



SOCIALIZATION AND IDENTITY FORMATION: A DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Article Info

Received: February 10, 2026

Revised: May 11, 2026

Accepted: June 22, 2026

Online Version: August 18, 2026

Abstract

In the digital age, socialization processes and identity formation have become increasingly intertwined with digital platforms and technologies. The digital environment presents new opportunities and challenges in the development of self-concept and social interactions, which have significant implications for various developmental stages. However, there is limited research exploring how digital spaces influence identity formation, especially from a developmental perspective. This study aims to investigate how digital socialization processes impact identity formation across different age groups and developmental stages, focusing on the interaction between online and offline environments. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with individuals from diverse age groups. The survey explored the frequency and nature of digital interactions, while the interviews provided in-depth insights into personal experiences with identity formation in digital spaces. The findings reveal that digital platforms significantly influence self-concept and identity development, with younger individuals more likely to engage in self-exploration through digital spaces. However, the impact varies across developmental stages, with older adults demonstrating more caution in identity expression online. Digital socialization plays a critical role in identity formation, particularly in adolescence and early adulthood. Future research should focus on how digital interactions shape identity development over time and across different cultural contexts.

Keywords: Developmental Perspective, Digital Socialization, Identity Formation



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Journal Homepage

<https://research.adra.ac.id/index.php/rpoc>

ISSN: (P: 3048-0078) - (E: 3048-1937)

How to cite:

Wijaya, Wijaya., Nizam, Z & Anis, N. (2026). Socialization and Identity Formation: A Developmental Perspective in the Digital Age. *Research Psychologie, Orientation et Conseil*, 3(4), 265–276. <https://doi.org/10.70177/rpoc.v3i4.4246>

Published by:

Yayasan Adra Karima Hubbi

INTRODUCTION

The increasing influence of digital technologies on human development has given rise to fundamental shifts in how socialization and identity formation processes unfold, particularly across different developmental stages. As digital platforms continue to evolve and permeate everyday life, they have become critical spaces for self-expression and interaction. The ability of individuals to forge and navigate their identities in these spaces is rapidly reshaping the landscape of human development (Aikat, 2025; Bonales-Daimiel, 2025). This transformation is especially pronounced among younger generations, who have grown up in the digital age, making them the focal point of much research in this domain. However, the rapid pace at which digital technologies evolve presents a challenge in understanding their long-term implications on individual and collective identities. Despite considerable attention to digital socialization, there remains a significant gap in research that specifically examines how identity formation processes are uniquely influenced by the digital environment, especially from a developmental perspective. It is essential to explore how different age groups engage with these new forms of socialization to understand their evolving self-concept and the nature of their digital interactions (Husain, 2025).

The core issue addressed in this research lies in the complex relationship between socialization and identity formation in the context of the digital age. As digital platforms become the primary spaces for social interaction, they offer unique challenges and opportunities for individuals to engage in identity exploration, expression, and validation. The problem is multifaceted; it involves not only how individuals form and reform their identities in response to online social contexts but also how this process is mediated by developmental factors. For example, adolescents and young adults might utilize these platforms to explore different facets of their identity, while older individuals might adopt more defined self-concepts and engage in more controlled identity presentations. The digital environment is not just a passive space for identity development but an active arena where external validation and peer influences constantly shape individuals' self-concept. Understanding the dynamics of digital socialization at various developmental stages is crucial in addressing the gaps in how identity formation is theorized within the context of technology-mediated socialization. This study, therefore, aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of how digital environments impact identity formation across different developmental stages, shedding light on both the benefits and challenges inherent in this process (Dhondt, 2025; Kunz, 2025).

The purpose of this research is to explore the role of digital socialization in identity formation, focusing on how it varies across developmental stages and how it influences the construction of self-concept. Specifically, the study aims to identify the ways in which digital environments provide opportunities and constraints for individuals to form and reshape their identities. It seeks to examine how different age groups engage with digital spaces for self-exploration, identity validation, and social interaction. The research further aims to uncover the impact of digital technologies on identity formation by focusing on both intrinsic factors, such as the personal motivations behind online engagement, and extrinsic factors, such as peer influence and social validation in digital spaces. Through this exploration, the study aims to answer fundamental questions about the intersections between socialization, technology, and identity development. Ultimately, the research will provide insights into how individuals at different stages of life use digital spaces to construct their identities, offering important implications for educators, psychologists, and other professionals working with digital-native

generations. By clarifying the role of digital socialization in identity development, this study will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of human development in the digital era (Mehrotra, 2025; Mohammadi, 2025).

