Navigating Self-Discovery: The Interplay of Social Media and Adolescent Identity Formation

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Abstract

This capstone uses a comprehensive review of the literature to examine the psychological impacts that social media has on the interplay of adolescent development in regards to their identity formation. The rationale for writing this capstone was to better identify how the insights from the literature could contribute to the understanding of impacts made on adolescent development for clients and their families. Having an understanding of the development of adolescents is imperative to understanding basic mental health support while offering effective treatment for those seeking support for their mental health. This research project's methodology was a critical analysis of current and past literature that addresses adolescent development and the evolution of social media's interplay with adolescents. This capstone notes how families with unstructured, limitless, and unsupervised use of social media content has led to increased psychological symptoms including anxiety and depression, body dysphoria, anger, suicidality, and self-harm. Interventions which include skill development, open lines of communication and acceptance were discussed as helpful commonalities appearing in the quantitative research. Additionally, dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), and cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) are presented as a theoretical model for application in the clinical setting. The recommendations for future research included interdisciplinary research which would address the environmental, psychological, and social nature of the impacts leading to psychological concerns. Further research conducted within the Canadian context was recommended, with an emphasis on heterogenous samples, and finally, a recommendation was made for research to apply different theoretical models to determine their effectiveness in treating youth with psychological concerns that are related to the context of "phone hygiene." This final recommendation was made emphasizing the need to adapt theoretical models to integrate awareness in how families are

adapting to the presence of technology in the home and healthy structure for use of phones with adolescents. The capstone concludes with a personal reflection highlighting areas of growth in both clinical and research perspectives and the impact on future professional practice.

Acknowledgements

Before I start, I would like to give my own Land acknowledgement; I would like to acknowledge that I am a humble trespasser on Treaty 6 territory which is the traditional meeting ground, gathering place, and traveling route for the Cree, SOH-toh, Blackfoot, Métis, Dene, and Nakota Sioux. I hold much respect for the histories, languages, and cultures of First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and all First Peoples of Canada whose presence continues to enrich our communities.

I am grateful to live, learn, and work on this land, and I honor my responsibility toward working on reconciliation with the land and its original and present caretakers.

Dedication

In completing this journey, it took a multitier approach to support my efforts to accomplish such an undertaking; family, friends, and friends that are family. To my dear and most beloved Auntie Donna who never for one second questioned or doubted my ability to conquer any dream I set forth in life. The unwavering love and constant support in any capacity I require, you show up and have shown me and influenced me in a multitude of ways that I can only quite simply say, thank you and I love you.

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Chapter One: Introduction

This capstone will look at how in the age of perverse digital connectivity social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat are becoming the main dominant medias that are not only shaping the experiences that adolescents are having online, but also greatly impeding their capability of developing a healthy sense of self (Nesi et al., 2020). Exploring the role of social media in the complex process of adolescent identity formation (Nesi et al., 2020), with a focus on how online interactions and vicarious experiences shape developing identities. Also, wanting to take into consideration how the dynamics of social media influence the healthy and congruent growth of an adolescent's sense of self. Since the explosion of digital connectivity taking place in 2010, there has been widespread ramifications which includes the impact on adolescent self-esteem, self-concept and self-confidence (Avci et al., 2024; Firth et al., 2024).

The qualitative research examining the influence that social media is having on the mental health of adolescents has yielded mixed findings (Dubar et al., 2024). This stems mainly due to the lack of comparative data available since the digital inception post 2010. While there are studies starting to come out that are shedding light on how adolescents are struggling with self-identity concerns between their "online/virtual" self and their congruent sense of self (Avci et al., 2024; Dubar et al., 2024); there is also the argument that screen time is not the problem, but that it is actually the lack of boundaries and behaviour modelled within the home setting (Shawcroft et al., 2023). Adolescents in 2024, as well as anyone born since 2007, have never known a world without social media (El Hayek et al., 2025). While platforms such as TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram provide opportunities for connection and creativity, their perversions and overuse can negatively affect youth, calling for mindful awareness and critical engagement (El Hayek et al., 2025; Lavell et al., 2024). Research indicates that adolescents are experiencing

increased levels of anxiety, depression, body image concerns, and bullying associated with social media use, with effects most pronounced among youth from marginalized backgrounds, lower socioeconomic groups, and those with prior attachment disruptions (Nesi, 2020). For example, recent studies report significant rises in mental health concerns linked to problematic or excessive social media engagement, though prevalence rates vary by population and context, underscoring the need to interpret these findings carefully and avoid overgeneralization (Avci et al., 2024).

Social media platforms often present one-dimensional, picture-perfect portrayals of people's lives, with carefully selected images of appearance, lifestyle, and experiences. These curated collections, sometimes referred to as a "highlight reel" (Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011), can amplify social comparison processes, leaving adolescents especially vulnerable to feelings of inadequacy, lower self-esteem, and negative mental health outcomes when they measure themselves against these idealized representations (Nesi, 2020). Despite the pervasive nature of these platforms, understanding the nuances of social media consumption is crucial as it is the understanding of how adolescents interact with and react to social media content, ultimately influencing their mental health trajectories (Berryman et al., 2018).

Another variable to consider regarding this research are factors that will affect a person's capacity to develop a congruent sense of self is successful achievement in a person's development as well as their attachment (style). A person's sense of self will often be reflective of their environment and who and what is influencing the environment, which also contributes to the use and impact of social media in the home (Reer et al., 2019). For this capstone, several variables will be considered when examining the impact of social media on adolescent identity formation. These include relationships in the home (particularly attachment styles), the presence

of healthy boundaries (such as free time, detachment from devices, and balanced phone use), and nurturance. Research suggests that homes characterized by secure attachment tend to foster adolescents who develop stronger self-confidence, healthier boundaries, and more secure interpersonal relationships (Blackwell et al., 2017). With the premise that those individuals who have developed into adolescence with a secure attachment style would be more likely to demonstrate emotional regulation as they interact with social media and hold the capacity to critically digest social media and what the user experience is (Avci et al., 2024; Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Research indicates that individuals with anxious, disorganized, or avoidant attachment styles are at heightened risk for developing mental health concerns, including depression, anxiety, and personality disorders. These challenges may be compounded by maladaptive coping strategies, either expressed in social isolation or through problematic online behaviors (Eichenberg et al., 2024). For instance, doomscrolling—the compulsive consumption of distressing or negative digital content—and trolling—the deliberate provocation or harassment of others in online environments—represent forms of engagement that can exacerbate psychological distress (Eichenberg et al., 2024). Such behaviors intensify emotional and behavioral difficulties, thereby further undermining overall well-being (Nesi, 2020). Moreover, in certain cases, social media functions not merely as a platform for interaction but as an addictive mechanism that extends beyond normative patterns of use (Eichenberg et al., 2024). In this context, attachment styles function as a central factor in shaping how adolescents regulate their mental health and select coping mechanisms in digital environments (Berryman et al., 2018; Nesi, 2020). Attachment theory posits that the early relational experiences with caregivers will influence expectations of self and others, which in turn guides patterns of emotional regulation

and interpersonal behavior throughout the lifespan (Berryman et al., 2018). For example, adolescents with secure attachment are more likely to seek out healthy forms of social support and engage in adaptive coping strategies if a negative stressor occurs for the adolescent (Berryman et al., 2018). In contrast, those with anxious or disorganized attachment styles may display heightened sensitivity to social rejection, leading them to internalize negative online interactions in ways that exacerbate symptoms of anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Berryman et al., 2018). Similarly, adolescents with avoidant attachment may withdraw or disengage from meaningful social connections, instead relying on maladaptive coping behaviors such as excessive social media use, doomscrolling (compulsive exposure to distressing digital content), or trolling (provocative or hostile online behavior) (Berryman et al., 2018; Nesi, 2020). These patterns can intensify emotional dysregulation and perpetuate feelings of isolation (Berryman et al., 2018; Nesi, 2020). Consequently, attachment style not only influences how adolescents experience the digital landscape but also determines whether social media engagement mitigates or amplifies psychological vulnerability in the age of constant online connectivity (Berryman et al., 2018; Nesi, 2020). In understanding how an adolescent develops their sense of self-concept, let's go back to Erikson's (1968) theory of psychosocial development. Erikson's theory posits that the stage of identity vs. role confusion is a critical period during adolescence, a time where a person is going to struggle the most to form a congruent and coherent identity that is not intertwined with the confusion regarding their social roles and expectations (Erikson., 1968). Erikson outlines in his theory that identity development is shaped and reinforced by individual exploration as well as through social interactions (Erikson.,1968). Erikson (1968) conceptualized identity formation as a continuous developmental process extending from adolescence into adulthood, shaped by both intrapersonal and interpersonal

experiences. Notably, his theory emerged in a pre-digital era, long before the advent of online connectivity and the pervasive influence of social media on relational experiences and identity construction (Eichenberg et al., 2024).

In this capstone, I will explore as well as analyze the adolescent experience with social media and highlight its negative implications on an adolescent's capacity to develop a congruent sense of self. The literature review will demonstrate that adolescents with unlimited access to social media platforms, coupled with limited familial boundaries or insufficient caregiver guidance in modeling appropriate online engagement, struggle to develop a healthy sense of self-identity, self-concept, and self-efficacy (Berryman et al., 2018; Nesi et al., 2020).

Research Findings

As mentioned previously, the research examining the influence of social media use on the mental health of adolescents has yielded mixed findings. Some studies indicate that increased engagement with social media platforms can produce direct negative outcomes for adolescents Nesi, 2020). These outcomes often include heightened anxiety and body image concerns, largely driven by social comparison processes that are especially pronounced in vulnerable populations (Nesi, 2020); some research highlights the benefits of social media for maintaining relationships when physical distance creates barriers. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, online platforms provided a vital means of staying connected when in-person interaction with close others was not possible (Nesi, 2020). Additionally, the nature of the platforms themselves, characterized by constant exposure to idealized images and lifestyles, can further contribute to detrimental mental health outcomes as adolescents navigate their self-worth in relation to their peers and online influencers (Nesi, 2020).

Research findings suggest that factors such as attachment style, socioeconomic status, and limited boundaries around social media use are correlated with elevated risks of mental health difficulties in adolescent populations. These difficulties include generalized and separation anxiety, depressive disorders, attentional challenges associated with ADHD, and patterns of problematic or addictive online behaviors (Avci et al., 2024; Eichenberg et al., 2024; Nesi et al., 2020). Constant, uncritical use of social media can intensify isolation, anxiety, and low self-esteem in individuals with a weak sense of self. This incongruence between their online and real-life identities makes everyday functioning increasingly difficult (Nesi, 2020; Riehm et al., 2019).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this capstone is to examine how social media shapes adolescent identity formation by providing opportunities for self-expression and belonging, while also contributing to comparison, self-doubt, and a fragmented sense of self (Berryman et al., 2018). The research question I have is, “How does social media affect an adolescent's capacity of creating a sense of self?”. With this research question I seek to review literature with a focus on attachment styles, developmental and behavioral psychology, as well as evidence to how social media negatively impacts a person’s ability to create a healthy sense of self-identity, self-concept, and self-efficacy (Nesi et al., 2020).

As social media becomes one of the main ways that adolescents are communicating and making schemas about experiences with one another (Nesi, 2020), there has been an increased amount of social comparison due to the “highlight reel” effect (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). The 'highlight reel' effect describes how social media users showcase idealized moments, leading adolescents to compare themselves to unrealistic standards and feel inadequate (Valkenburg &

Piotrowski, 2017). Researchers are still examining how the detrimental effects of social comparison on self-esteem should inform therapeutic approaches for adolescents navigating the impacts of social media and working toward a healthy, well-rounded sense of self (Gaethe, 2020; Vogel et al., 2014). How adolescents evaluate their self-worth through social media interactions has significant implications for their mental health. These patterns also influence how they show up in both their personal and social relationships (Gaethe, 2020; Nesi et al., 2020). A variable that is important to be mindful of is how a person can process and cope when distress or life stressors are taking place and will be varied between experiences and is influenced by a person's attachment style that was developed early in their life (Gaethe, 2020).

