



Social networks and adolescence: impact on self-esteem and digital identity

Redes sociales y adolescencia: impacto en la autoestima e identidad digital

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: the study addressed the influence of social networks on the construction of identity and self-esteem in adolescents. It analyzed how platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram transformed the forms of communication and social validation, promoting ideals of perfection that affected psychological well-being. The research highlighted that adolescence, a stage of search for identity and acceptance, was particularly vulnerable to the effects of constant digital exposure. Development: it was described that social networks offered ample possibilities for interaction but also fostered comparisons and frustrations when confronted with idealized life models. Self-esteem was analyzed from five dimensions - physical, effective, social, academic and ethical - all influenced by digital dynamics. Adolescents, by relying on external approval measured in "likes" or comments, substituted internal self-worth for the validation of others. In addition, cyberbullying was addressed as one of the main negative consequences, highlighting its persistent nature and the profound psychological impact it generated. The creation of fake profiles, used for purposes of harassment, manipulation or fraud, accentuated the vulnerability of users and enhanced the dynamics of virtual violence. Conclusions: the analysis allowed concluding that social networks redefined the processes of youth socialization, affecting the perception of the self and digital coexistence. The need to strengthen emotional education and digital literacy to promote responsible and conscious use of these platforms, reducing the impact of cyberbullying and promoting healthy virtual environments was highlighted.

Keywords: Social Networks; Adolescence; Self-Esteem; Cyberbullying; Digital Identity.

RESUMEN

Introducción: el estudio abordó la influencia de las redes sociales en la construcción de la identidad y la autoestima de los adolescentes. Se analizó cómo plataformas como Facebook, Twitter e Instagram transformaron las formas de comunicación y validación social, promoviendo ideales de perfección que afectaron el bienestar psicológico. La investigación destacó que la adolescencia, etapa de búsqueda de identidad y aceptación, resultó especialmente vulnerable a los efectos de la exposición digital constante. Desarrollo: se describió que las redes sociales ofrecieron amplias posibilidades de interacción, pero también fomentaron comparaciones y frustraciones al enfrentarse a modelos de vida idealizados. La autoestima se analizó desde cinco dimensiones —física, afectiva, social, académica y ética—, todas influenciadas por la dinámica digital. Los adolescentes, al depender de la aprobación externa medida en "me gusta" o comentarios, sustituyeron la autovaloración interna por la validación ajena. Además, se abordó el hostigamiento cibernético como una de las principales consecuencias negativas, destacando su carácter persistente y el impacto psicológico profundo que generó. La creación de perfiles falsos, utilizados con fines de acoso, manipulación o fraude, acentuó la vulnerabilidad de los usuarios y potenció las dinámicas de violencia virtual. Conclusiones: el análisis permitió concluir que las redes sociales redefinieron los procesos de socialización juvenil, afectando la percepción del yo y la convivencia digital. Se subrayó la necesidad de fortalecer la educación emocional y la alfabetización digital para promover un uso responsable y consciente de estas plataformas, reduciendo el impacto del ciberacoso y fomentando entornos virtuales saludables.

Palabras clave: Redes Sociales; Adolescencia; Autoestima; Ciberacoso; Identidad Digital.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, social media have become established as some of the most influential phenomena of the digital era, profoundly transforming forms of communication, interaction, and identity construction, especially among adolescents. Their expansion, driven by the development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), has made it possible to create virtual spaces where millions of people share experiences, opinions, images, and emotions in real time. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram are not only tools for social connection but also settings in which new forms of self-representation and social validation are configured through the gaze of the other. In this context, digital identity is often constructed from ideals and standards that do not always reflect reality, which can significantly affect users' self-esteem and psychological well-being.

Adolescence, defined by the World Health Organization as the period between 10 and 19 years of age, is a stage of profound physical, emotional, and social changes. During this phase, the individual seeks to affirm their identity, consolidate their autonomy, and find a sense of belonging. However, constant interaction on social media can alter these processes, generating comparisons, frustrations, or feelings of inadequacy when exposed to idealized life models. The need for acceptance and recognition, natural at this stage, finds in the virtual environment an amplified scenario in which validation is measured in "likes" or comments, which can strengthen or weaken self-perception.