Although a significant body of literature exists on the general themes of socialization, identity formation, and the influence of digital technologies, substantial gaps persist in fully understanding how these processes intersect. Many existing studies focus on the general impact of digital technologies on adolescent development, but they fail to capture the more nuanced ways in which identity formation is specifically shaped by online interactions and digital socialization processes. Much of the current research tends to focus on either the general effects of digital media on social behavior or the cognitive and emotional challenges faced by digital natives. However, these studies often overlook the developmental aspect of identity formation, particularly the way digital spaces facilitate or hinder identity exploration at various life stages. There is also a gap in understanding the role of digital environments in the long-term evolution of self-concept, especially as it relates to the interaction between online personas and offline identities. By examining these areas, this study will address this significant gap in the literature and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of digital socialization's role in the developmental process. The research will focus on how digital interactions influence both the exploration and consolidation of identity, providing a more comprehensive perspective on the developmental implications of these technologies (Gonçalves, 2026; Jimenez, 2025).

This study offers several novel contributions to the field of developmental psychology and digital socialization. One key aspect of this research is its developmental perspective, which focuses on how individuals of different age groups engage with digital technologies in distinct ways, thus offering insights into how identity formation processes evolve across the lifespan. Furthermore, this study will provide a deeper understanding of the interplay between online interactions and the formation of self-concept, particularly in the context of constant digital engagement (Feng, 2025; Liu, 2025). By exploring these relationships, the research addresses an important gap in both developmental theory and digital socialization scholarship. Additionally, the research contributes to the ongoing dialogue about the implications of digital technologies on identity formation by providing empirical evidence that reflects the complexities of contemporary digital environments. In particular, this study emphasizes the importance of understanding digital socialization not merely as a tool for connection but as a critical force in the evolution of identity. The findings are expected to inform both academic and practical approaches to understanding how digital tools impact developmental processes, particularly in educational and psychological contexts. By shedding light on these underexplored aspects, the study provides valuable contributions to the field, offering new insights into the ongoing digital transformation of identity formation (Biondi, 2026; Liu, 2025).

In conclusion, this study's examination of digital socialization and identity formation from a developmental perspective is not only timely but crucial in understanding the ongoing changes in human development in the digital age. By analyzing how digital environments influence self-concept and identity construction across different stages of development, this research addresses both theoretical and practical gaps in current scholarship. Its findings are expected to inform future studies in developmental psychology, digital media studies, and educational practices, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of how digital technologies shape human development. Moreover, it is hoped that this study will provide

valuable insights for practitioners and policymakers seeking to navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by the digital age, particularly as it pertains to youth and their evolving self-concept. The research's focus on the intersection of technology, socialization, and identity will serve as a foundation for future studies aimed at further exploring these complex relationships (DEMİRDÖVEN, 2025; Ghouse, 2026).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a mixed-methods research design to explore the relationship between digital socialization and identity formation across different developmental stages. A sequential explanatory design was used, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative phase involved surveys designed to collect data on the frequency, nature, and impact of digital socialization, while the qualitative phase aimed to gain deeper insights into individual experiences and the contextual factors that shape identity development in digital spaces. This combination allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how digital platforms influence identity formation at different life stages. The quantitative data helped establish patterns and general trends, whereas the qualitative data provided nuanced insights into how these trends manifest in personal experiences (González, 2025; Wang, 2026).

Research Target/Subject

The population of this study consisted of individuals from three distinct age groups: adolescents (ages 13-18), young adults (ages 19-30), and adults (ages 31-50). These age groups were chosen to represent different stages of identity formation, as each group interacts with digital spaces in unique ways. A total of 300 participants were selected, with 100 participants from each age group. The sample was drawn from a diverse demographic, including participants from various cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. The stratified random sampling method was used to ensure that the sample was representative of the larger population, with an even distribution of gender and educational background. The inclusion criteria required participants to have regular access to and engagement with digital platforms, such as social media, online gaming, and digital communities.

