

The Influence of Tiktok Apps on the Development of Adolescent Social Identity: An Analysis Based on Social Identity Theory

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the influence and impact of the TikTok application on the formation of adolescent social identity in a digital context. TikTok, as an increasingly popular platform, provides interactive features for self-exploration, but it also poses challenges such as social comparisons and the pressure to meet expectations. Emerging identities are often temporary and influenced by rapid trends that are analyzed based on social identity theory. The method used is a literature study, collecting and analyzing relevant sources about the influence of TikTok on adolescents' social identity. This research emphasizes the importance of digital education so that adolescents can use social media healthily. These findings provide insight for parents, educators, and policymakers about identity dynamics in the digital age.

Introduction

The development of social media in recent years has significantly shaped the way teens interact, express themselves, and build social identities. Since the advent of platforms like Facebook in the early 2000s, which were later followed by Instagram, Twitter (now X), and Snapchat, social media has evolved from a simple communication tool to a complex digital ecosystem. In today's era, digital platforms not only serve as a means of entertainment, but also as a space for self-exploration, the formation of social groups, and the search for recognition. Teenagers, as a generation born during the digital revolution, often use social media to overcome developmental challenges such as identity search, emotional connection, and social integration. According to Boyd (2014) in his book "It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens" adolescents take advantage of social media to "test" their identity through anonymous or semi-anonymous interactions, which allows experimentation with social roles without direct risks in the real world one of the platforms that stands out in this phenomenon is TikTok.

With its short video format, strong recommendation algorithm, and vast community of users, TikTok is the premier platform for teens to showcase themselves, participate in trends, and build social relationships digitally. Research shows that TikTok greatly influences the behavior and psychological experiences of its users, including the need for social connections and group identities (Montag et al., 2021).

The use of social media, including TikTok, has been shown to be linked to the process of identity formation in adolescents. Through activities such as creating content, joining interest-based communities, and interacting with fellow users, teens explore different social roles and find places that fit their identities. Recent systematic studies confirm that social media can be an important space for identity development, as it allows adolescents to take an active role in shaping their self-image through digital interactions (Beyens et al., 2020). This is reinforced by research in Indonesia that found that teenagers use social media to express themselves, build confidence, and gain social acceptance (Regita et al., 2024). In addition to the function of identity exploration, the use of social media is also related to group dynamics. According to social identity theory, individuals tend to group themselves into certain social categories to gain a sense of belonging and increase self-evaluation (Turner & Tajfel, 1997). In the context of TikTok, teens often join interest groups such as music, comedy, fashion, and viral challenges as part of the identification process.

Empirical studies show that digital communities on these platforms can enhance a sense of connectedness and strengthen group identity, while also influencing how teens perceive themselves in a social context. However, these dynamics can also create polarization, where adolescents are trapped in an "echo chamber" that reinforces group stereotypes, as discussed in models of differential vulnerability to media effects (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). However, identity formation through TikTok does not always contribute positively. Some studies have shown that the intense process of social comparison can bring up psychological distress, especially when teens compare themselves to ideal figures or popular content that algorithms show (Marengo et al., 2021). However, the use of social media can still have a positive impact if adolescents have adequate digital literacy and support for a healthy social environment. UNICEF (2017) noted that many Indonesian adolescents use social media to develop their personal and cultural identities but still need education on safe and healthy media use.

Seeing the growing phenomenon, research on the role of TikTok in the Even with these insights, there are still major areas we don't fully understand about this phenomenon. Most current studies look at older platforms such as Facebook or

Instagram, which use fixed profiles and existing friend groups. There is not enough evidence showing how TikTok's "For You Page" algorithm, which suggests content based on what it thinks users might like, influences how teenagers form their identities by showing them groups and ideas they didn't actively look for. Another point is that even though TikTok is known for encouraging creativity, there's some confusion in recent studies about whether it helps people express themselves honestly or if it pushes teens to follow popular trends just to gain attention. In the end, there aren't enough studies that investigate how Indonesian teenagers manage their traditional cultural values while keeping up with the fast-moving trends on TikTok, which are influenced by the platform's algorithm.

Because these areas haven't been studied much, it's important to do research on how TikTok specifically affects how teenagers form their social identities. TikTok works in a way that's very different from other platforms, so it's important to do a detailed study to understand how its special ways of connecting and the algorithms that suggest content are changing the way people experience growing up in the digital age.