As a mother of two children, I have witnessed firsthand how social media engagement has affected my oldest child's self-esteem and in turn their self-concept and sense of self. Often, my child will compare themself to others and feel increased pressure to conform to certain standards of appearance and behavior or fear a form of retribution in the way of a video/meme or discouraging post regarding whatever it is that violates the social code of the majority (i.e., following the latest clothing trends) where they feel most influenced (at school). Reflecting on my child's experience with early-onset puberty in 2019, at the age of nine; by March 2020 COVID-19 was a very big event in our lives and around the world, shutting everything down and having us at the mercy of government restrictions and online in almost every capacity to stay connected with school peers, family, and friends. As a family, we navigated the challenges and uncertainties of COVID-19 together and continue to face its lasting effects, including heightened separation anxiety, increased generalized anxiety, and, for my youngest son, symptoms of depression. During the mid-point of the pandemic, I recognized the importance of family dynamics in shaping my adolescents' mental health, as well as the need to maintain healthy

boundaries and structure around social media and technology use within our home. Research indicates that supportive family environments promote better adolescent mental health by fostering emotional regulation, secure attachment, and adaptive coping, whereas dysfunctional dynamics can increase vulnerability to mental health issues (Berryman et al., 2018; Smith & Carlson, 1997). Most studies rely on Western adolescent samples of varying sizes, which limits cross-cultural generalizability and underscores the need to interpret findings within specific social and cultural contexts (Berryman et al., 2018; Smith & Carlson, 1997).. Currently, as a graduate student pursuing a career in psychology and as a mother, I understand the importance of creating a supportive home environment for not only my children, but for those we connect with outside of our home and who can benefit from our worldly experiences, essentially, connection. Open communication, emotional support, and healthy boundaries are essential for fostering positive mental health in adolescents (Gaethe, 2020; Nesi et al., 2020).

Theoretical Framework

For this capstone, I will use Erikson's (1968) theory of psychosocial development and attachment theories as the primary theoretical frameworks. I will also integrate a feminist and multicultural lens to guide the literature review and to examine how these perspectives inform our understanding of identity formation. This approach focuses specifically on the impact of social media on female adolescents aged 9–15 (Gaethe, 2020; Nesi, 2020).

As it has been hypothesized that there is a correlational relationship between social media and the development of a negative sense of self, concerns regarding an increased rate of anxiety and depression amongst adolescents can indicate the need for more preventative measures and parental involvement when it comes to how social media is consumed (Nesi et al., 2020). Research highlights the negative impacts of adolescents using TikTok and Snapchat to socialize

with peers and close contacts. These platforms are not only pervasive in adolescents' lives (Berryman et al., 2018), but their effects are also closely linked to an individual's attachment style. Additionally, adolescents' ability to perceive themselves as whole individuals, separate from their online personas, plays a critical role in how they experience these impacts (Gaethe, 2020).

Feminist theory, developed by various scholars including Simone de Beauvoir (1949) and bell hooks (1984), focuses on understanding and addressing gender inequalities and power dynamics. This integrated approach informs the capstone by ensuring that the literature review is conducted in a manner that is respectful and acknowledges systems of oppression, colonization, and topics that are sensitive to gender dynamics (de Beauvoir, 1949). Previous studies using the Two-Eyed Seeing (Forbes et al., 2020) have demonstrated its effectiveness in bridging cultural gaps and fostering mutual respect between Indigenous and Western knowledge systems. Two-Eyed Seeing emphasizes learning to see from both perspectives simultaneously, valuing the strengths of each worldview, and applying them together in a complementary way (Forbes et al., 2020). This approach encourages researchers and practitioners to honor Indigenous ways of knowing while also integrating Western scientific methods, promoting a more holistic and inclusive understanding of complex social and developmental phenomena (Forbes et al., 2020). Similarly, feminist theory has been widely used to analyze and address issues related to gender inequality in various fields, including sociology, psychology, and education (Sue & Sue, 2015).

This integrated approach using attachment, feminist, and Two-Eyed Seeing provides a robust and interpretive framework for my capstone. By drawing on these diverse theories, the capstone aims to create a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of the literature. The use of a multicultural and feminist theory lens will ensure that this capstone is conducted in a

manner that respects and incorporates diverse ways of knowing and addresses gender dynamics (Saadat et al., 2017).

Methodology

The literature review that will take place in Chapter Two will take a qualitative look at several studies that give insight into the influence that social media has on the impact of healthy identity formation. Through the lens of a culturally informed approach to mental health, I developed the literature review with a focus on attachment styles, developmental psychology, and the influence of social media on adolescent identity formation. I also considered how my own biases and personal experiences have shaped my perspective on this topic. The importance of this topic acknowledges that there is an immediate need for changing the approach on provisions of when adolescents should be introduced to social media and having unlimited structure with social media and technological devices they have access to. Looking at ways to address mental health with the adolescent population and what standards and boundaries are necessary so that wellness and the impact on mental health amongst adolescents is made a priority and looked after in a preventative and constructive way (Saadat et al., 2017). The literature review was designed to examine the impact of social media on adolescent identity formation. It also aimed to identify practical interventions and preventive measures to support adolescents' development. By addressing these issues during the adolescent period, there is an opportunity to reduce the effects of mental health struggles and help youth manage life stressors in a productive and emotionally healthy way as they progress toward adulthood (Saadat et al., 2017).

Positionality

Understanding that the researchers' experience and what they value will impact how one proceeds with their literature review, and as I perceive myself as being self-aware, while understanding my own biases, my hopes are that it will allow for me to be objective as I develop my literature review and further my understanding of this topic. As previously mentioned, I am a parent, and I am also an active social media user (from inception, evolving as social media platforms have) and I certainly have my own opinions on the impacts and effects of social media on adolescents. While I am certain that my values about how social media is used in my life are inherently different than those of my 15-year-old, it is noteworthy to state that my own perspectives and preconceived notions have the capacity to influence my interpretations of the studies that will be reviewed. This topic was chosen both for its personal significance and for its relevance to my professional focus on adolescent populations. I felt it would be beneficial to learn and gain a better understanding of the topic. In the context of examining the impacts and contributions to mental health and how social media's influence has created several assumptions which underpin this research, one primary assumption is that attachment style heavily contributes to the building of self-esteem in adolescents **(**Best et al., 2014). This assumption is crucial as it will allow the researcher to focus on intrinsic and environmental factors that shape mental health and self-esteem, providing a clearer understanding of these elements in the absence of social media's pervasive presence (Best et al., 2014). The significance of this research lies in its potential to bridge the gap between reactive and preventative measures in supporting families with adolescents (Berryman et al., 2018). By examining the impacts of social media on adolescents, this research aims to provide insights that can inform more effective parental guidance and boundaries (Best et al., 2014). Positionality is a concept that refers to the social and political context that shapes an individual's identity and perspectives (Creswell, 2022). Being

able to acknowledge that our experiences, beliefs, and biases influence how we understand and interpret the world around us is crucial (Creswell, 2022). In the context of adolescents and mental health, positionality becomes particularly significant as it helps us recognize the various factors that contribute to the mental well-being of young individuals (Creswell, 2022).

Additionally, it is important to consider how positionality influences family dynamics. For example, cultural norms and expectations may shape parenting practices and impact the mental health of adolescents (Creswell, 2022). Socioeconomic status (SES) is another important factor that influences adolescent mental health. Adolescents from low-income families have increased stressors such as financial instability, limited access to resources, and exposure or increased risk to violence or crime (Creswell, 2022). These stressors can contribute to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression (Creswell, 2022). Understanding positionality allows us to recognize how SES intersects with other social categories to impact mental health.

Through my psychological lens I will speak to how I am seeing the impact of social media in the demographic I am working with (adolescents between 10 and 17) and what sort of therapeutic measures I am taking and how to work ethically, authentically, and adhere to the ethics and conduct I am bound to as a mental health practitioner in Alberta and as a new psychologist in the field. Specifically, I will look at the ideas and areas where there is opportunity to improve on sleep hygiene, boundary setting, how self-awareness and reflection are key components to having a healthy relationship with social media, and to create one's own identity outside of social media.

Contribution to the Field

With this research, I wanted to deepen not only my understanding of adolescent mental health but to enrich my knowledge of what is impacting them most in the present day. The

applicability of this research within the field of counselling can help promote change for parents, families, and all individuals who use social media. Demonstrating the influence and knowledge that exist with current research can help provide insight as to how we can help repair and prevent further negative impacts that social media has on identity formation during adolescence (Duriez, 2021).

Looking at what needs to change (re: therapeutic response/technique/intervention), how can psychologists grow awareness and initiate community involvement? Looking at ways to be preventative rather than reactive, finding at ways to promote better mental health hygiene around how phones and tablets are used with adolescence (Gaethe, 2020). Ideally, limiting exposure to social media before age 16 and understanding the importance of lived experience over virtual experiences can help shape identity without further confusion and pressure as well as developing and building community and connection that helps foster a better sense of self (Gaethe, 2020).

The second chapter, the literature review, will explore current and past studies that show insight and identify ways that adolescence is impacted with the interplay of social media on identity formation (Berryman et al., 2018). The third chapter will be a conclusion and personal reflection from myself regarding the literature and hoped outcomes for fostering and curating better engaged therapeutic sessions for future clients/patients that are seeking help for their mental health and wellness. While ending with ethical and cultural considerations that should be made and kept in mind as practical applications of my findings and knowledge as a practicing clinician amongst a population of adolescents.

In wanting to explore the ways that experiences of social media engagement influence identity formation in adolescents, the literature review will look at studies with childhood, adolescent, and adult experience and evaluation of how these experiences are shaping identity

formation and negatively impacting mental health amongst adolescents (Berryman et al., 2018). Looking at the impact of social media's influence on identity formation can have a positive impact on how to foster therapeutic environments that can use targeted strategies and techniques that help bring more congruence within identity formation amongst adolescence (Berryman et al., 2018).

Definition of Terms

In this section I will briefly define terms that are specific to my topic and area of research that have specific meaning to the context of my capstone.

- *Congruence*: refers to the alignment between a person's self-concept and their actual experience (Rogers, 1961).
- *Identity*: refers to the understanding and sense of oneself that a person develops through their experiences, relationships, and internal processes (Erikson, 1968).
- *Incongruence*: refers to the mismatch between how a person views their self-concept and their actual experiences or behaviors, which can lead to internal conflict or distress (Rogers, 1961).
- *Self-concept*: a person's overall perception and understanding of themselves, including their traits, beliefs, and behaviors (Baumeister, 1999).
- *Self-esteem*: refers to how a person evaluates aspects of their self-concept, representing their overall sense of worth or value (Corrigan et al., 2006).
- *Self-confidence*: a person's belief in their own abilities, skills, and judgment; related to self-assurance and trust in their capacity to handle challenges or achieve goals (Bandura, 1997).

- *Snapchat*: a multimedia messaging app where users can send photos, videos, and text messages that disappear after being viewed (Andone, 2015).
- *TikTok*: a social media platform used for creating and sharing short-form videos, often involving trends, music, and visual effects (Kircaburun, et al., 2020; Nuzuli, 2022; Toh et al., 2023).

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Adolescence is a crucial time in one's life. It is marked by the exploration of self where one starts recognizing, understanding, and creating a sense of self-esteem, confidence, and self-concept (Erikson, 1968). With the evolution of social media emerges platforms that hold powerful influence over adolescents which has complicated self-identity formation for some while others have been able to grow alongside social media without detrimental impacts (Gaethe, 2020). Conversely, when people spend time engaging in social comparisons there are clear links to both increased exploration and heightened identity-related distress (Avci et al., 2024). This chapter will be organized thematically with part A exploring adolescent development with Erikson's theory and insights regarding identity vs. role confusion which examines how social media intersects with the development of identity formation. Part B looks at nuances, habits, and patterns that are created or exasperated by social media, but grounded in the context of development in adolescence. Lastly, part C focuses on the attachment and the psychosocial, neurological considerations that affect one's life satisfaction, specific to social media influence and adolescent development.

The sections together will provide insights to a comprehensive and synthesized overview of the interplay that social media has had on the shaping and formation of a healthy and congruent adolescent identity (Gaethe, 2020).

My goal with this literature review is to consider the interplay of key contributing factors—such as schema development, self-efficacy, neurological influences, attachment styles, and the varying impacts of specific platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok. Social media use has fostered feelings of inadequacy and lowered self-efficacy, as adolescents frequently compare themselves to idealized online portrayals of peers (Gaethe,

2020); however, as I work with adolescents and youth (as well as my experience being a mother) accessible and unsupervised use of social media has led many adolescents to question their abilities and self-worth. This diminished capacity to manage online engagement and internal dialogue contributes to increased negativity and maladaptive patterns (Nesi et al., 2020; Twenge et al., 2019). Adolescents face constant exposure to negative comparisons and internalized schemas, which can lead them to rely on external validation from passive online experiences. This reliance may replace opportunities to develop competence through real-life interactions—such as friendships, school, community involvement, or extracurricular activities—which are essential for building resilience and authentic self-concepts (Gaethe, 2020; Nesi et al., 2020).

