media plays a significant role in identity reaffirmation among adolescents belonging to minority or vulnerable communities, such as the LGTBQ+ community. In these cases, digital platforms constitute spaces for expression and emotional support, where relationships are strengthened and meanings of belonging are negotiated.

Another relevant aspect was the evidence that Ecuadorian adolescents experience online cultural hybridization, combining global references with local practices. This dynamic confirms that social media influences not only individuals but also the construction of collective identities.

Finally, it is concluded that the effects of social media on adolescent identity cannot be

considered univocal or universal, but depend on variables such as gender, intensity of use, type of interaction, and cultural context. In this regard, the findings contribute a situated perspective from Latin America, highlighting the importance of future research that deepens understanding of the relationship between digital environments, identity processes, and youth well-being.

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Author Declaration

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