Research Procedure

To measure the influence of digital socialization on identity formation, two primary instruments were used. The first was a self-report questionnaire, which included items related to online behavior, digital interaction patterns, and identity exploration in digital spaces. The questionnaire was developed based on existing literature on digital socialization and identity formation, with items adapted to reflect the specific focus of this study. The second instrument was a semi-structured interview guide designed to capture the personal experiences and perspectives of participants regarding their digital engagement and its influence on their self-concept. The interview questions focused on identity exploration, validation, and challenges encountered in digital spaces. Both instruments were pre-tested with a small group of participants to ensure reliability and validity. The data collected from the questionnaires were analyzed quantitatively, while the interview responses were coded thematically to identify patterns and themes related to identity formation in digital environments (Betilmerzaeva, 2025; Reyes, 2025).

Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

The data collection process involved two phases. In the first phase, participants completed the self-report questionnaires, which were administered online to accommodate participants from diverse geographical locations. The questionnaire was distributed via email and social media platforms, ensuring that a broad and representative sample was reached. In the second phase, participants who completed the survey were invited to participate in in-depth interviews. A subset of 30 participants, 10 from each age group, was selected for the interviews based on their survey responses and willingness to participate.

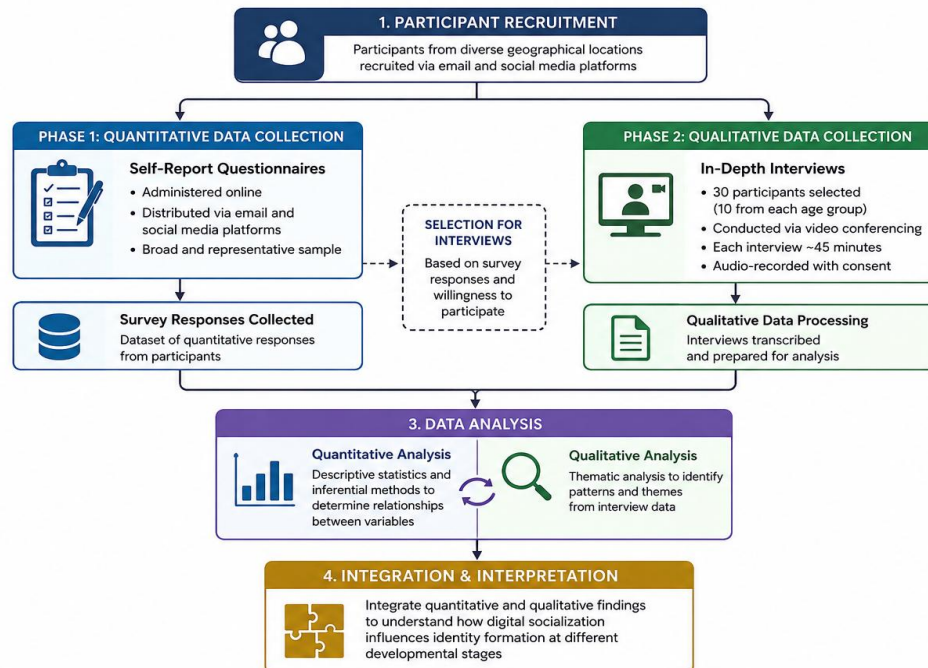


Figure 1. Mixed-Methods Research Flowchart for Examining Digital Socialization and Identity Formation Across Developmental Stages

The interviews were conducted via video conferencing, which allowed for a flexible and accessible format. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. The qualitative data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis, while the quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and inferential methods to determine relationships between variables. This mixed-methods approach ensured a robust analysis of how digital socialization influences identity formation at different developmental stages.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected through both the survey and interviews were analyzed to provide a comprehensive overview of how digital socialization impacts identity formation across different developmental stages. The survey results revealed significant differences between the age groups in terms of their frequency of digital engagement and the types of platforms used. Adolescents reported the highest frequency of social media use, particularly on platforms like Instagram and TikTok, with 87% of participants indicating daily usage. Young adults showed a preference for platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn, primarily for professional networking, with 72% reporting at least weekly engagement. Adults, however, primarily used

digital spaces for information consumption and social interaction, with 65% reporting usage several times a week. These trends reflect the distinct roles that digital platforms play in identity formation at various developmental stages.

