

# The Crisis and Reconstruction of Youth Identity in the Social Media Era

**Aaiming Mai\*, Wen Sun**

Zhengzhou Business University, Zhengzhou, 451200, China

*\*Corresponding author: Aaiming Mai*

**Copyright:** 2025 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY-NC 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited, and explicitly prohibiting its use for commercial purposes.

**Abstract:** With the rapid development of social media, the identity process of youth groups presents unprecedented complexity and dynamics. Social media not only provides youth with a platform for multicultural communication, self-expression and public participation, but also brings problems such as information overload, cognitive solidification, and conflict between virtual and real identities, which leads some youth into identity crisis. This paper focuses on the performance of youth identity crisis, crisis and its reconstruction path in the context of social media. The study concludes that social media is a catalyst for identity crisis and also an important space for reconstruction. Solving the crisis requires the concerted efforts of individuals, society and platforms, including improving media literacy, building healthy online communities and optimising algorithmic mechanisms. The research in this paper provides theoretical references and practical insights for the healthy socialisation of youth groups and cyberspace governance.

**Keywords:** Social Media; Youth; Identity

**Published:** Sept 14, 2025

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.62177/chst.v2i3.636>

## Introduction

Under the perspective of media environmentalism, social media in the digital era, like an unstoppable torrent, has reshaped the expression ecology of youth culture. From linear communication to reticulated communication, from mass media to relational media, from traditional media to intelligent media, every leap in media form is accompanied by profound changes in language and culture. In this environment, social media has opened up a new space for youth groups to express themselves, and youth groups are no longer passive recipients of information, but active creators and disseminators of content. However, the high-frequency use of social media also brings new challenges to identity. On the one hand, young people use the platform to expand their social relationships, participate in public affairs, and explore their diversified selves; on the other hand, mechanisms such as virtual image management and algorithmic recommendation may cause cognitive closure and self-division. In the era of social media in the 21st century, the identity and self-expression of contemporary youth are undergoing unprecedented changes. With the rise of social media and the flourishing of network culture, youth groups increasingly construct their personal identity and self-expression through online platforms. The importance of identity theory as a theoretical framework for analysing how individuals and groups shape and maintain their identities in the social environment cannot be overstated.

This paper attempts to systematically analyse the performance of youth identity in the age of social media on the basis of

relevant theories, so as to reveal its characteristics and problems and put forward suggestions for identity reconstruction. This will not only help to understand the psychosocial changes of youth in the new media environment, but also provide ideas for related education and governance.

## **1.Expressions of youth identity in social media**

### **1.1 Circularisation of group affiliation**

When youths are able to express their emotions on social media platforms or express their opinions in the circles they belong to through their digital identities, they establish connections with like-minded people and form communities, in which social interactions play a crucial role. Young people connect with others through likes, comments, retweets and other interactions to form a close social network, which not only deepens mutual understanding and recognition, but also provides positive and effective feedback for the construction of digital identities, thus strengthening the identity of the self and gaining a sense of identity. This emotional bond not only motivates them to actively participate in group activities, but also builds a strong community cohesion and identity in an invisible way. In social media, group members have established a kind of “spiritual resonance” beyond the boundaries of reality due to their common hobbies. Even if they are located in different regions and have never met each other before, they can find a sense of belonging in the same online space and form a close community connection<sup>[2]</sup>. This connection not only deepens the emotional bond between group members, but also strengthens their perception of group identity through shared experiences, thus deepening their sense of belonging and identity. Youths continuously adjust and refine their digital identities to adapt to the changing social environment and personal development needs. They find resonance in interaction, strengthen their identity in resonance, and gradually define their identity in the virtual world.

In this process, the role of social media cannot be ignored, which provides groups with a communication platform that crosses the boundaries of time and space, enabling group members to quickly assemble, share information and deepen their emotions no matter where they are. In the process of these social media as a means of Internet communication, youth groups have found “companions”, gained a sense of belonging to the group in the virtual space, and gained identity resonance and collective identity. The generation of a sense of belonging to a group is a key element in the generation of youth identity in the process of social media, and this sense of belonging compensates to a certain extent for the isolation or marginalisation that may exist in reality. From a psychological perspective, online identity sometimes plays the role of a simple and quick surrogate for real identity. This mutual reinforcement of identity and group belonging not only deepens the close ties between group members, but also provides solid support for the construction of their self-identity in the media environment.