I do truly believe that our adolescents and youth are lacking not only the opportunity to critically evaluate their own sense of self in a healthy lens, but are also not understanding of the impact that the reduction of in-person experiences is having on their personal health and mental well-being. While there is now a recognition of this phenomenon starting to take place, due to COVID 19 exasperating and inciting change to the way everyone had to communicate—as (almost) every interaction was moved online in one capacity or another (Nesi et al., 2020; Twenge et al., 2019). Mitigating these effects and fostering a healthier relationship with social media will in fact bolster self-efficacy and lead to more alignment with their congruent selves while developing a robust schema about themselves (Bandura, 1997; Rogers, 1961). This literature review draws from various scholarly sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics created from social media use, social comparison, self-esteem, and digital well-being (Vogel et al., 2014).

Topic A: Erikson's Theory of Development and Social Media Interplay

Erikson's theory of psychosocial development is understood that each stage of development comes with a sense of accomplishment in order to progress to the next stage of development (Erikson, 1968). When the current/previous stage is not successfully moved along from this in turn can be detrimental to the continued development in a successful manner (Erikson, 1968). Because it is important for us as humans to have our innate desires met to then build and scaffold off of our innate experiences we have in life, this is one of the main ways that helps humans attribute to the development of a robust schema (or mental framework) that then helps adolescents identify their areas of strengths, weaknesses, and fostering environments of community and connection (Erikson, 1968). Each of Erikson's eight stages have a core conflict or crisis that every person must be able to resolve on their own to scaffold off in order to develop a healthy psychological identity and this keeps us moving along competently on to the next stage (Twenge, et al., 2019). When there is not a successful resolve in a (any) stage of development then there is opportunity for incongruent identity formation, fractured beliefs, and confusion for the individual to rectify and resolve (Erikson, 1968).

Below are the eight stages of development as posited by Erikson:

- Trust vs. Mistrust. This stage takes place from birth until 18 months. The goal in this stage of development is to understand who can be trusted in the world. Adolescents may ask themselves questions such as: "Does someone come when I cry? Is there someone I can depend on? Who feels safe and nurturing?" (Erikson, 1968). If there is not a positive outcome during this period of development then the infant will not succeed in moving along onto the next stage of development without a solid foundation of trust and safety in the world (Erikson, 1968).

- Autonomy vs. shame and doubt is the second stage of development, taking place from 18 months until 3 years. A toddler at this time is seeking to build off of trust to form a sense of will by seeking to do things on their own, or are they still reliant upon others (Erikson, 1968)? As the toddler grows so does their innate sense of confidence and independence in wanting to explore environments and seeking forms of autonomy to make choices (Erikson, 1968).
- Initiative vs. guilt is the third stage to take place from ages 3 to 5 years old. Wanting to understand purpose, they are looking for an opportunity to practice taking initiative and acting on it. Seeking creativity and opportunity to act allows children to scaffold their trust, confidence, and capacity to seek purpose which can aid in creativity and feeling capable (Erikson, 1968).
- Industry vs. inferiority is the fourth stage which takes place from ages 5 to 12 years old. Children and young adolescents are seeking to understand their place in this world. This is where competence and capacity for recognizing their sense of pride when they are capable and successful in their achievements (Erikson, 1968).
- Identity vs. role confusion is the fifth stage in development. During adolescence (ages 12 to 18), identity formation can become confused or conflicted without adequate scaffolding from earlier developmental stages (Erikson, 1968). This stage of identity can become derailed, confused, and conflicted if there is not successful scaffolding through prior years of development that have led to this stage (Erikson, 1968). In this stage of development the main focus becomes who am I and where am I going, an existential time of development where adolescents and youth are seeking evidence to confirm their beliefs so they can develop a coherent sense of self. If this is not able to be achieved the

question about who they are and what they mean in their place in the world can become highly confused (Erikson, 1968).

- Intimacy vs. isolation is the sixth stage, taking place from ages 18 to 40 years, and this stage seeks to be loved and reciprocal with my love and if one cannot or does not feel loved and connected, then the sense of being loved and having the capacity to develop a healthy sense of emotional maturity will lead to being conflicted, confused, and unfortunately, unhealthy relationships and connections with others when it comes to intra and interpersonal relationships (Erikson, 1968).
- Generativity vs. stagnation is the seventh stage that takes place from ages 40 to 65 years which is looking at purpose in the way life counts, and understanding the ability to either create or nurture the relationships and connections that have been made to this point and essentially wanting tangible evidence of creating a legacy (Erikson, 1968).
- Ego integrity vs. despair is the eighth and final stage of Erikson's theory of development. This stage is from age 65 until death. This stage looks at having grown and aged along this journey of life. It is reflective of how we want to confirm that the legacy and life that has been created shows evidence of meaning and purpose. Wondering if their life was lived with a form of acceptance or are they in a state of despair filled with regrets (Erikson, 1968).

Self-Identity and Social Media Influence

As noted previously, self-identity vs. confusion takes place as the fifth stage of development around age 12, meaning that prior to one's creating a healthy sense of self, to be successful in the first four stages a person needs to feel nurtured, trust, industry, and independence as well as recognizing their own capacity and capability of mastering their own

skills and tasks, up until and continuing through this development (Erikson, 1968). Self-identity according to Erikson is how an adolescent may experience different roles and senses of identity during this period. Variables that impact this stage of development are family, friends, peers, and any activities or community that the adolescent engages with on a daily or consistent basis (Meeus, 2011). Benson and Bundick (2020a) offer an interesting examination of the contributions of Erikson's theory to the present time of development and also recognize where there are areas that need evolving when we look at the stages of development regarding adolescent identity. Evidence shows that Erikson's psychosocial theory—particularly stage five and the identity formation, when there is crisis followed by the lifelong task of negotiating identity— continues to underpin contemporary developmental psychology, and is still a foundational reference in scholarly research on identity. Empirical evidence supports Erikson's theory (1968), particularly the fifth stage of identity versus confusion. In the present day, social media increasingly influences adolescents' identity development in negative ways. Exposure to online comparison can heighten feelings of confusion and contribute to higher rates of anxiety and depression. Adolescents may also experience self-criticism, feeling "not good enough," and become caught in a cycle of constant negative social comparisons (Rutter et al., 2021). Benson and Bundick (2020a) look at factors of connectivity in the age of digital media, it is shown to be impacting the developmental trajectories taking place currently during adolescence. The overuse of social media can negatively impact relationships, first with peers and then within the family, particularly when adolescents lack guidance or limits on how to manage their engagement with these platforms (Vossen et al., 2024); looking at familial relationships within the home when a social media platform becomes too consuming and there are no structure or limits of how to in a sense "have a relationship with social media" (Vossen et al., 2024). Highlighting Erikson's

foresight about the implications of psychosocial development and its impact to societal shifts: witnessing more anxious youth not wanting to participate in extracurricular's and community support that is dissipating which then leads to exasperating a population of adolescents that grow isolated and disconnected (Benson & Bundick, 2020a). Erikson's theory (1968) can seem limited, particularly in addressing socioeconomic status, marginalized populations, and the diversity of cultural beliefs and values. Benson and Bundick (2020a) noted that identity formation involves multiple considerations. There is an emphasis that a fully congruent sense of self requires attention to factors such as culture, gender, and inclusivity (Benson & Bundick, 2020a). Given the amount of support and nurturance that youth need, intentionally building inclusive communities fosters a more robust and empathetic sense of self (Benson & Bundick, 2020a). Creating a safe environment for both the self and the community is essential for successful growth through Erikson's fifth stage of development (Benson & Bundick, 2020a).

Benson and Bundick (2020a) placed an emphasis on parts of Erikson's theory that are applicable in present time, specific to social environments and the significance of having lived experience vs. a vicarious online experience (Twenge et al., 2019). In any experience that is being completed online there is an opportunity to feel connected which can be detrimental to adolescents without enough balanced lived experiences (Twenge et al., 2019).). This piece is critical when we consider the impacts our daily influences have on us, and should an adolescent have a curated online experience due to the algorithm in any of the social media platforms, this can become dangerous, toxic, alarming, harmful, and impede their development through Erikson's fifth stage causing confusion and creating unhealthy and maladaptive coping habits (Rutter et al., 2021). With my work in the mental health field, I have seen first hand how the

impact of social media and its lack of boundaries have increased the rise of anxiety, depression, body dysphoria, self-harm, and exasperated symptoms of ADHD.

Part of the fifth stage of development is curiosity and questioning who I am, what I want in life, and where I want to go (Erikson, 1968). It also involves developing a sense of identity, taking chances, and exploring what works and what does not (Erikson, 1968).Because this stage is central to the ages of 12 to 18, this is the prime period for self-exploration and taking reasonable risks that are not detrimental to self or others (Meeus, 2011). Using Erikson's theory which emphasizes that the potential to experience role confusion during this period is high due to potential for disruptions, ruptures in attachment, lack of opportunities (Erikson, 1968); when we look at what could cause potential disruption and recognizing that the COVID 19 pandemic caused most of what was listed to take place (Magson et al., 2021). Your level of privilege, SES, community, culture, and demographic, those are the factors that shaped how well you fared during COVID 19 (Magson et al., 2021). If you were not initially impacted by a financial, familial, school/educational, or community rupture, you were after everything reopened and shifts in the geopolitical environment started to change and everything from a micro to a macro level was impacted for (al)most everyone (Magson et al., 2021). As Benson and Bundick (2020a) recognize, Erikson's theory in this light is still relevant and applicable to the growth and development of adolescents, specifically in how social environments have changed to now include social media and online platforms (Benson & Bundick, 2020a). Benson and Bundick (2020a) would argue that how the change has evolved would look like identifying social media as an amplifying mirror in the role of identity (Benson & Bundick, 2020a). The "mirror" effect of social media causes adolescents to constantly compare themselves to others, often in a negative way. This exposure provides immediate feedback—both criticism and praise—which

can undermine authentic, organic validation. As a result, adolescents may increasingly rely on external validation, altering dopamine responses and reducing overall satisfaction with the self (Rutters et al., 2021). Adolescents are likely to face challenges that feel significant during Erikson's fifth stage; when there is failure to achieve identity resolution, this will manifest as confusion about a person's values, creating a weakened sense of self, which then becomes difficulty committing to roles or goals in life (Erikson, 1968). The contemporary research underscores just how much social media intensifies these developmental risks (Meeus, 2011). Multiple studies, including a systematic review of 32 studies involving nearly 20,000 adolescents, confirm that it is not the duration and time spent on social media as it is the act and nature of engagement—particularly idealized self-presentation and social comparison—that drives identity distress and intersects the fragmented self-concept clarity (Avci et al., 2024). While these findings underscore important links between social media behaviors and adolescent identity development, several limitations must be considered. First, most studies in the review were cross-sectional, which restricts the ability to draw causal inferences about how engagement patterns influence identity outcomes over time. Second, the wide age range of participants spans multiple developmental stages, meaning that effects on identity formation may differ between early, middle, and late adolescence. Third, the majority of studies relied on self-reported measures, which can introduce bias in assessing social media use and identity-related outcomes. Taken together, these limitations highlight the need for longitudinal research and more nuanced sampling to better understand how social media interacts with developmental processes across adolescence (Avci et al., 2024). Similarly, platforms which serve as a "digital social mirror" create a form of an ideal self where receiving unsolicited feedback distorts their self-perception, also creating identity confusion (Saadat et al., 2017). This intersecting dynamic aligns with

Erikson's insight that identity formation is relational and context-dependent: requiring individuals to navigate social expectations, receive validation, and integrate personal values (Erikson, 1968). Benson and Bundick (2020a) extend this understanding for the age of social media by emphasizing that identity emerges within our ecological systems—trusting adults, boundaries with appropriate and proper context, as well as structured environments, these can become crucial buffers against the pressures faced in online interactions (Uhls et al., 2017). The healthy identity development is reliant on these supportive relationships and structured spaces, as opposed to individual introspection or algorithmic validation (Valkenburg et al., 2022). The question—"Is it social media itself or the lack of boundaries in the environment impacting youth's sense of self?"—finds firm theoretical grounding in this framework. No, it is not merely the platform, but the relational and ecological context that will determine whether social media use amplifies identity risks or promotes adaptive exploration (Valkenburg et al., 2022). Adolescents whose digital interactions are anchored by trusted adults, authentic modeling, and healthy boundaries are more likely to navigate identity formation successfully (Valkenburg et al., 2022). This aligns with Erikson's (1968) belief that identity must be negotiated within supportive environments and validates Benson and Bundick's (2020a) call for relationally informed, ecological approaches to understanding adolescent development in the digital era.