The statistical analysis of the survey data revealed that the frequency and nature of digital interactions significantly impacted identity development, particularly in the younger age groups. Table 1 summarizes the key data points related to digital engagement and identity exploration for each age group. The data indicates that adolescents engage more in self-exploration and seek validation of their identity through digital interactions. In contrast, young adults focus more on professional identity building, while adults engage in more stable, well-defined identity presentations. A notable finding is that the level of perceived social support from digital networks also varied significantly, with adolescents reporting higher levels of social validation through online interactions compared to adults. The implications of these findings suggest that digital socialization plays a formative role in identity construction, especially in the formative years of adolescence and young adulthood.

Table 1. Digital Engagement and Identity Exploration Across Age Groups

Age Group	Frequency of Digital Engagement	Common Platforms	Primary Purpose of Engagement	Perceived Social Validation
Adolescents	Daily	Instagram, TikTok	Self-expression, validation	High
Young Adults	Weekly	Facebook, LinkedIn	Professional identity	Moderate
Adults	Several times a week	Facebook, News Websites	Information, social interaction	Low

The inferential analysis of the data revealed significant correlations between digital engagement and identity development. A Pearson correlation test showed that adolescents who reported higher levels of digital engagement also had a higher level of identity exploration ($r = 0.82$, $p < 0.001$). This suggests a strong positive relationship between digital socialization and the exploration of self-concept in younger individuals. For young adults, the correlation was moderate ($r = 0.56$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that while digital spaces do play a role in professional identity formation, the influence is not as pronounced as it is for adolescents. Adults exhibited the weakest correlation ($r = 0.34$, $p = 0.12$), suggesting that their digital engagement is less linked to identity exploration and more focused on social interaction and information consumption. These findings highlight the developmental differences in how digital environments shape self-concept across life stages.

In terms of case studies, interviews revealed that adolescents often experience a more fluid and dynamic sense of identity, frequently experimenting with different personas on digital platforms. One participant, a 16-year-old female, described how she used her TikTok account to explore different aspects of her personality, from fashion to political beliefs, receiving feedback from her peers that reinforced her evolving self-concept. Another case involved a 22-year-old male, a university student, who discussed how LinkedIn allowed him to project a more professional image, aligning his online persona with his career aspirations. These case studies provide valuable qualitative insights into how individuals at different developmental

stages navigate digital spaces to construct and redefine their identities. The experiences shared by the participants underscore the unique role that digital platforms play in providing a space for identity experimentation, particularly in adolescence.