### **1.2 Diversification of self-expression**

In the era of social media, the diverse styles of social media fully reflect the self-expression of contemporary youth. With the rise of social media and the flourishing of network culture, youth groups increasingly use network platforms to construct personal identity and self-expression. Youths carefully create their digital images on social media platforms in the form of pictures, texts, videos and other forms, from the selection of personalised avatars to the setting of nicknames and signatures, every detail highlights their unique perception of self-identity, and youths have different identities at different times, places and social circles, and youths post life moments and share their insights and feelings on social media platforms, gradually building a three-dimensional identity in the virtual world. They post their life moments on social media platforms, share their opinions and feelings, and gradually build up a three-dimensional, vivid and personalised digital identity in the virtual world. Young people have different forms of expression according to different platforms, which not only satisfies their curiosity about new things, but also allows them to show their unique personalities and emotions in different social occasions. The multiple styles in social media not only reflect the self-expression needs of contemporary youth, but also reflect their unique pursuit of personalisation, innovation and emotional resonance, and also provide an important platform for youth to display themselves and realise their self-worth. The current self-expression of young people shows obvious diversity. From traditional words and language to images, videos and emoticons, they are no longer satisfied with traditional ways of expression, but seek more personalised and creative ways of expression, using various media and tools to express their thoughts and emotions. In this process, through diverse self-expression, young people have not only explored and confirmed their social

identities, established ties with society, and realised their self-worth, but have also, to a certain extent, promoted social and cultural diversity and innovation.

### **1.3 Enhancement of Public Identity**

The role of interaction and social media in self-identity. The “mirror me” theory was first proposed by Cooley in *Human Nature and Social Order*. According to Cooley, the “mirror me” refers to the formation of self-perception and self-evaluation through observing the reactions of others in social interactions with them. Each individual can become a reference point for other individuals and form a conception of self by looking back at themselves through the attitudes and opinions of others towards them.

Identity is the intrinsic motivation of digital identity construction. Youth continuously explore and confirm their identity through self-knowledge, social comparison and group belonging in the process of growing up. In the intelligent communication environment, digital identity becomes an important carrier and expression of their identity. Social media provide a virtual field for youth groups to display themselves, enabling them to explore and shape their identities in the network, and the deep-level social interactions reveal the abstract identity practices in the traditional vision. Youths carefully construct and display their digital identities in social media, expecting to gain the understanding and recognition of others, and thus strengthen their self-worth and the meaning of their existence. At the same time, identity also influences the direction of construction and the choice of content. Young people will choose elements that match their values and interests to construct their digital identities according to their identities, so as to make them more in line with their self-perceptions and social expectations. This identity is not only based on real-life experiences, but also realised through interaction and communication in virtual space.

Digital connectivity and the use of social media have changed the way youth interact globally and have made independent participation in social and political activities possible. This change has not only facilitated the dissemination of culture, but has also allowed cultural identities to be presented and shaped in new ways in virtual spaces. However, this new form of identity may lead to a paradox between real and virtual identities, thus affecting an individual's true identity.

The rise of online social platforms has provided youth with a new space for social participation and self-expression. In this space, young people can display their thoughts, feelings and values in a variety of ways and connect with a wider social group. The emergence of this phenomenon has not only changed the way young people socialise, but also reshaped their mode of social participation. Through online platforms, young people can express their views and emotions more freely and participate in the discussion of social topics. Such participation not only enhances the social presence of youth, but also improves their social influence. At the same time, this phenomenon also reflects the youth's sensitivity and sense of participation in social issues, as well as their positive attitude towards social change. In this process, youth participation through online platforms not only realises self-expression and identity construction, but also promotes social progress and development to a certain extent. Young people are increasingly active in public affairs and social issues on social media, such as public welfare activities, environmental protection, social justice, etc. By liking, retweeting, following and initiating topics and other behaviours, for example, in certain emergencies or public welfare fund-raising, the youth group is often the main force of communication and action. This kind of participation not only strengthens the identity of young people as “citizens”, but also allows them to develop a sense of responsibility in social practice. This kind of identity brings positive social energy, but there is also the problem of “fast-food” participation, that is, at the level of forwarding or liking, without in-depth thinking and sustained action. Young people are easily driven by short-term emotions to gain a sense of identity, but are not sufficiently engaged in long-term practice.