Identity Confusion or Social Media? Exploring Their Impact on Adolescents

The adolescent brain is wired for social feedback, and social media delivers this in real time through a positive reinforcement loop of algorithms, follows, likes or other indicators. When used mindfully, it can support positive identity formation; however, overexposure or lack of healthy boundaries can lead to confused, fragmented, or externally defined identities in developing children, youth or young adults (Nesi, 2020; Uhls et al., 2017). Scaffolding from the

previous four stages of development is key in successful identity formation. Benson and Bundick (2020a) show that each developmental stage builds upon the last, the same as Erikson's (1968) theory of development. If adolescents were unable to form trust (Stage 1), autonomy (Stage 2), or confidence (Stages 3–4), they would be likely to rely excessively on external affirmation, such as "likes" or online praise/validation (Benson & Bundick, 2020a). This appears harmless, however seeking constant streams of validation or praise can contribute to overidentification with digital personas, vulnerability to online bullying, and inconsistent self-image across platforms and relationships (Beyens et al., 2024; Nesi et al., 2020). Increased levels of confusion with identity due to social media environments, either support or undermine Erikson's progression through development, or depending on the adolescent's environment, self-regulation and sense of security (Benson & Bundick, 2020b; Erikson, 1968).

Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory—particularly the identity vs. role confusion stage—is increasingly examined in light of contemporary digital environments. Adolescents have become reliant on social media platforms for feedback, social comparison, and role experimentation; these being the key components Erikson identified as essential to identity formation (Erikson, 1968; Nesi, 2020). Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the immediacy and amplification of online validation, which can hinder authentic identity development when boundaries are absent or early developmental foundations are weak (Uhls et al., 2017). Socioeconomic factors and experiences of marginalization, such as those faced by visible minorities, further increase the risk of harm and developmental challenges in this population (Benson & Bundick, 2020a). Without adequate support adolescents may experience identity diffusion, mirroring Erikson's concerns about unresolved crises in earlier stages leading to confusion in later ones (Benson & Bundick, 2020b).

This developmental vulnerability is explained by classic and modern identity theories. Cooley's (1902, as cited in Valkenburg et al., 2022) "looking-glass self" describes how self-concept is shaped by perceived judgments of others, a process magnified in digital spaces where feedback is constant and public (Valkenburg et al., 2022). The self-categorization theory further explains how adolescents shift self-perception based on the online communities they affiliate with, which may fragment identity across contexts (Han & Yzer, 2020). Similarly, symbolic interactionism highlights the interpretive process of constructing self-concept through social exchanges—processes now often mediated by algorithms and platform norms (Vogel et al., 2014).

The empirical evidence demonstrates that exposure to diverse perspectives online can broaden identity exploration but also increase uncertainty and anxiety when adolescents engage in upward social comparisons or receive conflicting social cues (Beyens et al., 2024). Instant peer validation through likes, comments, and shares can boost self-esteem in the short term, but negative interactions or inconsistent feedback can erode identity stability (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). The curation of idealized online personas, while common, can create an incongruence between online and offline selves, leading to internal dissonance and confusion (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017).

Adolescence is a sensitive period of emotional and social brain development, where digital media use can exert significant influence (Vogel et al., 2014). One concern emerging from empathy research is that increased digital media exposure is associated with reduced cognitive empathy in young adults—though evidence remains mixed (Vogel et al., 2014). While some studies find no correlation, the trend toward lower empathy raises concerns about how prolonged online interactions may impair perspective-taking or affective mirroring (Valkenburg,

& Piotrowski, 2017). Neuroscientific findings further illustrate how excessive social media use may reshape the adolescent brain (He et al., 2017). Structural MRI studies show reduced gray matter volume in the amygdala and ventral striatum, regions critical for emotional processing and reward, among heavy social media users—and notably, these reductions are not observed in prefrontal areas (He et al., 2017). Additionally, broader digital media habits—such as large social networks—are linked to volumetric changes in the amygdala and orbitofrontal cortex (OFC), while mobile device usage correlates with reduced ventral striatum volume (Wang & Eccles, 2012). Together, these results imply that patterns of online interaction leave discernible fingerprints on brain structures associated with identity, emotion, and rewards (Wang & Eccles, 2012). Parallel insights from behavioral addiction research sharpen our understanding of the neurobiological risks of compulsive digital engagement (Wang & Eccles, 2012). Meta-analyses and neuroimaging studies on internet gaming disorder (IGD) reveal pervasive structural and functional alterations in frontostriatal circuits, including diminished gray matter in the prefrontal cortex and disrupted connectivity within executive and reward networks (He et al., 2017). Collectively, these changes mirror patterns seen in substance-related addictions, highlighting the brain's vulnerability to digital behaviors when boundaries are absent (Wang & Eccles, 2012).

These findings are more concerning when viewed through Erikson's lens: adolescents lacking solid foundation in earlier developmental stages (e.g., trust, autonomy, competence) may turn toward external digital affirmation—social media likes or online validation—as a substitute scaffolding (Vogel et al., 2014). But voyeuristic or vicarious online experiences may instead reinforce identity fragmentation (Vogel et al., 2014). With cognitive empathy diminished, emotional processing altered, and neural reinforcement skewed by compulsive reward cycles, digital media may, in fact, impede coherent, intrinsic identity formation rather than support it

(Vogel et al., 2014). In sum, Erikson's (1968) theory of psychosocial development remains a critical framework for understanding adolescent identity formation, even in the face of unprecedented technological and cultural shifts. The rise of the internet and social media has created new arenas in which adolescents navigate self-concept, peer relationships, and social comparison, amplifying both the opportunities for self-expression and the risks to self-esteem and well-being (Vogel et al., 2014). Contemporary research confirms that the digital environment can shape developmental outcomes in ways Erikson could not have anticipated, yet the core principles of his model—particularly the tension between identity formation and role confusion—remain strikingly relevant in interpreting how today's youth construct their sense of self in a hyperconnected world (Nesi, 2020).

Social Media's Impact on Self-Esteem and Self-Confidence

The goal is to understand how social media impacts Erikson's (1968) fifth stage of development, particularly its influence on adolescents' self-esteem and self-confidence. Since adolescence is such a critical window for brain maturation and identity formation, between the ages of 7 and 15, neural systems supporting self-regulation, emotion processing, and social cognition undergo significant development (Nesi, 2020). Social media use during this time intersects with these developmental tasks—impacting adolescents' capacity to develop stable self-esteem and a coherent self-concept (Nesi, 2020). The pattern of habitual checking of social platforms not only conditions heightened sensitivity to social rewards and curates a feedback loop for adolescents, but may also modulate neural circuitry involved in identity-related processing (Nesi, 2020). Benson and Bundick (2020b) reframe adolescent identity development through a positive youth development (PYD) and ecological lens that emphasizes strengths, developmental assets, and the social contexts that scaffold growth rather than a singular focus on

crisis or pathology (Benson and Bundick., 2020b). Their work highlights how identity emerges within nested systems of family, peers, schools, and community resources, and argues that contemporary digital environments (social media, online communities) should be treated as part of those ecological systems rather than external or peripheral influences (Benson and Bundick., 2020b). Importantly for this capstone, Benson and Bundick call attention to how adolescents engage with online spaces (for belonging, exploration, or validation) and to the protective role that supportive adults and structured opportunities can play in guiding adaptive identity exploration online (Benson and Bundick., 2020b).

Erikson's (1968) psychosocial model centers identity vs. role confusion as a stage-specific tension: successful resolution produces a coherent sense of self, whereas failure produces confusion and diffusion (Erikson,, 1968). Benson and Bundick (2020b) do not overturn this core insight; rather, they extend and modernize it. Where Erikson emphasizes intrapsychic negotiation of roles across sequential stages, Benson and Bundick foreground the relational and contextual conditions that make successful negotiation more or less likely in contemporary settings (Benson and Bundick., 2020b). In other words, Erikson names the developmental task (identity formation) while Benson and Bundick expand the map of influences (digital ecology, assets, and social supports) that facilitate or hinder that task in the 21st century (Benson and Bundick., 2020b). This extension is empirically meaningful when we consider social media's documented effects on self-evaluation and identity work. Contemporary studies show that the quality of social media engagement—active vs. passive use, upward social comparison, and the presence/absence of supportive feedback—predicts divergent outcomes for self-esteem and identity clarity (Valkenburg et al., 2022; Vogel et al., 2014); studies using undergraduate samples indicate that active versus passive use, upward social comparison, and supportive

feedback predict different self-esteem and identity outcomes (Valkenburg et al., 2022; Vogel et al., 2014). Benson and Bundick's emphasis on assets and scaffolding aligns with findings that adolescents who possess stronger emotional regulation, parental support, or opportunities for meaningful offline engagement tend to fare better when negotiating identity in digital contexts (Nesi, 2020; Rutter et al., 2021). Thus, rather than viewing social media as a deterministic cause of identity confusion, Benson and Bundick encourage researchers and clinicians to examine the interaction between individual strengths, social supports, and platform affordances—an approach that complements and refines Erikson's stage-based diagnostic lens (Benson and Bundick., 2020b).

There are also points of contrast worth noting. Erikson's (1968) model is normative and stage-based, with an implicit developmental sequence; it provides a timeless heuristic for identifying the tasks adolescents must accomplish. Benson and Bundick (2020b), by contrast, emphasize nonlinear pathways, cultural variation, and the malleability of developmental trajectories in response to contemporary social technologies (Benson and Bundick., 2020b). Practically, this means interventions inspired by Erikson might focus on helping adolescent resolve role conflict whereas interventions informed by Benson and Bundick would additionally target relational scaffolds (e.g., parental mediation, school-based digital literacy, community opportunities) and platform-level strategies to reduce harmful comparison and increase opportunities for authentic self-expression online (Benson and Bundick., 2020b).

Taken together, Erikson (1968) and Benson and Bundick (2020b) complement one another. Erikson provides the foundational developmental task of identity versus confusion, while Benson and Bundick offer a contemporary, ecological account of how that task is enacted and influenced in the age of social media. For researchers and clinicians, the combined

implication is clear—assess both intrapsychic identity processes and the social-ecological supports (or risks) that digital media introduce, because identity outcomes depend on their interaction rather than on either factor alone (Benson & Bundick, 2020a, 2020b; Erikson., 1968; Nesi, 2020). Erikson's theory of psychosocial development positions adolescence as a critical period for navigating the stage of identity versus role confusion, where individuals explore and consolidate a coherent sense of self (Erikson., 1968). In the digital era, social media has emerged as both a tool and a challenge in this developmental process. Platforms offer adolescents expanded opportunities for self-expression, peer feedback, and identity exploration beyond traditional social contexts (Nesi, 2020). These experiences can foster self-confidence when they are positive and affirming (Nesi, 2020). However, the curated nature of online interactions, constant social comparison, and exposure to idealized images can heighten vulnerability to self-esteem fluctuations and identity diffusion within youth (Nesi, 2020). This dual impact underscores the complexity of social media's role in shaping adolescent identity, suggesting that while it can facilitate meaningful self-discovery, it also carries risks that can undermine psychological well-being (Nesi, 2020). Understanding this interplay is essential for educators, parents, and mental health professionals seeking to support adolescents in navigating identity formation with resilience and authenticity in a digitally saturated world.

Topic B: Nuances of Social Media and the Impact on Adolescent Identity Formation

The rapid integration of social media into daily life has transformed the way adolescents explore, construct, and negotiate with their own identities (Nesi, 2020). Social media is beyond being a space for connection and information exchange, social media platforms have created complex psychological environments that can both support and hinder healthy identity development (Nesi, 2020). Research consistently shows that how individuals engage with these

platforms—rather than the amount of time spent online—plays a decisive role in shaping self-perception, social relationships, and mental well-being (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). In adolescence, the developmental stage marked by heightened sensitivity to peer feedback and social validation, the nuances of social media use—including patterns of social comparison, perfectionistic self-presentation, and posting regret—are particularly salient to the processes of identity formation and self-esteem regulation (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017; Valkenburg et al., 2022). Social comparison is a core mechanism through which social media can influence self-esteem, confidence, and emotional health (Nesi, 2020). The highly curated and idealized portrayals common on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok create fertile ground for upward comparisons, wherein adolescents will then evaluate themselves against those perceived to be more attractive, successful, or socially connected (Nesi, 2020). These upward comparisons have been linked to lower self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, and diminished well-being, particularly in adolescents who are still consolidating their self-concept (Vogel et al., 2014). Digital well-being is closely tied to these comparative processes: adolescents frequently engage in appearance- or status-based comparisons are more likely to experience anxiety, depressive symptoms, and reduced satisfaction with their offline lives (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). It is concerning that perfectionism amplifies the risks associated with social comparison on social media (Nesi, 2020). Adolescents who hold perfectionistic standards may be more inclined to engage in selective self-presentation, meticulously curating their online personas to match idealized self-images (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). This curated self-presentation can deepen the gap between online and offline identities, increasing the likelihood of identity incongruence and self-esteem instability (Nesi, 2020). Comparative studies have found that individuals high in socially prescribed perfectionism are particularly susceptible to the negative effects of upward social

comparison, reporting greater feelings of inadequacy and lower confidence in their abilities (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). The interplay between perfectionism and social media comparison underscores the importance of understanding personality and cognitive styles in evaluating digital well-being (Nesi, 2020). The phenomenon of posting regret—feelings of remorse or self-criticism after sharing content—adds another layer to the identity formation process in the digital age (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2023). Posting regret often arises from the pressure to present an idealized self-image or from negative feedback received online (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2023). These experiences reinforce self-monitoring and self-censorship, both of which may impede authentic self-expression (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2023). For adolescents, repeated cycles of posting regret and self-criticism can undermine self-esteem, exacerbate identity confusion, and promote maladaptive coping strategies (Beyens et al., 2024). Over time, these patterns foster an externally defined identity—one overly reliant on algorithmic validation and peer approval—rather than a stable, internally anchored sense of self (Beyens et al., 2024).