Method

This study uses a qualitative literature review approach, carefully gathering and assessing sources in a planned way to make sure the research is thorough and meets academic standards. The process of choosing the materials followed certain rules. We looked for articles, books, and papers from conferences that had been reviewed by other experts in the field. These were published between 2020 and 2024 to make sure the information was up-to-date and relevant to today's digital world. Data was collected from trusted sources like Google Scholar and Scopus by using specific search terms such as "TikTok and Adolescent Identity." The researcher then used Thematic Analysis to look at the information. This process included organizing the data, grouping it into main ideas like how algorithms affect people and how individuals express themselves, and finally putting together the key points and results (Adeniran & Tayo Ladega, 2024). To make sure the data was trustworthy and accurate, the study used source triangulation. This involved comparing worldwide theories with actual research done in Indonesia. Each source was carefully checked for quality to give a reliable and detailed understanding of how TikTok affects young people socially.

Results and Discussion

Mechanisms of Adolescent Social Identity Formation in the Tiktok Algorithmic Environment

The theoretical findings in the preliminary section show that Tiktok provides a social space that is dense with interaction for adolescents. However, the context of the discussion emphasizes how the process can work psychologically and socially. Based on social identity theory, the formation of social identity does not only occur due to the existence of groups, but through cognitive processes triggered by the environment. In the context of Tiktok, the environment is algorithmic, where the pattern of content recommendations forms group boundaries unconsciously. This makes adolescents experience a faster categorization process than offline social interactions.

This, Tiktok not only provides social groups, but generates social experiences that force teens to judge themselves as "part of" or "not part of" a category. This phenomenon explains why teens on Tiktok show a more dynamic, but also more fragile identity formation, since their identities are highly dependent on the flow of content determined by algorithms (Montag et al., 2021).

Strengthening Identity Through Content Participation and Repetition

This discussion raises how social identification is formed through active involvement in Tiktok culture. Participation in certain challenges, audio trends, and aesthetics is not just a form of entertainment, but an internalization of group values. In Social Identity theory, this process serves as a "symbolic practice" that reinforces affiliation. When teens produce content like their group, they are building a social membership that is accepted by the community.

Previous research (Beyens et al., 2024) indicates that identity strengthening occurs not because of the content, but because of the social response received by likes, comments, and duplications by other users. Thus, social identification does not occur theoretically, but through repetitive digital interaction mechanisms. Participation repetition creates a sense of togetherness that makes the digital group a significant source of identity for adolescents. Similar findings were also reported by Rahmawati et al (2024) who researched teenage TikTok users and found that repetition interactions such as re-trending, commenting, and doing duets reinforced social identity as teens gained repeated validation from their community. This validation becomes the basis that builds the perception that they are accepted, valued, and have a position in a particular digital group.

Social identification on TikTok is reinforced through "symbolic practices" such as challenges and audio trends. Empirical data from Beyens et al. (2024) suggests that identity strengthening is driven not by the content itself, but by the quantitative social feedback (likes and shares). As shown in the table below, the validation loop is central to this process:

Table 1
Quantitative Social Feedback

Interaction Type	Identity Function	Source
Duets/Challenges	Symbolic Membership	Rahmawati et al. (2024)
Likes/Comments	Social Validation	Beyens et al. (2024)
Re-trending	Group Affiliation	Aticka & Khairussalam (2023)

This repetitive mechanism creates a sense of "digital togetherness," where validation acts as the primary building block for a teen's perceived position within a group.

Social Comparison as an Instrument of Identity Validity

Different from traditional social interactions, TikTok has very clear public social indicators ranging from the number of likes, views, followers, and comment distribution. These indicators create an evaluative space that reinforces social comparisons, where teens often compare themselves to the ideal content

promoted by the platform's algorithm (Yao & Chen, 2025). In Social Identity Theory, social comparison aims to maintain a positive identity through group differentiation, but on TikTok, this process becomes more intense due to the competitive and quantitative nature of the platform, which encourages behaviors such as "chasing likes" for social validation. This explains the findings of the Pew Research Center (2023) which noted the increasing tendency of teens to associate self-worth with the digital responses they receive, as well as a recent study showing that 72 % of teens feel pressure to look perfect on TikTok.