## **2.The issue of youth identity in social media**

### **2.1 Misalignment of virtual and real identities**

In the digital age, the identity of youth groups is no longer confined to the objective physical world, but crosses the boundaries between online and offline, forming a symbiosis between the virtual and the real. The emotions of youth groups in online virtual situations are often reproduced in the physical world, and their behaviours and experiences in the digital world feed back into reality, and vice versa. The over-reliance of some youth groups on social media can easily lead to the alienation

of real interactions. Social media, as one of the core elements of network ecology, even constructs a kind of spiritual world of warmth and self-protection mechanism in the extension of social relations and confirmation of group values. Long-term over-reliance on social media may easily lead to the escape from reality of youth groups, which in turn reduces their ability to interact in reality and hinders the development of interpersonal relationships. The high mobility and freedom of social media also make the construction of youth identity more complicated. In the “digital labyrinth” of social media, the collision between the virtual and the real, and the ideological confrontation between the master self and the other constantly strengthen the contradiction and alienation of youth identity. For example, when travelling on the plateau, one has to take a step by sucking in a mouthful of oxygen, but what is posted in the circle of friends is “always free”; when camping, one has to take a step by sucking in a mouthful of oxygen. For example, when travelling on the plateau, one has to take a step by inhaling a mouthful of oxygen, but one’s circle of friends posts “always free”; when camping, one encounters strong winds and a mess, but one’s circle of friends posts “the sun is just right, the breeze is not dry”. This phenomenon is the product of identity tearing under the collision of reality and virtual, when the online image of social media contradicts with the real-life self, the youth group can not help but fall into the prison of “self-pulling”, which leads to the breakage of self-identity, resulting in the crisis of self-identity<sup>[1]</sup>. Despite the flexibility of identity construction in social media, young people still need to face the concrete social roles and responsibilities in real life, and this transition between reality and the virtual world may exacerbate the uncertainty of identity.

## **2.2 Identity fluidity and instability**

The fragmentation and diversification of social media may easily lead to the fragmentation of youth identity. Internet fashion trends are diverse and change rapidly at different times, which makes it difficult for youth groups to maintain long-term stability in the process of forming their identities<sup>[4]</sup>. Young people may use different buzzwords in different contexts according to their own circles, thus promoting diversified identities. However, it may also lead to anxiety in the identity process of youth groups. The rapid change of different linguistic symbols in social media leads to the lack of stability of self-perception of youth in the process of using them, which may easily lead to changes in identity. Youth display different self-orientation for different social circles. Although the mobility and plasticity of identity provide youth with multiple opportunities to explore their identity, the digital context makes identity symbols fluid, and the fluid identity space leads to ambiguity in identity positioning.

## **2.3 Prominence of Consumer Identity**

Driven by the commercial logic of platforms, consumption has gradually become an important way for youth to express their identities. By buying trendy brands, using popular products, and “sunning their lives” on social media, young people use consumption behaviour to show off their individuality and social status. Consumption has become an important symbol for young people to show themselves and obtain group identity. However, the consumerised identity tends to cover up the real value of the youth, making them externally labelled, and even falling into the trap of comparison and utilitarianism. However, the formation of digital identity is not entirely determined by the subjective will of individual youth. The technical characteristics of social media platforms and the precise mechanism of algorithmic recommendation have a subtle influence on the behavioural choices and identity shaping of young people. These objective factors interact with the subjective initiative of young people to influence their digital identity. Technological features give digital identities a variety of presentation forms and a wide range of dissemination channels, while the algorithmic recommendation mechanism pushes customised information and services based on users’ specific behaviours and preferences, further highlighting the personalisation of digital identities.