When considered through Erikson's (1968) framework of identity versus role confusion, the nuances of social media examined in Topic B illustrate how digital contexts can both facilitate and complicate identity formation. Erikson posited that adolescence is defined by the need to integrate various roles and experiences into a coherent self-concept, with successful resolution resulting in a stable identity and failure leading to confusion (Erikson., 1968). Social comparison, especially upward comparison, can destabilize this process by fostering self-doubt and externalizing self-worth (Valkenburg et al., 2022; Vogel et al., 2014). Similarly, perfectionistic self-presentation on social media heightens the incongruence between one's authentic self and curated persona, which may lead to identity diffusion and lower self-esteem (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2023). Posting regret compounds these challenges, as adolescents

may internalize negative feedback or feel dissonance between their posted content and their internal identity, reinforcing patterns of self-censorship and diminished self-confidence (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2023). While Benson and Bundick (2020b) extend Erikson's model by emphasizing the role of ecological supports—such as trusting adult relationships, boundary-setting, and community scaffolding—in promoting healthy identity development in the digital age, the risks associated with unmoderated social media use underscore Erikson's central claim: without adequate resolution of the identity stage, adolescents remain vulnerable to confusion, low self-esteem, and reliance on external validation (Benson and Bundick., 2020b).

Building from the developmental foundations outlined in Theme A, it is essential to examine how specific features of social media influence adolescents' sense of self-perception and emotional and mental wellness. One of the most pervasive mechanisms linking social media engagement to identity outcomes is, indeed, social comparison, a process by which individuals evaluate themselves against others in their online networks (Valkenburg et al., 2022; Vogel et al., 2014). In digital contexts, this comparison is often upward—toward idealized portrayals of peers, influencers, or celebrities—which can shape not only how adolescents feel about themselves in the moment but also their longer-term self-esteem, confidence, and overall digital well-being (Valkenburg et al., 2022; Vogel et al., 2014). Understanding this dynamic is critical, as the interplay between social comparison and emotional well-being sets the stage for broader patterns of online behavior and identity development that will be explored in the following sections.

Social Comparison, Gender Impacts, and the Interplay of Social Media on Adolescent Identity Formation

According to Gaethe (2020), social media use—particularly when combined with frequent social comparison—can be correlated to self-esteem levels in adults. This relationship is

also salient for adolescents, who are especially vulnerable to curated and idealized portrayals of peers on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat (Gaethe., 2020). These digital environments amplify opportunities for upward social comparisons, which can distort self-perceptions and contribute to identity confusion during Erikson's (1968) fifth stage of psychosocial development: identity versus role confusion (Gaethe., 2020). When adolescents' sense of self becomes overly dependent on online validation, the scaffolding from earlier developmental stages, as emphasized by Benson and Bundick (2020a), may be insufficient to buffer against these pressures, leaving adolescents more susceptible to diminished self-esteem and fragmented self-concept (Gaethe., 2020).

Social comparison is a well-established factor influencing digital well-being. Vogel et al. (2014) found that engaging in upward social comparisons—comparing oneself to others perceived as "better off"—is associated with lower self-esteem and greater feelings of inadequacy (Vogel et al. 2014). This process can heighten vulnerability to symptoms of anxiety and depression which can affect an adolescent's risk of self-harm or suicidal ideation (Andrianie et al., 2024). Social media further complicates this dynamic by creating a perpetual and algorithmically curated stream of such comparisons (Vogel et al. 2014), which can overwhelm adolescents' developing coping mechanisms and emotional regulation capacities, especially when there are no safety nets or structures in place—if the relationship that is created with the adolescent and social media is unfiltered and unlimited access (Nesi et al., 2020).

Gender differences further shape the impact of social comparison on identity development. Lemus (2022) observed that females are particularly prone to appearance-based comparisons on Instagram, leading to body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem. These findings align with earlier studies indicating that female adolescents are more likely to internalize

idealized images, whereas males may experience social comparison impacts through status-oriented or achievement-based content as opposed to boys in the same age range and developmental stage (Lavell et al., 2024). Such gendered pathways highlight the necessity of tailored interventions that address the specific ways identity formation is disrupted by social media engagement (Vogel et al. 2014).

The relationship between social media addiction, self-esteem, and life satisfaction underscores the compounding nature of these effects (Vogel et al. 2014). Hawi and Samaha (2017) demonstrated that excessive social media use is negatively correlated with both self-esteem and life satisfaction. When these patterns persist, they may mirror the cycles of validation-seeking and identity instability described in Erikson's framework, wherein failure to resolve the identity crisis results in ongoing role confusion. Benson and Bundick's (2020b) ecological perspective similarly warns that without strong relational supports—such as trusted adults, peer acceptance, and consistent boundaries—digital engagement can erode the psychological foundations necessary for healthy identity formation.

Adolescents' perceptions of their own digital well-being also play a critical role. Rosič et al. (2023) developed the Perceived Digital Well-Being in Adolescence Scale, finding that heavy social media use and negative online interactions are associated with lower perceived digital well-being. This is consistent with Wang (2020) idea regarding the "Facebook illusion" where users tend to believe others are happier and more successful than themselves, further intensifying upward social comparison. Over time, such distorted perceptions can contribute to identity diffusion, as adolescents struggle to reconcile the curated online self with their lived offline experiences (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2023).

From an evolutionary and theoretical perspective, social comparison processes predate digital technologies (Saadat et al., 2017**)**. However, social media has exponentially increased the frequency, intensity, and scope of these comparisons (Saadat et al., 2017). While occasional upward comparisons can be motivating (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2023**)**, the constant exposure facilitated by social networking sites disproportionately favors harmful comparisons, particularly when adolescents are navigating a formative identity stage (Vogel et al. 2014). This interplay between long-standing psychological mechanisms and novel digital environments offers a fertile ground for examining how identity development theories, such as Erikson's, must adapt to account for the unprecedented social contexts of the 21st century (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2023).

Perfectionism and Social Comparison

Perfectionism is another factor that significantly influences the relationship between social comparison and self-esteem in the context of social media use (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2023). Lin et al. (2021) found that individuals with high levels of perfectionism are more likely to engage in frequent and often upward social comparisons, which are strongly associated with reduced self-esteem. These findings align with earlier work by Vogel et al. (2014), who demonstrated that upward comparisons on social media platforms can generate feelings of inadequacy, particularly when users perceive others as more successful, attractive, or socially connected. When perfectionistic tendencies meet the curated realities of social media, the result can be an intensified pursuit of unattainable standards, heightening the risk of identity instability during adolescence (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2023).

This interplay between perfectionism and social media mirrors Erikson's (1968) concerns in the identity versus role confusion stage, where external pressures and unrealistic ideals can

impede the development of a coherent sense of self. Benson and Bundick's (2020b) ecological perspective adds nuance here, suggesting that the absence of protective relational contexts—such as supportive adults, clear boundaries, and opportunities for authentic expression—can leave adolescents especially vulnerable to perfectionism-driven social comparisons (Gaethe., 2020). For female adolescents, these pressures often center on appearance-based content, reinforcing body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem, body dysphoria, and increased risk of self-harming behaviors and tendencies (Lavell et al., 2024; Lemus, 2022). Male adolescents could encounter similar perfectionistic pressures through achievement-oriented or status-based content, which can also impact self-confidence and perceived social standing (Gaethe, 2020). The broader literature underscores that these dynamics do not only occur in isolation, but that they also intersect with other aspects of digital well-being (Gaethe, 2020). Posting regret, for instance, is another mechanism that can exacerbate self-esteem erosion, as adolescents who later question or feel embarrassed by their online self-presentation may experience heightened self-consciousness and self-criticism (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2023). Similarly, patterns of problematic or addictive social media use have been linked to diminished life satisfaction and self-esteem (Vogel et al., 2014), suggesting that perfectionism may interact with these behaviors to produce compounding negative effects (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2023).

Taken together, the intersection of perfectionism, social comparison, and identity formation highlights the importance of targeted, developmentally informed interventions (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2023). Efforts to promote healthier digital habits, also referred to as "phone hygiene" in practice— this aids in emphasizing self-compassion, critical awareness of curated content, and balanced social media engagement—can be helpful when having to mitigate the adverse effects on self-esteem and support adolescents in building a stable, authentic sense of

self in the digital era (Benson & Bundick, 2020b). Beyond its direct effects on self-esteem, perfectionism in online environments can have long-term implications for adolescents' self-concept clarity. (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2023). Self-concept clarity—the extent to which one's beliefs about oneself are clearly defined, internally consistent, and stable—is a crucial component of healthy identity development (Uhls et al., 2017). Research has shown that higher social media engagement is associated with lower self-concept clarity, particularly among adolescents who engage in frequent self-comparison and image management (Uhls et al, 2017). This aligns with Erikson's (1968) assertion that an unstable or fragmented self-concept during the identity stage can result in role confusion (Erikson., 1968). For perfectionistic adolescents, the constant refinement of their online self-presentation in pursuit of idealized standards can erode the stability of their self-concept, creating a feedback loop in which social media fuels identity diffusion rather than integration (Benson & Bundick, 2020b; Vogel et al., 2014). Neuroscientific research also adds a compelling dimension to this discussion. Adolescence is a developmental window marked by heightened sensitivity to peer evaluation, underpinned by ongoing maturation of socioemotional brain networks (Saadat et al., 2017). Perfectionism-driven social comparison may amplify activation in neural regions associated with reward and self-referential processing—such as the ventral striatum and medial prefrontal cortex—when receiving online feedback (Saadat et al., 2017). Over time, this heightened sensitivity may reinforce the salience of social validation and exacerbate vulnerability to negative self-evaluation in the absence of positive feedback (Saadat et al., 2017). This neurobiological interplay underscores the fact that perfectionism and social comparison in digital contexts are not merely psychological phenomena but are also embedded in the structural and functional development of the adolescent brain (Saadat et al., 2017).

While perfectionism and social comparison can create sustained pressures to maintain an idealized online image, the reality of digital permanence introduces another critical psychological challenge: posting regret. Adolescents who curate their identities under perfectionistic and comparative pressures may later feel regret, embarrassment, or anxiety over shared content that no longer aligns with their self-perception or social standing (Shannon et al., 2022). This phenomenon bridges the gap between ongoing self-comparison and the lived consequences of online self-presentation (Shannon et al., 2022). As the next section will explore, posting regret not only reflects adolescents' heightened sensitivity to peer evaluation but can also contribute to diminished self-esteem, identity instability, and reluctance to engage authentically in digital spaces.

Posting Regret and Self-Esteem

Posting regret—defined as the feeling of remorse or dissatisfaction after sharing content on social media—represents a critical intersection between online self-presentation, social evaluation, and self-esteem. Sampasa-Kanyinga et al. (2023) found that heavy social media use among middle and high school students was significantly associated with posting regret, which in turn correlated with lower self-esteem (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2023). Adolescents often curate their online identities under the influence of perfectionistic tendencies and upward social comparisons, which increases the likelihood of sharing idealized but inauthentic content (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2023). When these posts later appear misaligned with their evolving self-image or elicit negative feedback, regret can emerge, triggering self-criticism and eroding confidence (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2023).

Gender differences add further nuance to this relationship. Lemus (2022) found that female adolescents are more vulnerable to appearance-based comparisons on platforms like

Instagram, which heightens the stakes of self-presentation. This aligns with prior work on social comparison (Vogel et al., 2014) and perfectionism (Lin et al., 2021), where the internalization of unattainable standards leads to a fragile self-concept. For these adolescents, posting regret can compound existing body image concerns and exacerbate self-esteem declines, especially when peer validation is lacking or negative (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2023). Emerging research also suggests that the emotional consequences of posting regret may extend beyond momentary discomfort to influence long-term identity development. Nesi (2020) note that adolescents' online behaviors are deeply intertwined with offline psychosocial adjustment, meaning that repeated cycles of high-stakes posting, critical feedback, and regret can foster identity diffusion rather than identity consolidation (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2023). From Erikson's perspective, such patterns are likely to be representative of disruptions in the healthy resolution of the identity versus role confusion stage, as adolescents struggle to integrate their online personas with their offline sense of self (Benson & Bundick, 2020b; Erikson, 1968). Over time, this incongruence may contribute to diminished self-efficacy and avoidance of authentic self-expression, both of which undermine digital well-being (Benson & Bundick, 2020b).