High social comparison is also in line with the findings of Marengo et al. (2021), that exposure to ideal visual content on social media can affect self-perception and identity stability, and is reinforced by new research that found a correlation between intensive TikTok use resulting in (1) learning and entertainment, (2) maternal fears related to content binging and cyberbullying, (3) finding connection and comfort through social media during the pandemic, (4) ongoing digital care work as lasting maternal labor, (5) iterative dialogue: platform restrictions and content curation boundaries, (6) upward and downward social comparison, (7) fear of missing out (FoMO), and (8) third-person perception (TPP) (Sams et al., 2025). However, on the TikTok application, this process becomes more extreme because the rapid virality of virality makes social standards change continuously, so teenagers often experience "identity flux" or identity fluctuations triggered by daily trends (Nesi et al., 2018). Therefore, identity formation in teens on TikTok is volatile, sometimes positive through creative expression and a supportive community, but it is also prone to emotional instability such as anxiety and depression due to unsatisfying comparisons (Livingstone & Smith, 2015).

Collective Identity and Trend-Based Group Fragmentation

This discussion emphasizes the important difference between offline social identity and social identity on TikTok. In the offline context, groups are usually formed based on relatively stable factors, such as regional origin, school, family, religion, or common interests that develop organically from face-to-face interactions. For example, a group of friends in a school or sports community is often based on long-term relationships that involve shared values, social norms, and shared experiences that form strong emotional bonds. The identity of this offline group tends to be more permanent and deeper, because it is supported by physical interactions, traditions, and social commitments that are not easily changed. According to Tajfel and Turner's (1979) theory of social identity, offline groups provide a sense of security and continuity, where individuals feel part of a stable entity, such as a family or cultural community.

However, in the context of TikTok, the dynamics of the group are very different. Groups on this platform are formed based on trends that are fast paced, changing, and don't always have a strong foundation of value. Dance trends, beauty trends, humor trends, and audio trends function as markers of digital groups that teenagers participate in. For example, a dance trend like "Renegade" or a viral challenge like "Savage Love" can gather millions of users in a matter of days, creating a temporary community around the content. TikTok's algorithm that pushes content based on user preferences accelerates the formation of these groups, where teens join through likes, comments, or duplication of content. As trends change in a matter of days or weeks, as can be seen from the evolution of trends from the "Charli D'Amelio effect" to the "Silhouette Challenge", the identities that teenagers build can change along with those dynamics. This shows that group identities on TikTok are temporary and fragmentary, in contrast to traditional group identities that are more stable.

These differences have significant psychological and social implications for adolescents. On the one hand, the flexibility of identity on TikTok allows for a more dynamic self-exploration, where teens can experiment with different social roles without long-term commitments. A study on TikTok use among teens found that viral trends can boost creativity and a sense of temporary connectedness but also trigger feelings of instability when the trend ends (Abidin, 2020). On the other hand, this instability can lead to identity fragmentation, where adolescents feel divided between various digital "personas" that are not integrated. Empirical research suggests that teens who rely too heavily on TikTok trends may have difficulty building a coherent identity, as they continue to adjust to what is "viral" at the time (Marengo et al., 2021). This contrasts with offline identities, which often provide a more solid foundation for long-term self-development.

In addition, this difference also reflects a shift in digital culture, where group values are no longer based on established social norms, but rather on popularity and algorithms. In Indonesia, for example, TikTok trends such as "TikTok Dance Indonesia" or local cultural challenges often create groups that are inclusive but quickly fade, in contrast to offline groups such as youth organizations or traditional art communities that have more permanent structures and goals. UNICEF (2023) reports that adolescents in developing countries such as Indonesia use TikTok to build cultural identity, but the risk of identity fragmentation increases if there is no education on digital literacy. Thus, while offline identities emphasize depth and continuity, identities on TikTok emphasize speed and adaptability, which can enrich the teenage experience but also pose challenges in forming authentic and sustainable identities.

There is a sharp contrast between stable offline identities and the fragmented identities found on TikTok. While offline groups (family, school) provide long-term continuity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), TikTok groups are "temporary communities" built around fleeting trends like the "Silhouette Challenge" or "Charli D'Amelio effect." Abidin (2020) notes that while this allows for flexible self-exploration, it also risks identity fragmentation. In Indonesia, UNICEF (2023) highlights that while TikTok helps build cultural identity through trends like "TikTok Dance Indonesia," the lack of digital literacy often leads to a "persona" that is disconnected from the adolescent's authentic self.