Virtual reality and social media have jointly shaped the digital landscape of modern production society, and the rise of digital communities has enabled others to give individuals a concrete presentation of the landscape, which affects the individual’s perception of the real society and self-image, and thus further influences the construction of social relations. Youth is a critical stage of identity exploration, during which individuals are particularly concerned about their position in social groups. For example, young users who often swipe on brand-name products and high-end restaurants in social media may subconsciously influence their values, leading to a surge in material needs. Young people compare the “high-end” group with themselves,

showing their dissatisfaction with their own economic income and living status quo. The false prosperity of consumerism is constantly spread through the media, constructing an illusory and manipulated collective cognition, and the shaping of the mimetic environment creates identity anxiety among young people. Therefore, driven by the wave of consumer culture and diversified role-playing, young people are no longer satisfied with the function of image transmission, but regard social media as a performance tool, and make use of social media as a broad stage for social performances of digital impression management. The illusory and superior personal image created in “refined” social media seems to be a necessity for youth groups to fit in in the digital world, and the number of likes and comments in social media such as Jieyin and Weibo has become the basic basis for defining the popularity of an individual among others <sup>[3]</sup>. In this process, young people may overindulge in the “prefabricated” “images” in the circle of friends, focusing too much on their performance in the circle of friends to the neglect of real-world connections and experiences, leading to the formation of a chaotic perception of identity in the youth group.

### **3.Strategies for reconstructing youth identity in social media**

#### **3.1 Youth Consciousness: Shaping Positive Identity in Social Media**

In the contemporary society with high penetration of social media, youth groups are not only the main creators of network culture, but also a sensitive group with identity crisis. In the face of the diversity and complexity of information, young people must gradually develop a sense of self-awareness in the process of identity construction, and take the initiative to assume the responsibility of shaping a healthy identity. For one thing, young people need to realise that the recommendation mechanism of social media platforms is not completely neutral, but is based on the commercial logic of content distribution. Only with a certain degree of media literacy can they remain critical when acquiring information and avoid falling into identity homogenisation and value parochialism. Social media is full of fragmented, entertaining and even false information, and without basic media judgement, it is easy to fall into blind obedience and identity loss. Therefore, young people need to take the initiative to learn about the media, and have the ability to check the authenticity of information, understand the logic of communication and analyse the value orientation, so as to avoid being swayed by bad information. Secondly, young people should be good at balancing self-expression and value practice in social media, and have more space for self-expression on the Internet, but idealised “personas” cannot completely replace real-life self-worth. Young people need to learn to maintain tension and balance between their virtual and real identities, so as to avoid falling into the “ideal self” for a long time and creating a psychological gap. In the context of identity mobility and diversification, young people need to develop core values that can withstand external shocks through learning, practice and self-reflection. For example, a sense of social responsibility, family and national identity, and career goals can provide individuals with a relatively stable self-orientation. In addition to self-presentation, they should pay attention to the precipitation of inner values, and endeavour to keep their online identities in line with their real identities, so as to reduce the discrepancy between “virtual reality” and “reality”. In this regard, young people should give full play to their initiative, look at the impact of technology on individual cognition in a dialectical manner, and seek online identity on the basis of the reality as the main space for development, so as to cultivate the subjective idea of “guest self” and return to the self.

#### **3.2 Platform responsibility: creating a digital ecosystem conducive to youth identity construction**

Social media platforms play an important role in the construction of youth identity. Young people need a platform space to express their individuality and display their multiple identities. For one thing, platforms should avoid overly homogenised and homogenised content delivery mechanisms and give users multiple opportunities for expression. For example, by optimising the algorithmic recommendation mechanism and adding the function of “interest expansion”, the platform can help young people break out of the existing information circle and extend their self-identity in a broader context. While pursuing traffic and capital, platforms should also consider shaping public nature and assuming social responsibility as the core values of their operations. Platform algorithms often push highly customized content through user profiles and behavioural preferences, which to a certain extent strengthens stratified identity, but also leads to cognitive limitations and value deviations. Platforms should optimise technology to avoid users falling into overly closed opinion spaces. For example, they should encourage cross-circle content recommendation and introduce public discussions on diversified topics, so that young people can form