Taken together, the literature suggests that posting regret functions as both a symptom and a catalyst of deeper challenges in adolescent identity formation. When compounded by perfectionism, gender-specific vulnerabilities, and persistent social comparison, it can create a reinforcing cycle of self-presentation anxiety and self-esteem erosion. These dynamics underscore the critical importance of interventions aimed at promoting mindful posting practices, building resilience to external validation, and fostering authenticity in digital self-expression. Such strategies may serve as protective factors in safeguarding adolescents' self-esteem and supporting the healthy integration of their online and offline identities. The interplay of

perfectionism, social comparison, and self-esteem in the digital age underscores that adolescent identity formation does not occur in isolation but is embedded within broader relational and ecological systems (Benson & Bundick, 2020b. Erikson's (1968) identity versus role confusion stage highlights that a stable sense of self is cultivated through both internal exploration and external validation from trusted relationships. When these supports are absent—or when digital interactions dominate—identity development can be distorted by unrealistic standards and performance-driven self-presentation (Erikson., 1968). Benson and Bundick (2020b) emphasize that identity formation is deeply relational, shaped by the presence of mentoring figures, healthy boundaries, and supportive social contexts. As adolescents increasingly turn to social media for connection and affirmation, these platforms inevitably intersect with core developmental processes, influencing not only self-esteem but also attachment security, perceptions of life satisfaction, and vulnerability to developmental risks (Gaethe., 2020). This next section will examine how attachment patterns shape adolescents' interactions with social media, how these interactions relate to subjective well-being, and the broader concerns that arise when digital environments intersect with the critical identity work of adolescence.

Topic C: Attachment Styles With Developmental Interplay, Neurological Impacts From the Interplay of Social Media and Life Satisfaction

This third and concluding section of this literature review has several focuses, first on attachment styles, followed by the neurological components of how social media impacts brain development in late childhood and early adolescence (ages 7–15), as well as its implications for self-concept and self-esteem for adolescence.

During this developmental period, the brain regions that are responsible for emotional regulation, social cognition, and reward processing will undergo significant and critical

maturation (Smith & Carlson, 1997). The structure and quality of an adolescent's environment(s)—which include those who are in caregiver relationships, boundaries around good phone hygiene practices, and digital habits—all play a significant and pivotal role in determining whether these neurodevelopmental changes support or hinder healthy identity formation (Smith & Carlson, 1997). With empirical research demonstrating that adolescents who have unlimited access to social media platforms and minimal familial boundaries or guidance are more at risk to experience disruptions in self-concept clarity and exhibit patterns of online behavior associated with diminished well-being leading to poor life satisfaction (Nesi et al., 2020). In contrast, those whose caregivers provide appropriate modeling, structured boundaries, and digital hygiene practices—such as device-free family time, active monitoring, and open dialogue—tend to show that there is a more adaptive identity development and greater resilience to the negative pressures of online comparison and validation-seeking (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). This contrast underscores the mediating role of the social environment in shaping digital behaviors and their developmental consequences (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). While attachment theory offers a critical lens for understanding this interplay. Adolescents with an insecure or ambivalent attachment style often will turn to social media for reassurance and validation, engaging in behaviors such as frequent profile checking, excessive self-presentation, and sensitivity to online feedback (Eichenberg et al., 2024). These patterns can be a catalyst to intensify the vulnerability to those who have low self-esteem, have a dysregulated self-image, and compulsive engagement, reinforcing cycles of dependency on digital validation (Eichenberg et al., 2024). Conversely, securely attached adolescents—those with consistent emotional support and attuned caregiving—are more likely to use social media for authentic expression and maintaining meaningful relationships, thus mitigating risks to

identity stability and psychological well-being (Eichenberg et al., 2024). These findings show that there is an intersection highlighted of neurodevelopmental change, relational context, and digital engagement in shaping adolescents' emerging sense of self during adolescence (Eichenberg et al., 2024). Eichenberg et al., (2024) stated that factors such as the quantity and quality of social media use—mediated by attachment security, caregiver involvement, and the presence or absence of structured boundaries—can either support or derail the developmental tasks of adolescence as outlined by Erikson's identity versus role confusion stage (Eichenberg et al., 2024). In the following sections, this review will examine how these factors relate to life satisfaction and the broader developmental risks that arise when social media intersects with the critical process of identity formation.

Attachment Styles and the Interplay of Social Media on Identity Formation

Adolescence is a critical period for identity development, traditionally shaped by face-to-face interactions, peer relationships, and supportive caregiver bonds. (Erikson., 1968). However, with the advent and ubiquity of social media, dynamics of identity formation have shifted in unprecedented ways, raising questions about the long-term impacts of this digital culture (Uhls et al., 2017). Understanding the interplay between social media and identity formation is therefore crucial for parents, educators, and mental health professionals when seeking to support adolescents in navigating these complex digital landscapes (Benson & Bundick, 2020b). Attachment theory offers a foundational lens for examining this interplay. John Bowlby (Bowlby & Psychotherapy.net., 1984) asserted that early attachment experiences shape an individual's capacity for emotional regulation, interpersonal relationships, and resilience throughout the lifespan. Building on this, research identified four primary attachment styles—secure, anxious, avoidant, and disorganized—each reflecting distinct patterns in how individuals seek closeness,

manage distress, and navigate emotional disruption (Eilert & Buchheim, 2023). Securely attached individuals typically demonstrate adaptive emotional regulation and healthy support-seeking behaviors, both of which are critical during periods of developmental stress (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Bretherton, 1992). In contrast, adolescents with anxious or avoidant attachment styles often exhibit maladaptive coping patterns: anxious attachment is associated with heightened emotional reactivity and overdependence on external validation (Bretherton, 1992) while avoidant attachment is linked to emotional suppression, withdrawal, and reluctance to seek help (Eilert & Buchheim, 2023; Russ et al., 2024).

In the age of social media, these attachment-related tendencies can significantly influence online behavior and psychological outcomes (Nesi., 2020). Adolescents with insecure attachment styles are more likely to engage in validation-seeking digital behaviors, such as excessive posting, compulsive checking for likes and comments, and heightened sensitivity to online feedback (Eichenberg et al., 2024). These behaviors can exacerbate vulnerabilities to low self-esteem, dysregulated self-image, and compulsive social media use, reinforcing maladaptive emotional cycles. By contrast, securely attached adolescents tend to engage in purposeful, relationship-driven online interactions, using digital platforms to maintain supportive peer connections rather than as a primary source of self-worth (Eichenberg et al., 2024).

Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory complements this attachment-based understanding by situating adolescence in the identity versus role confusion stage, where the development of a stable and integrated sense of self is paramount. Without the scaffolding of secure relationships and structured boundaries, adolescents may struggle to reconcile their online and offline selves, leading to fragmented identities (Benson & Bundick, 2020a). The ecological perspective advanced by Benson and Bundick (2020b) emphasizes that the interplay between trusting adult

relationships, healthy digital boundaries, and supportive environments can serve as crucial buffers against the identity diffusion often exacerbated by unmoderated social media engagement (Nesi., 2020). Gender also plays a moderating role in these dynamics. Lemus (2022) found that adolescent females are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of social media, frequently engaging in appearance-based comparisons that heighten body dissatisfaction and reduce self-esteem. This vulnerability is magnified in those with anxious or ambivalent attachment patterns, who may rely more heavily on curated online images and feedback to construct their self-concept (Twenge et al., 2019). These findings underscore the importance of integrating attachment-based interventions into programs designed to promote healthy digital habits, particularly for vulnerable populations (Twenge et al., 2019).

Taken together, the evidence suggests that attachment security, caregiver involvement, and structured boundaries around social media use are integral to supporting adolescents' self-concept and emotional well-being in the digital age (Twenge et al., 2019). The next section will examine how these relational and neurodevelopmental factors intersect with life satisfaction and the broader developmental risks posed by unregulated social media engagement.

Neurological Considerations in Regards to the Interplay of Social Media

Adolescence is a particularly important time for brain development, with areas involved in emotional and social aspects undergoing intensive changes (Erikson., 1968). The use of social media may have profound effects on adolescent brain development due to the ability to interact with many peers simultaneously without direct contact (Gaethe., 2020). Published data indicates a different mode of processing emotions in adolescents, which correlates with the intensity of social media use (Shannon et al., 2022). Studies suggest that extensive social media interactions are linked to alterations in brain structures associated with emotional processing and addiction,

highlighting an interplay between social experiences in online networks and brain development (Shannon et al., 2022).

Neurodivergent youth—particularly those with ADHD—show distinct vulnerabilities in the social-media context because executive control, reward sensitivity, and emotion regulation systems are still maturing during early adolescence (Shannon et al., 2022). A recent narrative review synthesizing behavioral and neurobiological work concludes that adolescents with ADHD exhibit more problematic social media use (PSMU) than typically developing peers, plausibly via heightened reward responsivity, impulsivity, and difficulties with inhibitory control and sustained attention (Shannon et al., 2022). Complementing this, a high-quality systematic review of longitudinal studies finds reciprocal associations between digital media use and ADHD symptoms over time—associations that are strongest for problematic (compulsive) use rather than mere screen time (Shannon et al., 2022). Longitudinal cross-lagged work likewise shows bidirectional links between hyperactivity/inattention and internet addiction, suggesting that baseline ADHD traits can increase risk for compulsive online behavior, which in turn predicts later symptom burden (Gong et al., 2024). These patterns underscore a feedback loop in which platform features (variable rewards, infinite scroll) intersect with neurocognitive profiles to exacerbate ADHD-related difficulties (Gong et al., 2024).

Neuroimaging adds converging evidence that early-adolescent social media behaviors relate to neural systems that are centrally involved in reward and social evaluation. A longitudinal cohort study reported that habitual social media checking (vs. non-habitual) was associated with lower neural sensitivity to social anticipation across regions such as the amygdala, insula, ventral striatum, and dorsolateral prefrontal cortex by age 12—implicating circuits tied to motivation, affect, and control (Richtel, 2023). In large ABCD-derived samples,

higher digital media activity has been associated with differences in cortical thickness/surface measures in networks linked to attention and executive functions, though effects are nuanced and sometimes small after multiple-comparison correction—highlighting heterogeneity across youth (Richtel, 2023). Taken together, the neural data suggest plausible mechanisms by which frequent, cue-driven engagement may potentiate reward-seeking and sensitivity to online feedback, especially in adolescents already prone to impulsivity or emotion dysregulation (Richtel, 2023).

Sleep is a practical pathway through which symptoms can worsen. Among adolescents with ADHD, evening/night media use is linked to sleep-onset delays and shorter sleep, which are known to magnify inattention, hyperactivity, and mood problems the next day—amplifying the felt impact of neurodivergence in school and social settings (Rice et al., 2014). These sleep-mediated effects dovetail with Erikson's view that developmental tasks are negotiated within real-world contexts: inadequate sleep can erode the emotional scaffolding needed for identity exploration, while consistent routines and caregiver-set boundaries can buffer risk (Benson & Bundick, 2020b).

For adolescents on the spectrum, the picture is more heterogeneous: some evidence points to benefits (e.g., improved friendship quality and access to like-minded communities), while other syntheses link autistic traits to higher risk of problematic internet/social media use, with downstream distress (Rice et al., 2014). The implication for practice—aligned with Benson and Bundick's (2020b) ecological framing—is to individualize supports: structured guidance, co-regulated phone hygiene, and strengths-based online communities may enhance belonging while reducing compulsive engagement and comparison-driven distress (Benson and Bundick., 2020b).

Bottom line: among neurodivergent adolescents, it's not simply "time online" but the fit between neurocognitive profile and platform demands (reward cues, social feedback cycles, nighttime use) that predicts symptom exacerbation and identity-related strain; conversely, secure attachments, consistent boundaries, and supportive digital ecologies can mitigate these risks and promote healthier identity development (McInroy & Craig, 2018).