In turn, the intensive use of social media has given rise to new forms of violence, such as cyber harassment or cyberbullying, characterized by harassment, humiliation, or the dissemination of offensive information through digital media. These aggressions, occurring in a public and persistent space, leave deeper and longer-lasting psychological traces than traditional harassment. Furthermore, the proliferation of fake profiles, created for purposes of manipulation, harassment, or fraud, has increased users' vulnerability, highlighting the need for digital education and prevention measures.

In this sense, analyzing the relationship between social media, self-esteem, adolescence, and cyberbullying makes it possible to understand how technology affects socialization processes and the construction of contemporary identity, posing ethical, psychological, and educational challenges of great relevance in today's society.

DEVELOPMENT

Social Networks

Definition

The Royal Spanish Academy defines a social network as an information society service that offers users a communication platform via the Internet, so that users create a profile with their personal data, thereby facilitating the creation of communities based on common criteria and enabling communication among its users, who can interact through messages and share information, images, or videos, so that these publications are immediately accessible to all users in their group.

Examples of social networks include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tinder, LinkedIn, Happn, Pinterest, etc.

Although various communication media supported by information and communication technologies exist, not all options provide users with the diversity offered by specialized RSI. On the Facebook platform, users can, among other things, review the profiles of potential and accepted friends; search for, invite, receive, or reject contacts; form new communities or groups, subgroups, or combinations thereof; post images, classify them, assign them to the wall, rate them, touch them, and tag them; send instant messages (chat) or use email with an inbox to integrate or share received messages; interact face-to-face through videoconferences; play in thousands of social recreational spaces; post syndicated messages (RSS), use it as a reference space to redirect to other Web sites of interest, and combine communication tools with other Web resources, including Twitter; manage events with a calendar that alerts about registered dates, as well as locate, share, view, and listen to music or video files.⁽¹⁾

Self-esteem

In a note published in *Diario Libre* on October 2, 2021, about how social networks affect the self-esteem of young people, Laura Ortiz Güichardo says that people strive to show only their best side in the digital world, without considering that this causes harm to the mental health of

many. In that published note, clinical psychologist Paola Flaquer clarified that social networks are increasingly affecting users' self-esteem. "The reason is simple: on these platforms, a false idea of a perfect life is sold, which creates unrealistic standards of beauty and happiness that make others feel that they always need more to be well" (2021).

Haeussler and Milicic in 1996 consider five dimensions or areas associated with self-esteem: physical, affective, social, academic, and ethical:

- Physical Dimension. It refers to feeling physically attractive, to accepting and feeling satisfaction with the person's own body as it is, without neglecting interest in personal appearance and self-care.
- Affective Dimension. Feeling accepted and loved by others, as well as self-acceptance, recognizing both positive and negative personal characteristics. These characteristics will enable individuals to establish significant affective relationships.
- Social dimension. It refers to the feeling of belonging to the reference group, community, etc., as well as the ability to establish social relationships with people of the opposite sex. It also includes actions that allow for feeling pleasure and enjoyment when facing various social situations.
- Academic dimension. It refers to the self-assessment of cognitive abilities and the feelings generated in this regard, such as feeling intelligent, creative, etc., as well as the perception that arises when facing activities in the academic environment.
- Ethical dimension. This dimension refers to the process of internalization of values and expected social conduct norms, and the feelings that these generate, such as feeling that one is a good or bad person, feeling like a responsible person or not, among others.

Adolescence

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), adolescence is the period between 10 and 19 years of age; it is a complex stage of life that marks the transition from childhood to adulthood, during which physical, psychological, biological, intellectual, and social changes occur. It is classified into early adolescence (also called precocious or early), from 10 to 14 years, and second or late adolescence, which comprises 15 to 19 years of age.