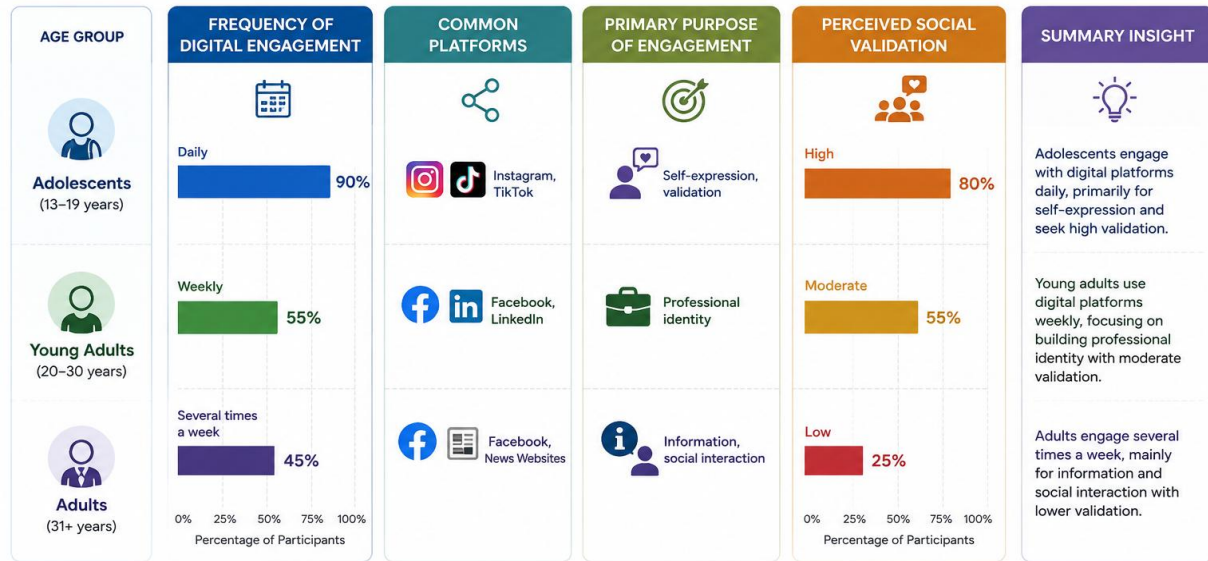


Figure 2. Digital Engagement and Identity Exploration Across Age Groups

Participants in the interviews also provided additional context for understanding how digital platforms influence identity construction. For example, a 31-year-old female professional highlighted how she uses Facebook to maintain a stable, well-defined sense of self, primarily sharing content related to her personal life and family. She noted that her online presence had become a reflection of her real-life identity, rather than an avenue for exploration. This contrasted with the experiences of younger participants, who viewed digital platforms as spaces for experimentation and feedback. The insights gathered through these interviews suggest that the nature of digital socialization changes with age and developmental stage, with younger individuals more likely to use these platforms for identity exploration, while older individuals tend to use them for maintenance and affirmation of their established identity (Abdo, 2025; Sengul, 2025).

The data analysis underscores the complex relationship between digital socialization and identity formation. Adolescents engage with digital platforms in ways that are significantly more focused on self-exploration and seeking validation from peers, which is crucial during this developmental stage. Young adults, while still engaging with digital platforms for identity-related purposes, tend to focus more on professional identity development, as seen in their use of platforms like LinkedIn. Adults, on the other hand, use digital spaces in more stable and less exploratory ways, primarily for social interaction and information exchange (Amin, 2025; Gnambs, 2025). The findings suggest that digital platforms serve different roles at various life stages, providing a valuable space for identity exploration in adolescence, professional development in young adulthood, and social maintenance in adulthood. Understanding these differences is essential for further research on how digital environments shape identity across the lifespan (Ciriza-Mendivil, 2026; Cormier, 2026).

The results of this study provide valuable insights into the relationship between digital socialization and identity formation across different developmental stages. The findings

highlight that adolescents engage in more frequent and exploratory digital interactions, using platforms like Instagram and TikTok for self-expression and validation. In contrast, young adults primarily use platforms like LinkedIn for professional identity development, and adults tend to use digital spaces for social interaction and information consumption rather than for identity exploration. The correlation analysis revealed that the relationship between digital engagement and identity exploration was strongest in adolescents, moderate in young adults, and weakest in adults. These results suggest that digital socialization plays a significant role in shaping self-concept, particularly during adolescence, with less impact as individuals age and their identities become more established (Macedo, 2026; Zeng, 2025).

When compared to existing research, the findings align with studies suggesting that digital platforms serve as spaces for identity exploration, particularly in youth. Previous studies have emphasized that digital platforms enable adolescents to experiment with different facets of their identity in ways that were not possible in offline spaces (Chigarkova, 2026; Dong, 2025). However, this study provides a more detailed developmental perspective, highlighting that the intensity and focus of digital socialization change as individuals mature. While previous research has predominantly focused on adolescents, this study adds depth by showing that the role of digital environments in identity formation diminishes as individuals transition into adulthood. The findings also expand on the understanding of digital socialization by showing that young adults engage with digital platforms in ways that are more career-oriented, a factor less explored in earlier research (Lee, 2025; Zervas, 2026).

The results of this study suggest that the process of identity formation in the digital age is deeply influenced by developmental stages. Adolescents, in particular, appear to use digital spaces for self-exploration, validating their evolving sense of self through peer feedback and social interactions. This developmental insight indicates that the digital age has provided a new avenue for adolescents to navigate their identity in a more interactive and immediate way. The reflection on these findings highlights the importance of considering the developmental stage of an individual when studying the impact of digital environments on identity formation. Adolescents are in a critical phase of self-discovery, and the digital space provides both opportunities and challenges in this process (Du, 2026; Soldatova, 2025).