Neurodivergent youth—particularly those with ADHD—show distinct vulnerabilities in the social media context because executive control, reward sensitivity, and emotion regulation systems are still maturing during early adolescence (McInroy & Craig, 2018). Recent evidence indicates that adolescents with ADHD engage in more PSMU than their neurotypical peers, likely due to heightened reward responsivity, impulsivity, and difficulties with inhibitory control (McInroy & Craig, 2018). A systematic review of longitudinal studies found reciprocal associations between ADHD symptoms and digital media use, with the strongest links emerging for compulsive, rather than casual, engagement (McInroy & Craig, 2018). Cross-lagged analyses confirm a bidirectional feedback loop in which baseline ADHD traits predict later compulsive online behaviors, which in turn exacerbate attention and self-regulation difficulties (Gong et al., 2024; McInroy & Craig, 2018). This dynamic mirrors Benson and Bundick's (2020b) ecological framing, underscoring how neurodevelopmental vulnerabilities interact with unstructured digital environments to shape identity development.

Neuroimaging research offers converging evidence for these behavioral patterns. Longitudinal fMRI studies reveal that habitual social media checking that takes place in early adolescence is associated with reduced neural sensitivity to social anticipation in brain regions including the amygdala, ventral striatum, and dorsolateral prefrontal cortex—circuits tied to motivation, affect regulation, and cognitive control (Aguado, 2006). In large-scale

neurodevelopmental datasets, high-frequency digital media use has been associated with cortical differences in networks supporting attention and executive function, though effects vary across individuals (Aguado, 2006). Such findings suggest that platform features designed to maximize engagement—variable rewards, social notifications, and infinite scrolling—may interact with neurodivergent profiles to amplify reward-seeking tendencies and reliance on online validation (Aguado, 2006).

Sleep disturbance appears to be a key pathway through which these effects accumulate (Aguado, 2006). Among adolescents with ADHD, evening and nighttime media use predicts delayed sleep onset and shorter total sleep duration, both of which heighten next-day inattention, emotional dysregulation, and mood difficulties (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). In Erikson's theory, this erosion of restorative routines undermines the emotional resilience necessary for navigating identity exploration, while consistent caregiver-set boundaries and phone hygiene can act as protective buffers (Benson & Bundick, 2020b). For autistic adolescents, outcomes appear more heterogeneous. Some studies report benefits, such as enhanced friendship quality and opportunities for self-expression within online communities, while others link elevated autistic traits to a higher prevalence of problematic internet use and associated distress (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). These findings reinforce the need for individualized support strategies that balance opportunities for social connection with safeguards against compulsive engagement and comparison-driven self-criticism.

Together, the literature on neurodivergence, attachment, and adolescent brain development reveals that social media's impact on identity formation is shaped by a complex interplay of neurocognitive predispositions, relational contexts, and platform-specific demands (Nesi., 2020). When unstructured use of social media intersects with vulnerabilities such as

insecure attachment or ADHD-related impulsivity, the risk of diminished self-esteem, identity confusion, and emotional dysregulation is significantly increased (Benson and Bundick., 2020b). Conversely, structured digital environments, supportive adult relationships, and intentional engagement can provide a buffer against these risks, setting the stage for more adaptive psychosocial outcomes (Nesi., 2020). This nuanced understanding provides a foundation for examining the next dimension of adolescent digital experiences—how social media use intersects with overall life satisfaction, and whether certain usage patterns enhance or erode well-being over time (e.g., Berryman et al., 2018; Ellison et al., 2020).

Social Media and Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction during adolescence is closely tied to the development of a coherent sense of identity and self-concept, both of which Erikson (1968) identified as central to the identity versus role confusion stage (Berryman et al., 2018). Benson and Bundick (2020a, 2020b) extend this understanding in the digital era, emphasizing that identity formation unfolds within interconnected ecological systems—families, peer groups, and broader societal contexts—that either support or undermine well-being. Within this framework, social media serves as both a resource for and a risk to adolescent life satisfaction, depending on the presence of boundaries, modeling, and supportive relationships (Berryman et al., 2018).

While social media offers opportunities for connection, creativity, and self-expression, it also introduces developmental risks when engagement is excessive, unregulated, or shaped by maladaptive relational dynamics (Berryman et al., 2018). From Erikson's (1968) perspective, adolescence is a sensitive period in which identity versus role confusion is the central psychosocial task. In contexts where digital behaviors dominate over face-to-face interactions,

adolescents may struggle to form a coherent self-concept, leading to identity diffusion and lowered resilience in the face of social challenges (Benson & Bundick, 2020a, 2020b).

Neuroscientific evidence underscores the vulnerability of adolescents to these risks. Structural MRI studies have found that intensive engagement with social media is associated with volumetric changes in brain regions linked to emotion processing, social cognition, and reward regulation, including the amygdala, ventral striatum, and orbitofrontal cortex (He et al., 2017; Kircaburun, et al., 2020; Toh et al., 2023). Such alterations may heighten sensitivity to peer validation cycles while reducing emotional regulation capacity—effects that are particularly concerning for adolescents lacking secure attachment frameworks or strong offline relational supports (Eichenberg et al., 2024).

Relational and ecological factors further mediate these risks. Benson and Bundick (2020a) note that healthy identity development relies on an interconnected system of trust, structure, and boundary-setting, which help to buffer the influence of external pressures. When these systems are absent, adolescents are likely to rely heavily on algorithmically driven social feedback to guide their self-perceptions, making them more susceptible to cyberbullying, social exclusion, and unrealistic appearance norms (He et al, 2017). Over time, these dynamics can erode self-esteem, exacerbate perfectionistic tendencies, and lead to maladaptive coping strategies, including compulsive social media use or withdrawal from offline relationships (Berryman et al., 2018).

A further concern is the bidirectional relationship between social media use and mental health. While some adolescents may initially turn to digital spaces for connection during periods of loneliness or low mood, the resulting exposure to upward social comparisons, misinformation, and hostile interactions can exacerbate symptoms of anxiety and depression (Twenge et al.,

2019). This cyclical pattern risks entrenching maladaptive identity narratives—such as the belief that self-worth is contingent on online validation—further complicating developmental trajectories.

Taken together, all of these findings suggest that the intersection of social media use and adolescent identity formation requires very careful and critical, collaborative navigation. The quantity and quality of online engagement, the presence or absence of supportive ecological systems, and the adolescent's underlying attachment framework all contribute to developmental outcomes. Without intentional intervention—through parental modeling, digital literacy education, and accessible mental health resources—these risks may compromise not only identity development but also long-term psychological well-being.

Empirical research has demonstrated that the relationship between social media use and life satisfaction is nuanced. While moderate engagement can facilitate social connection and belonging—core components of Erikson's identity consolidation—excessive or unregulated use is linked to diminished life satisfaction, particularly when driven by upward social comparison and validation-seeking behaviors (He et al., 2017). This pattern is especially pronounced among adolescents with insecure attachment styles, who may turn to digital platforms for reassurance in ways that amplify dependency and reduce resilience (Eichenberg et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the quality of online interactions appears to be more predictive of life satisfaction than mere quantity of use (Berryman et al., 2018). Positive, reciprocal exchanges within trusted networks can enhance adolescents' sense of competence and relatedness—elements consistent with Erikson's emphasis on relational grounding—whereas negative or exclusionary experiences can erode self-worth and reinforce identity diffusion (Nesi et al., 2020). In contexts where caregivers provide consistent boundaries and model healthy digital behaviors,

adolescents report higher satisfaction with life, suggesting that ecological supports function as buffers against the risks of overexposure to online social pressures (Nesi et al., 2020).

Overall, the interplay between social media and life satisfaction in adolescence underscores the critical role of supportive relational contexts and intentional digital engagement (Berryman et al., 2018). When ecological support is absent, adolescents may experience a narrowing of self-concept, heightened vulnerability to peer validation cycles, and reduced capacity for authentic identity exploration—outcomes that Erikson predicted in cases of unresolved identity crises (Berryman et al., 2018).

This literature review examined how social media intersects with adolescent identity formation through three interconnected themes. Theme A applied Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory and Benson and Bundick's (2020b) ecological perspective to show that healthy identity development depends on supportive relationships, structured boundaries, and authentic self-exploration—factors increasingly shaped by digital environments. Theme B explored the nuanced effects of social comparison, perfectionism, and posting regret, highlighting that upward comparisons and curated self-presentations often undermine self-esteem, particularly for adolescents vulnerable to appearance-based pressures and perfectionistic tendencies (Nesi et al., 2020; Vogel et al., 2014). Theme C integrated attachment theory and neuroscientific evidence, demonstrating that insecure attachment styles, unstructured digital use, and neurodevelopmental vulnerabilities—especially among neurodivergent youth—can intensify identity confusion, emotional dysregulation, and diminished self-concept (Eichenberg et al., 2024; Nesi et al., 2020). Overall, the literature reveals that social media's impact on adolescent identity is shaped by the interaction of developmental stages, personal vulnerabilities, and environmental context. These

findings provide a foundation for the next chapter, which outlines the outcome, risks, and ways to address the interplay of social media on identity formation in adolescence.

Chapter Three

This capstone was a project that utilized qualitative, thematic literature review, and synthesized findings from integrated theoretical, empirical, and neurodevelopmental research to examine the effects of interplay between social media use and adolescent identity formation. Through the thematic organization of this literature, the key constructs emerged across three primary areas: (a) developmental theories and their application to the digital age; (b) the nuances of social comparison, perfectionism, and posting regret; and (c) the roles of attachment, neurodevelopment, and life satisfaction in shaping adolescent outcomes. The literature review held a strong focus on Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory—specifically the stage of identity versus role confusion—with Benson and Bundick's (2020b) ecological framework, highlighting that healthy identity formation depends not only on an individual's developmental tasks but also on the direct impact of quality in their relational and environmental supports.

The literature review synthesized and highlighted how upward social comparison, perfectionistic tendencies, and gender-specific pressures are amplified in social media contexts, often undermining self-esteem and contributing to identity instability (Lavell et al., 2024; Vogel et al., 2014). Perfectionism emerged as a compounding factor, creating a greater gap between authentic and curated selves and intensifying vulnerability to self-doubt. The literature would also underscore the moderating roles of attachment security, neurodivergence, and caregiver boundaries in determining whether social media engagement becomes a tool for healthy self-expression or a source of psychosocial risk (Eichenberg et al., 2024; Nesi et al., 2020). The neuroimaging research provided converging evidence, suggesting that constant and habitual comparison-driven engagement correlates with structural and functional differences in brain regions governing reward, affect, and control (Nesi et al., 2020).

From this literature review there were several critical insights learned. First, social media is neither inherently good nor inherently harmful; rather, the outcome becomes dependent on a person's level of interaction given their developmental stage, the social context, and usage patterns (taking a device to bed or in general, unlimited and unstructured boundaries; Nesi et al., 2020). Second, there *can be* supportive and positive environments and interactions exchanged online; this can be characterized by modeling healthy boundaries and authentic communication— this can buffer the significant risks of digital engagement, which is in alignment with Benson and Bundick's (2020b) ecological approach. Third, considering impacts to those who are neurodivergent adolescents, particularly those with ADHD, may require more structured and tailored interventions to address impulsivity, regulation challenges, and heightened reward sensitivity in online spaces (Nesi et al., 2020).

When I consider the findings and consider the research, what still needs to be addressed in the literature is the longitudinal trajectory of these effects, particularly how early adolescence (ages 7–15) digital engagement shapes identity outcomes into young adulthood. My focus was heavily into adolescence due to the amount of youth I engage with and have witnessed first hand as a mother to recognize the struggles that come along with identity formation and impacts from social media. There remains a gap in the research on culturally diverse populations, intersectional identities, and the combined impact of multiple risk factors—such as insecure attachment, neurodivergence, and socioeconomic disadvantage—on social media's role in identity formation. Additionally, while neuroimaging studies are growing, further research is required to clarify causality between digital engagement patterns and observed neural differences, as most existing evidence remains correlational (Nesi et al., 2020). Finally, more

intervention-based studies are needed to evaluate the effectiveness of school, family, and community programs in fostering digital resilience and promoting balanced online engagement. In consideration all together, the findings indicate that supporting adolescent identity formation in the digital age requires a multifaceted approach that bridges developmental theory with ecological, neurobiological, and psychosocial perspectives. This synthesis not only affirms Erikson's (1968) foundational insights but also demonstrates the continued relevance of contextual frameworks like Benson and Bundick's (2020a, 2020b) in understanding and addressing the complexities of social media's influence on youth development.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations in relation to the College of Alberta Psychologists (CAP, 2023) when considering my role as a Mental Health Intern Therapist, the exploration of social media's impact on adolescents raises complex clinical and methodological ethical considerations that align closely with the standards and regulatory expectations of CAP. Clinically, psychologists have an ethical responsibility to safeguard vulnerable populations, including minors, from potential harm associated with social media use—such as the detrimental effects of social comparison, exposure to harmful content, and patterns of digital addiction (CAP, 2023). This duty aligns with CAP's (2023) mandate to prioritize client welfare, mitigate risks, and act in ways that promote dignity, respect, and psychological well-being (Standard 1). From a methodological standpoint, research involving adolescents requires careful adherence to ethical guidelines for working with minors. CAP emphasizes the necessity of obtaining informed consent from legal guardians and, when appropriate, the assent of the adolescent themselves (Standard 5). Informed consent procedures must ensure that participants and their guardians are fully aware of the study's aims, potential risks, and safeguards in place. Additionally, researchers

and clinicians must uphold strict confidentiality protocols in compliance with CAP's privacy requirements and the Health Information Act of Alberta, ensuring that identifying information is securely stored and shared only with explicit consent or where legally mandated (CAP, 2023).

