

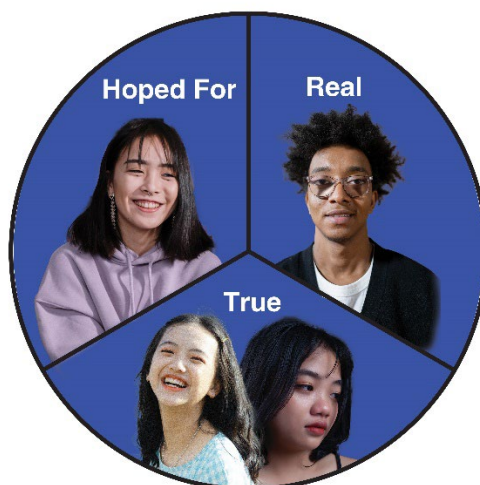
## Online Hidden Identities

Between the age of 12-18 years adolescents search for a sense of personal identity through an exploration of values, beliefs, and goals (Erikson 1995). This is a major phase of development where young people will continually re-examine their identities and try to find out exactly who they are and where they belong. A positive sense of identity has been linked to increased confidence and high self-esteem (Beronsky, 2003), whereas failing to establish a sense of identity can lead to role confusion. In the latter situations, adolescents are not sure about themselves or their place in society. However, those who successfully get through this stage will have the ability to continuously explore their identities, while still being able to commit to accepting others.

### ***Social Media and Identity***

Social media can provide a chance to explore different aspects of ourselves. Individuals may edit and manipulate certain features of their physical photos to make themselves appear more attractive. Also, the invisibility of social media may make some people feel more confident about disclosing certain aspects of their self, because of a lack of opportunity to disclose these aspects in real life.

A study focussed on how online identities are constructed by students using Facebook (Zhao et al., 2008). Most students in this study claimed they wanted to be part of a peer group, in order to increase their popularity. Some students carefully edited their photos while others were quite plain. The results show that these students produced three different types of online Facebook identities. However, all participants wanted to depict a socially attractive self.



**Image of the three types of identity**

- The 'real self' consists of the way in which these students present themselves in face-to-face interactions.
- Social media encourages them to reveal their 'true self', including aspects which were previously hidden in face-face encounters.
- For the first time, individuals can express their 'hoped-for possible selves', which empowers them to accomplish the identities they hope to establish but are unable to do in face-to-face interactions. For example, a boy may wish to become a famous footballer, but lacks an opening to show his skills.

Such 'hoped-for-possible selves' may not be anchored in reality, especially when individuals adapt their behaviour to conform to social expectations.

Although this is a snapshot of one group of students, it has made me realise how much unnecessary amount of energy young people will use to try to be more popular with their peers. There is a concern amongst parents, teachers and the wider community that in a need to become more popular, young peoples' developing identities are prohibited from flourishing, and thus remain 'hidden.'

## **Signs**

Some signs of your adolescents may be struggling with their identity are as follows:

- Continuously changing their profile picture.
- Repeatedly editing their images.
- Exclusion from their peer group.
- Seeking approval, advice and information from online friendships.
- Disclosing personal aspects of themselves without considering the consequences.
- Needing particular clothing or accessories to fit in.
- Making negative comments and comparisons with others.

## **Ways to Increase Adolescents' Self-Esteem and Confidence**

Caregivers should try to inspire more face-to-face interactions in a supervised group. For instance, volunteering to obtain a bronze Duke of Edinburgh Award. Young people can join the army cadets (12-17), the police cadets (13-18) and the sea cadets (10-18) where they will make new friendships and have fun at the same time.

An alternative is for adolescents to take up a physical activity such as football, learning to play an instrument or join a dance group.

All the above activities will teach your adolescents to learn new skills which will be useful in their adult lives.

Encourage them to connect with true friends, it's not about having the most connections. When commenting on other peers posts, ask them how they would feel if receiving those comments. Set privacy settings to connections only.

If your adolescents becomes anxious or depressed there may be a need for them to talk to a professional about this, for example a parent, teacher, wellbeing coach or counsellor.

Ref: Steph Adam Hidden Identity