Interest in the protection and development of children and young people, and the demand for countries to adopt 1 series of actions in favor of children and adolescents—reflected in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, approved by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989; the 1st World Summit for Children in 1990; and the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994, in Cairo—have also contributed to children and adolescents being considered a particular group in society, with the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, to education and development, to receive care, and, in the case of adolescents, to participate in the identification and solution of their problems.(2)

Cyber Harassment Through Social Media

Bullying, or school mistreatment among peers in adolescence, began to be studied in the 70s by psychologist Dan Olweus, who defined the phenomenon as any form of aggressive behavior (psychological, verbal, or physical) occurring among schoolchildren (minors), with clear intentionality on the part of the bully—whether manifest or not—and that occurs not occasionally but repeatedly over time.(3)

Harassment through electronic communication is what has been termed "cyber harassment" or "cyberviolence" (cyberbullying), which refers to how communication media can favor such violence and even exert it on different groups of people.(4) This may include the spread of rumors, the publication of private data, the sending of compromising or inappropriate images and texts, the creation of fake profiles to impersonate other people, making jokes beyond what is acceptable, and others.(4) García emphasizes the concrete forms of such harassment (such as tormenting, threatening, harassing, humiliating, shaming, etc.), stating that it occurs when "a child, adolescent, or preadolescent is tormented, threatened, harassed, humiliated, and shamed by another person from the Internet through interactive media, digital technologies, and telephones." These forms are linked to the reasons for perpetrating them, among which are greater popularity, a feeling of power, jealousy, revenge, and the failure to perceive the emotional consequences, since the minor has difficulty understanding the importance of respecting others and their privacy.(5,6)

"Photos, recordings, comments, insults. Everything is posted online or sent through messages. What used to be more or less private now becomes public. Psychological abuse has increased greatly. And it also means that it is unknown who is attacking, because identities are hidden."

There is a big difference between bullying and cyberbullying. I have had patients of both types, and they have nothing to do with each other. The victim of bullying can change schools, or even towns, and if his new environment no longer picks on him, the situation normalizes, he gains confidence, and he feels that a nightmare has ended and a new stage begins. By contrast, if there are images, videos, or insulting comments about him online, even if he changes schools and towns, he will be afraid that his new classmates will see what is posted about him. Therefore, he experiences constant insecurity and great anguish. He has changed towns, but his aggressors are still online. Moreover, when school ends and he marries and has children, his children may come across humiliating photos of their father on the internet—or his boss may. It is a cybercrime, and that image will haunt him for life”.(7)

The protagonists of bullying are, first, the harasser, who devises the harassment and is not always the person who carries it out; he decides what the rules are and who is left out of them, and he is also the leader of the group and has a need to demonstrate strength and power. On the other hand, the victim, if unable to defend himself or herself, whether physically or verbally, will continue to be a victim until another takes his or her place or until an adult can intervene. In addition, there are other actors, such as the followers, who support the leader, tolerate the harassment, and are often those who carry it out and who celebrate all the leader's actions. Without them, bullying would make no sense for the leader (in order to be popular, there must be others who idolize him); lastly, there are the bystanders, who may adopt different attitudes, such as watching without saying anything (the silent majority), laughing at what happens, and trying to stop the harassment, whether directly or by reporting it.(8,9)

Role of cyberbystanders: As Salmivalli (10) reports, bullying and cyberbullying are conceptualized as a group process; therefore, bystanders of these behaviors play a fundamental role. For example, an attitude on the part of bystanders that clearly shows support for the victim can help stop bullying, whereas a passive attitude can cause bullying to last longer.