As a Mental Health Intern Therapist working with adolescents in therapy, I also face unique ethical challenges in navigating social media–related concerns. This has included managing situations where social media use has exacerbated mental health symptoms for clients or they have been at risk for trafficking or extortion, which has put me in the position of balancing the adolescent's right to privacy with parental involvement in treatment and having to address assent and breaking confidentiality.

CAP's (2023) ethical framework calls for clinicians to be culturally sensitive and ensure that appropriate interventions are developmentally appropriate, especially for clients from vulnerable or marginalized groups who may be disproportionately impacted by online harms (Standard 3). Psychologists are expected to remain aware of the potential for implicit biases, ensure equitable access to services, and implement interventions that account for systemic and contextual factors influencing client well-being. In the context of both clinical practice and research, psychologists must be vigilant about dual relationships and boundaries in digital spaces, avoiding any online interactions with clients that could compromise professional objectivity or confidentiality (CAP, 2023, Standard 4). Furthermore, as social media and digital technologies evolve rapidly, ongoing professional development is essential to ensure that psychologists remain competent in assessing, addressing, and ethically managing the intersection between adolescent development and digital engagement (CAP, 2023). By adhering to CAP's regulatory framework and integrating these considerations into practice and research,

psychologists can ethically and effectively engage with the complex realities of adolescent social media use, promoting both individual well-being and broader public health outcomes.

Psychological Considerations in the Field of Mental Health

The intersection of social media, self-efficacy, and identity formation has profound implications for adolescent mental health. Erikson's theory of psychosocial development identifies adolescence as a pivotal stage in which individuals grapple with the conflict between identity and role confusion, a process now increasingly mediated by digital interactions (Erikson, 1968). While social media platforms can serve as arenas for self-expression, exploration, and peer connection, they also expose adolescents to unique psychosocial risks. Stress and anxiety correlated with the pressure to curate a flawless online persona often creates a sustained state of social vigilance, leading to heightened stress and anxiety. Adolescents are often drawn to feeling compelled to conform to idealized standards set by influencers and peers, a dynamic reinforced by algorithms that privilege and privy to others curated content to compare themselves to which there is an appeal and socially validated content (Lavell et al., 2024). Such pressures can undermine self-efficacy, as adolescents begin to question their own competence and self-worth when their lived realities fail to match online portrayals (Vogel et al., 2014). Depression and isolation have significantly negative impacts on adolescents' experiences in the context of interactions like cyberbullying, exclusion from peer groups, or public criticism, and are strongly associated with increased depressive symptoms and feelings of social isolation in adolescents (Nesi et al., 2020). These experiences can disrupt the identity formation process by fostering maladaptive self-schemas and heightening not only one's self-consciousness but also concerns for bodily safety in terms of self-harm and suicidality. For those with preexisting vulnerabilities—such as insecure attachment styles—these digital interactions may compound

emotional dysregulation and inhibit healthy social development (Eichenberg et al., 2024). Social media functions as a double-edged sword in the context of adolescent identity formation. On one hand, it offers opportunities for exploration, community building, and creative self-expression. In contrast it also presents significant risks to self-efficacy and mental health when engagement becomes excessive or maladaptive. By understanding these dynamics, parents, educators, and mental health professionals can provide the scaffolding necessary to help adolescents navigate their digital worlds while cultivating a coherent, confident, and resilient sense of self (Benson & Bundick, 2020a, 2020b; Nesi et al., 2020).

Discussion

This capstone project set out to examine how social media intersects with adolescent development, with three aims: (1) to interpret identity formation in adolescence through Erikson's (1968) identity vs. role confusion stage alongside Benson and Bundick's (2020a, 2020b) ecological/relational lens; (2) to synthesize evidence on nuances of social media (e.g., social comparison, perfectionism) and their ties to self-esteem, self-concept, and life satisfaction; and (3) to integrate attachment and neurodevelopmental perspectives, including risks for neurodivergent youth. The guiding questions asked how specific patterns of social media engagement shape identity work and well-being, for whom, and under what contextual conditions. The literature review revealed that across the three themes converging on conditional rather than deterministic story: outcomes are not *as* dependent on "time spent" rather than on how engagement is shaped for adolescents engage (active vs. passive use, upward comparison, validation-seeking) and on ecological scaffolds (attachment security, caregiver boundaries, school/community supports). Recurrent mechanisms included social comparison and curated self-presentation, which predict lower self-esteem and identity instability, especially for youth

high in perfectionism or navigating appearance-based pressures (Lavell et al., 2024; Nesi et al., 2020; Vogel et al., 2014). The attachment security consistently moderated these effects: insecure/ambivalent styles were linked to validation-seeking patterns and problematic use, whereas secure attachment predicted more purposeful, relationship-serving engagement (Eichenberg et al., 2024). Emerging neuroimaging and longitudinal work offered biological plausibility, connecting habitual checking and heavy/compulsive use with differences in reward, affect, and control circuits during a sensitive developmental window (Rosič et al., 2023). For neurodivergent adolescents—especially those with ADHD—bidirectional links between symptoms and problematic digital engagement suggested feedback loops that heighten risk. Erikson's theory (1968) centers on the task of adolescence—integrating roles/values into a coherent identity—and warns of diffusion when resolution falters. This maps cleanly onto the modern dynamics in which comparison-heavy, validation-driven engagement can externalize self-worth and fragment identity. Benson and Bundick (2020a) extend Erikson by specifying the contextual conditions—trusting adult relationships, boundaries, meaningful opportunities—that enable healthy identity work in a digital ecology. Together, both lenses identify and suggest a "both/and model" where adolescents need intrapsychic exploration and relational/structural supports that constrain harmful online dynamics and expand authentic, competence-building experiences (Nesi et al., 2020). Not all social media is equal. There can be active, reciprocal interactions within trusted networks which sometimes relate to belonging and the modest well-being benefits including but not limited to passive, appearance-focused scrolling which is correlated to decreased self-esteem and life satisfaction (Vogel et al., 2014). The methodological limitations included a heavy reliance on the cross-sectional, self-report data; platform heterogeneity poorly captured by blunt "screen-time" metrics; and inconsistent measures of

"problematic use." Causality remains under-specified in many studies, though longitudinal and neuroimaging work is growing (Vogel et al., 2014).

Drawing on the evidence and gaps, below are actionable proposals spanning clinical, educational, and research domains: A New Integrative Model: DAISY—Digital-Attachment–Identity System for Youth Concept. This would take place by merging Erikson's (1968) identity task with Benson and Bundick's (2020a) ecology to guide assessment and intervention across four levers: (1) Attachment & Emotion Regulation, brief assessment of attachment style and regulation skills/build secure-behaviors within family/school contexts (Eichenberg et al., 2024); (2) Engagement Quality (not quantity), making a tilt toward active, reciprocal, prosocial use; reduce passive comparison loops (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017); (3) Boundaries & Routines: co-created phone hygiene (sleep-friendly cutoffs, notification control, device-free meals), with gradual autonomy scaffolding (Nesi et al., 2020); and (4) Identity Literacy: "comparison literacy" + self-compassion/perfectionism work; explicit linkage to Eriksonian exploration and commitment (Lavell et al., 2024; Vogel et al., 2014).

As well, I have been using my knowledge and resources aligned with my current practice that entails community workshops with new moms and offers a heavy focus on Erikson's theory and ways to cultivate healthy structures and boundaries around topics such as screen time and technology use with infants/toddlers and children under 7 years of age.

The creation and implementation of an intake questionnaire (attachment, use patterns), safety plan (sleep, cyberbullying), micro-skills (motivational interviewing for algorithm-savvy habits) has also been added to my practice. The clinical practice that I have thus far adopted has focused heavily within the context of attachment-informed cognitive behavioral therapy

(CBT)/dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) elements for youth high in upward comparison, integrated with self-compassion during sessions.

Personal Reflections From a Practicing Mental Health Intern Therapist

In completing this capstone, it has been both an academic milestone and a deeply personal journey. Revisiting my reflexivity and positionality from Chapter One, I see clearly how my roles as a wife, mother, daughter, sister, friend, and adult learner have shaped the therapist I am becoming. My lived experiences—including navigating profound loss, adapting to change, and growing through challenges—have given me a deep appreciation for human resilience. These life lessons now intersect with the theoretical, clinical, and ethical knowledge I have gained throughout my academic training, forming the foundation of my identity as a counselling psychologist. The therapeutic stance I find myself rooted in currently is that of being grounded in social justice, person-centered values, and compassion-focused, existentially informed practice. All these orientations reflect my personal and philosophical commitments to authenticity, empathy, and human dignity. I view the therapeutic space as a profound privilege—one in which clients entrust me with their most vulnerable truths. This trust carries both a duty and an honor, requiring me to create a safe, nonjudgmental environment where clients can explore, heal, and grow.

As I prepare to grow within the practice of becoming a registered psychologist in Alberta, I am acutely aware of my professional responsibilities to both my clients and the broader field of psychology. Being a clinician means not only addressing the immediate needs of those I serve but also considering the broader impact I wish to have on the mental health and wellness landscape now and as I grow and move along in the future. While I do not anticipate pursuing large-scale research projects, I can see the value in applying integrative, evidence-based

frameworks—particularly in addressing attachment and relational concerns—to enhance therapeutic outcomes.

In my clinical work, I integrate DBT, CBT, and solution-focused therapy. DBT offers mindfulness and emotional regulation strategies that help clients manage distress; CBT provides cognitive restructuring techniques to shift unhelpful thought patterns; and solution-focused methods enable clients to set and work toward achievable goals. This flexible, integrative approach allows me to meet clients where they are—whether they are navigating identity development, relational challenges, or emotional dysregulation—and to tailor interventions to their cultural context, lived experiences, and readiness for change.

The synthesis of the literature in this capstone has reinforced the importance of recognizing the dual nature of social media's influence on adolescent identity formation. Erikson's (1968) psychosocial framework emphasizes identity development as a critical task of adolescence, while Benson and Bundick's (2020b) ecological perspective underscores the role of supportive environments, boundaries, and modeling in fostering healthy self-concept. The research reviewed here emphasized that while social media can offer opportunities for connection and self-expression, it also presents a perverse and significant risk—particularly for adolescents lacking strong attachment relationships or healthy digital boundaries. These risks include diminished self-esteem, heightened social comparison, and increased vulnerability to digital addiction. From the qualitative and thematic literature review, several key insights emerged which were that social media's effects on identity formation are complex, mediated by attachment styles, self-esteem, perfectionism, and digital well-being. Adolescents with strong, nurturing, and trusting relational support and who are offered consistent structured boundaries experience fewer negative impacts than those without such protective factors. The neurological

evidence suggests that there is a heavy emphasis on unstructured digital engagement that has the potential to alter brain regions associated with emotional processing, self-regulation, and reward sensitivity. While the literature is rich in cross-sectional studies, there remain gaps in longitudinal research, culturally diverse perspectives, and evidence-based interventions that address both the relational and neurodevelopmental dimensions of adolescent social media use. Ethical considerations—especially in relation to vulnerable and neurodivergent populations—require ongoing attention, guided by standards such as those of CAP (2023).

Conclusion

Ultimately, the findings of this capstone affirm that adolescent identity formation in the digital era is shaped by an intricate interplay of developmental, relational, and technological factors. Erikson's (1968) developmental framework and Benson and Bundick's (2020b) ecological perspective both underscore the need for secure relationships, clear boundaries, and supportive environments—all of which buffer the risks posed by unregulated social media engagement. As a practicing Mental Health Intern Therapist en route to become a registered psychologist, I am committed to translating these insights into practice by fostering therapeutic relationships grounded in authenticity, empathy, and cultural responsiveness. My goal always is to equip those I have the honor to work with and share space with to provide anyone needing support with adolescents, their families offer the tools, awareness, and resilience needed to navigate the pressures of social media while building a strong, coherent sense of self. In doing so, I hope to honor the dual call of my profession—to promote individual healing and growth while contributing to a broader culture that safeguards the mental health and identity development of our youth.

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