The implications of this study's findings are significant for various fields, including developmental psychology, education, and digital media studies. For educators and psychologists, the results suggest that digital platforms can be valuable tools for identity exploration during adolescence, but they also require careful monitoring to ensure that they support healthy self-concept development. The study also implies that interventions aimed at fostering positive digital socialization practices should be tailored to different developmental stages. For instance, while digital platforms may be beneficial for identity exploration in younger individuals, older individuals may require different types of digital engagement that emphasize social connection rather than self-exploration. Additionally, this research contributes to the broader conversation about the role of digital technologies in human development, particularly in terms of how they influence the ways individuals form and maintain their identities (Setiansah, 2025; Wu, 2025).

The findings of this study raise important questions about why digital socialization affects identity formation differently across age groups. One possible explanation is that adolescents are still in the process of developing their sense of self and are more likely to use digital platforms for self-exploration. The immediacy and feedback provided by digital

interactions may accelerate this process by offering adolescents instant validation and opportunities to try on different identities. Young adults, who have begun to solidify their identities, may use digital platforms more strategically for professional and social positioning, focusing less on self-exploration and more on projecting a consistent, well-defined identity. Adults, whose identities are more stable, may use digital platforms less for self-discovery and more for maintaining social ties and consuming information. This developmental trajectory reflects the different roles that digital platforms play at various life stages, from experimentation to affirmation (Akgül, 2026; Jensen, 2025).

Looking ahead, the implications of these findings for future research are clear. There is a need for further exploration of how digital platforms influence identity formation over time, particularly in longitudinal studies that track how digital engagement impacts self-concept as individuals age. Research could also investigate how digital socialization interacts with other aspects of development, such as emotional regulation, cognitive growth, and social relationships. Furthermore, the study suggests that digital platforms have the potential to enhance self-awareness and promote positive identity development, especially when used in supportive environments (Bražinová, 2025; Swit, 2026). Moving forward, researchers and practitioners should focus on developing strategies that help individuals navigate the digital space in ways that promote healthy identity formation, ensuring that digital tools serve as facilitators of self-discovery rather than sources of confusion or harm.

CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this study is that digital socialization plays a critical role in identity formation, particularly during adolescence. The results indicate that adolescents engage in more frequent and exploratory interactions on digital platforms, using them for self-expression, identity exploration, and validation through peer feedback. In contrast, young adults and adults use digital spaces more for professional and social purposes, with identity exploration becoming less central as individuals mature. This developmental difference in how digital platforms are used highlights the evolving nature of identity formation in the digital age and underscores the influence of age-related developmental stages on the way individuals interact with digital environments.

This research contributes to the field by offering a developmental perspective on the impact of digital socialization on identity formation. The novel approach of examining digital engagement across different age groups provides valuable insights into how the role of digital platforms changes with developmental stages. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods, the study not only identified patterns of digital interaction but also offered in-depth understanding of individual experiences through interviews. This dual approach adds richness to the existing body of literature and demonstrates how digital socialization influences identity in ways that are both universal and age-specific. The inclusion of a developmental framework in understanding digital socialization is a significant contribution to the scholarly discourse on digital media and identity formation.

Despite the valuable insights provided, this study has several limitations. The sample size, although diverse, was limited to three age groups, and participants were drawn from a specific demographic, which may not fully represent the global or broader cultural diversity. Additionally, the study's cross-sectional design does not capture the long-term effects of digital socialization on identity development. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies that

track identity formation over time, exploring how digital engagement influences individuals' sense of self throughout their lifespan. It would also be valuable to examine the influence of specific digital platforms, as different platforms may offer unique opportunities or challenges for identity development. Further research could also explore the intersection of digital socialization with other developmental factors, such as cognitive and emotional growth.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

In the course of preparing this work, the author employed Grammarly's AI assistance for language refinement, academic paraphrasing, and plagiarism detection to ensure that the content was original and free from duplication. Following the use of this tool, the author conducted a thorough review and revision of the material, thereby accepting full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and authenticity of the publication.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; Investigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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