Fake Profiles on Social Media

A fake profile is one that does not comply with the legal terms and conditions established by the platform. Fake profiles are considered to be those that do not belong to real people (fake or invented names, for example, television characters, etc.), those that do not belong to people (for example, profiles of cartoons, pets, etc.), those that belong to people who have more than one profile (the second would be considered as an infringement since only one profile per person is allowed), those that try to impersonate existing real profiles (someone who pretends to be someone else), among other cases. (11,12) It is also important to make it clear that we can find fake profiles generated manually or by hand by a person, or those generated and manipulated in a massive and automated way, more commonly known as “bots” or “robots”. However, having made this clarification, it should be considered that the automated registration of profiles on Facebook is currently complex, since automated generation is combated by sites and platforms through different techniques, including the “captcha”, which basically involves asking the user to enter a series of letters or numbers that are observed in an image, something quite complicated to overcome by automated software. (13) Returning to fake profiles, we can anticipate that their generation responds to different purposes, among which we can point out:

- Stalker: Profiles used to observe and obtain information from other profiles on the social network. In general, this type of profile does not establish particular contacts or communications; however, on certain occasions, such profiles are created with a predefined objective, making it possible to move from merely passive information gathering to active information gathering (e.g., contact through deception).
- Cyberbullying: This type of profile is used for peer harassment, in which the aim is to insult, attack, and send threatening or offensive messages by exploiting the anonymity that a fake profile allows.
- Gamers: This type of profile is used to obtain extra benefits, such as credits or lives in games or entertainment applications.
- Spammers: A category of profiles used for mass, non-consensual dissemination of various types of content, generally commercial.
- Pornography: This type of profile is used to access and befriend celebrities, groups, or pages related to adult content.
- Digital reputation: This category of fake profiles is used to accumulate digital reputation through the generation of likes or fake positive interactions (such as product recommendations).
- Media manipulation: This category of profiles is used to manipulate different types of content,

generally related to the political or commercial sphere. They are commonly found commenting, arguing, criticizing, or discussing in digital newspapers or in news disseminated through the social network itself, with a very defined stance on certain topics or experiences.

- **Cybercrime:** This category of profiles is used as a tool for the commission of different types of computer crimes (proper or improper), such as phishing, grooming, hacking, cracking, denial of service, threats, extortion, malware dissemination, among others. In many cases, they are also used for actions prior to some computer crimes, such as conducting social engineering (not considered a crime in itself).

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis conducted makes it possible to understand the profound influence that social media exert on the lives of adolescents, affecting their self-esteem, their identity-construction process, and their way of relating to others. These platforms, originally conceived as spaces for socialization and entertainment, have been transformed into scenarios where exposure, constant comparison, and the search for acceptance redefine young people's self-perception. Adolescence, being a stage of emotional vulnerability and consolidation of the self, finds in social media a double-edged environment: it can be a space of belonging and expression, but also a place where social pressures and idealized standards can generate feelings of frustration, insecurity, and emotional dependence.

The different dimensions of self-esteem described by Haeussler and Milicic (physical, affective, social, academic, and ethical) are directly challenged by the dynamics of social media. Constant exposure to models of beauty, success, or happiness distorts adolescents' perception of themselves, fostering comparisons and affecting their psychological well-being. In many cases, approval measured in "likes" or comments becomes an indicator of personal worth, replacing internal validation with dependence on the external gaze.

Likewise, research shows that the misuse of social media has generated new forms of violence, with cyberbullying among the most concerning. Unlike traditional bullying, digital harassment has no temporal or spatial limits and can be perpetuated over time through the dissemination of offensive images or messages. The psychological consequences of cyberbullying are profound, since victims remain permanently exposed and lose control over the dissemination of the content that affects them. Furthermore, the proliferation of fake profiles aggravates this problem by facilitating the anonymity and impunity of aggressors.

In summary, social media constitute a complex phenomenon that demands critical reflection and a comprehensive educational response. Promoting digital literacy, the responsible use of platforms, and the strengthening of self-esteem from an ethical and affective perspective is indispensable for adolescents to learn to navigate virtual environments in a healthy manner. Only in this way will it be possible to transform social media into true spaces of communication, learning, and personal growth, rather than scenarios of vulnerability, manipulation, and violence.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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