a more open and stable identity in a more diversified information environment. Secondly, platforms should continuously optimise their own mechanisms, gradually introduce anti-dependency systems for youth, and promote the construction of public values for digital platforms, so as to lay a solid foundation for the harmonious coexistence of platforms and society, in order to ensure that the direction of their development is compatible with the well-being of young people and even society as a whole. Social media platforms are not only a tool for information dissemination, but also an important field for the construction of social values. During the critical period of youth identity formation, platforms should assume certain social responsibilities. By strengthening the promotion of positive content, highlighting the multi-faceted coverage of public issues, and restricting the dissemination of false and extremist information, platforms can subconsciously help young people build positive social identities and civic awareness.

The social media platform is not only a carrier of youth identity, but also an important influence on identity crisis and reconstruction. It can not only promote youth to achieve diversified self-expression and social participation, but also may exacerbate identity dilemmas due to factors such as algorithms, consumerism and virtualisation. Therefore, platforms need to explore the optimisation of technology, value guidance, psychological care and the construction of public space, so as to achieve a balance between commercial interests and social responsibility, and thus become a real facilitator for the positive construction of youth identity.

### **3.3 Educational Leadership: Cultivating a Healthy Youth Identity in the Media Environment**

Education must proactively adapt to changes in the media environment, not only to develop young people's ability to use the media critically, but also to provide support in terms of values, mental health and pluralistic expression, so as to help them form a healthy, stable and positive identity in the complex online environment. For one thing, it is necessary to pay more attention to social media and deepen our understanding of youth identity trends. Government departments, schools and others should constantly strengthen the study of Internet buzzwords, and understand the ideology of youth groups from time to time. Guide them to recognise the dual attributes of social media: as a platform for self-expression, but also as a source of false information, excessive comparison and identity anxiety. Foster the ability of young people to be able to sift, judge and integrate massive amounts of information, and avoid being manipulated by representations and fragmented information. Second, education should incorporate media literacy into the curriculum system to help young students improve their ability to discern virtual information, think critically and express themselves rationally. In the age of social media, young people are more vulnerable to the impact of multiculturalism and consumerism, so education needs to play the function of "orientation" and provide them with stable value anchors. Youth should be guided to build up self-confidence, self-esteem and a sense of social responsibility through curriculum ideology, thematic education and campus culture. School education should strengthen the cultivation of correct values and collective identity in the curriculum and activities. Encourage students to express themselves in diverse ways inside and outside the classroom through new media works, short videos and online discussions. Instead of being passively "moulded" by social media, young people should be allowed to diversify and actively construct their identities in a positive educational context. Promote the combination of psychological education and media literacy education to help youth understand the difference between virtual and real identities and form a healthy self-identity.

## **4. Conclusion**

In the fast-changing information environment, social media play the roles of communication, identity and criticism, and can show the values of contemporary youth, which is an important carrier of youth cultural identity. In the process of using social media, based on its unique language form and communication mechanism, youth groups construct identity in the combination of virtual space and real space, reflecting the cultural adaptation in the face of social development. However, in the face of the challenges posed by social media, all parties should take various measures to clarify the long-term impact of social media on youth identity, and guide young people to build a stable and healthy identity in a diversified environment.

## **Funding**

no

## **Conflict of Interests**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

## **Reference**

- [1] Xu, Unique. (2025). Identity Crisis and Reconstruction of Youth's WeChat Friend Circle. *New Media Research*,11(12),73-78+88.
- [2] Ogidi, J. D. (2015). Social media as a source of self-identity formation: challenges and opportunities for youth ministry. unpublished master's thesis]. University of Stellenbosch.
- [3] Liu, Y., & Lei, K. (2025). Development and validity test of impression management efficacy scale based on self-presentation behaviour of Chinese youth on social media. *Frontiers in psychology*, 16, 1494083.
- [4] Avci, H., Baams, L., & Kretschmer, T. (2024). A systematic review of social media use and adolescent identity development. *Adolescent Research Review*, 1-18.