The Tension Between Authentic Identity and Algorithmically Formed Identities

One of the important contributions of this discussion is to look at how TikTok creates tension between the authentic identity of teenagers and the identity that is "produced" by algorithms. When algorithms prioritize certain content, teens are encouraged to adjust to make the content relevant or accepted. This leads to "algorithmic-based self-adjustment", where teenagers change their self-expression not based on personal desires, but based on what the platform values.

This phenomenon is in line with the findings of UNICEF (2023) regarding the risk of digital distress in adolescents, especially since the control over social experiences is not entirely in them, but in the design of the platform. This tension is theoretically relevant because it shows that the social identity of teens on TikTok does not necessarily reflect personal choices, but rather interactions with the platform's structure that are manipulative and selective.

In addition, the formation of adolescents' social identities on TikTok is also influenced by psychological and social usage motives. Research (Febrina et al., 2023) shows that teens use TikTok not only as a medium of entertainment, but also as a space to negotiate self-identity through attention-seeking, group affiliation, and personal expression. These motifs reinforce the previously described identification process, as adolescents actively conform to community norms to gain social validation.

In addition to the process of individual identity, the process of forming a collective identity can also be seen from the participation of teenagers in TikTok trend culture. The phenomenon of following a challenge, using certain audio, or imitating the persona of a popular creator shows that social groups on TikTok are not only formed by shared interests, but also by the trend cycles that the community creates collectively. This is made clear by research (Aticka &

Khairussalam, 2023), which states that the self-representation of teens on TikTok is heavily influenced by the desire to conform to the visual aesthetic that is currently dominant on the platform. This means that adolescents' social identities are formed through a dynamic and fast-changing process of imitation and collective participation.

A critical finding is the rise of "algorithmic-based self-adjustment." Adolescents often modify their behavior not based on personal choice, but to satisfy the platform's selective design. This tension is supported by Febrina et al. (2023), who found that usage motives such as attention-seeking and group affiliation force teens to conform to dominant visual aesthetics (Aticka & Khairussalam, 2023). This suggests that social identity on TikTok is a "produced" rather than "organic" entity, heavily influenced by the desire for community validation.

The Influence of Social Support on Adolescent Identity

According to Solehah et al (2025) In research in the digital era, support from family and peers in the form of open communication, emotional attention, and a sense of security has been shown to contribute significantly to adolescents' mental well-being. Other studies have shown that perceived social support is consistently correlated with higher levels of well-being and lower levels of emotional distress symptoms among adolescents (Ekanesia et al., 2024). Social support not only helps adolescents manage the stress of social media exposure but also supports them in the process of forming their own identity by providing space for reflection, emotional validation, and a fundamental sense of belonging (Fadilah et al., 2024).

The negative impacts of algorithmic pressure are significantly mitigated by external social support. Recent studies by Solehah et al. (2025) and Ekanesia et al. (2024) demonstrate that open communication and emotional attention from family act as a buffer against digital distress. Fadilah et al. (2024) further argue that social support provides the "reflective space" necessary for teens to integrate their digital experiences into a coherent, healthy offline identity.

Conclusion

TikTok plays an important role in shaping adolescents' social identities. With interactive features and recommendation algorithms provided, the platform allows teens to explore and express themselves in an ever-changing social environment. However, this process of identity formation also puts them in a vulnerable position to social comparisons as well as pressure to meet the expectations set by

algorithms. The identities formed on TikTok are often temporary, depending on rapid changes in trends, so they can cause emotional instability.

Therefore, it is crucial for parents, educators, and policymakers to be aware of these influences and encourage effective digital education. This will help teens have a positive experience when using social media. Further research is also needed to explore more deeply the relationship between digital platforms and the development of adolescent identity. In theory, this study builds on Social Identity Theory by showing that how people group themselves in the digital world isn't just something humans do in their minds it's also shaped by the suggestions made by AI systems. In real life, these results show that schools need to start teaching "identity literacy" to help teenagers deal with the pressure from algorithms. Also, platforms should be more open about their rules to reduce the dangers of comparing themselves to others on social media. Helping teens build a strong sense of self needs a good mix of letting them express themselves through creative online activities and offering a stable, caring offline space that gives them lasting emotional support.

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