



The Icing On The Cake: How Social Media Constructs A Fourth Personality Layer

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Abstract: This article presents a critical literature review of the relationship between social media use and the development of personality disorder features, particularly among young people. Drawing on psychological theory, psychological study, developmental research, and Marshall McLuhan's famous probe "The medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 7), this review examines key findings across disciplines while offering interpretive insights into emerging behavioral patterns. A large body of data now shows a stark rise in individuals aged 12-25 experiencing mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, suicidality, hospitalizations, and chronic low self-esteem. While these symptoms have been widely discussed, this paper explores the deeper structural implications of these outcomes—specifically, how long-term social media use may be shaping identity and contributing to the emergence of Cluster B personality traits, including borderline and histrionic features, affecting relationships, real-life problems (finding joy, goal setting for the future, employment), and simply "growing up". Synthesizing studies on self-image, child development, personality disorders, and influencer culture, this review highlights a critical gap in current discourse: not just *what* is happening to mental health, but *why*, and the collateral damages of the ripple effects. This review connects established psychological theories to patterns of online behavior, proposing that the medium itself (social media) may be rewiring the developing brain, contributing to a newly dominant FPL or "fourth personality layer"—a digital self that increasingly dictates offline thought, behavior, and sense of identity. This review contributes to a deeper understanding of how social media may not just reflect who we are, but actively construct who we become.

Keywords: *personality disorder, identity, social media, online culture, digital self, fourth person*

Social media has become an integral part of contemporary life for young people to communicate, present themselves, and form their identities. With the proliferation of platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and X, self-presentation has shifted from a private, introspective process to a highly public, curated performance. McLuhan's assertion that the medium itself shapes our cognition and behavior becomes particularly relevant in understanding how these platforms are altering youth's self-concept and identity, as a writer well before this generation of digital life. Platforms today actively curate the content we see and, in turn, our sense of self. This is exemplified by the idea that the user is both the product and the content, where identity is commodified and performance-based validation becomes the currency of self-worth. This transformation is not just a reflection of who we are but is a process that actively reconstructs who we become. The boundaries between the self and the digital world blur, and where individuals are increasingly navigating a mediated and illusionary existence.

Despite the growing body of literature that documents the rise in mental health issues among youth, including depression, anxiety, suicidality, and low self-esteem, the structural implications of these outcomes remain underexplored. The influence of social media on mental health and wellbeing has been framed as a consequence of exposure to negative content or comparison with idealized representations of others. This is true, however, few studies have critically examined how long-term exposure to these digital environments may be reshaping the very process of identity formation itself. While the digital culture emerging today is new, many executives for social media platforms are aware of the addiction, self-esteem issues, and implications on the users. In many respects, this is what keeps users *using*. With that being said, social media does not just pose serious harm to self esteem, it poses serious harm to ongoing livelihood. By synthesizing findings on self-esteem,

corporate involvement and influencer culture, this paper will argue that social media may be playing a crucial role in reshaping the psychological development of youth, contributing to the formation of a new “fourth personality layer”—the digital self—which increasingly dictates our offline thoughts, behaviors, and sense of identity. This paper further suggests that the digital self is more than a mere extension of our offline identity—it may be emerging as a dominant, autonomous force in the development of personality, potentially contributing to the emergence of features of personality disorders. The paper continues by exploring the relationship between social media use and the development of personality disorder traits, particularly those associated with Cluster B features, such as borderline and histrionic personality traits.

Review of Existing Literature

What About Psychology? The Three Tiers in Freud’s Theory of The Self

Freud’s theory of personality conceptualizes the self as composed of three interacting elements: the id, ego, and superego. The id, present from birth, operates unconsciously and is driven by the pleasure principle, seeking immediate gratification of instinctual drives such as sex and aggression. The ego emerges during the first three years of life as the rational, reality-oriented part of the psyche that mediates between the demands of the id and the superego. It operates on the reality principle, balancing internal desires with external expectations. In contrast, the superego, which begins to develop around age five through social interaction, functions as the moral conscience and strives for perfection.

Freud posited that the ego’s ability to manage this internal conflict determines psychological health. An imbalance, such as a dominant id or superego, can contribute to maladaptive traits like narcissism, guilt, or even psychopathy. Individuals with a strong, adaptive ego are considered to possess a well-balanced and healthy personality structure (OpenStax Psychology, CC BY 4.0).

I’m Just A Kid (And Life Is A Nightmare): Developmental Theory by Erikson

Erikson proposed that human development unfolds in eight sequential psychosocial stages, each characterized by a central conflict between two opposing psychological tendencies: one positive (syntonic) and one negative (dystonic). Successful resolution of these conflicts leads to the development of a specific virtue or ego strength, while failure may result in psychological challenges or maladaptations. This theory integrates biological, psychological, and social factors, emphasizing the role of social dynamics in shaping personality and identity throughout life.

The Eight Stages of Psychosocial Development

1. Infancy (Trust vs. Mistrust)

Virtue: Hope

Maldevelopment: Withdrawal

Occurs when infants learn to trust their caregivers to meet their needs.

2. Early Childhood (Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt)

Virtue: Will

Maldevelopment: Compulsion

Children develop a sense of personal control and independence.

3. **Preschool Age (Initiative vs. Guilt)**

Virtue: Purpose

Maldevelopment: Inhibition

Children begin to assert power and control through directing play and social interactions.

4. **School Age (Industry vs. Inferiority)**

Virtue: Competence

Maldevelopment: Inertia

Children need to cope with new social and academic demands.

5. **Adolescence (Identity vs. Role Confusion)**

Virtue: Fidelity

Maldevelopment: Repudiation

Teens explore different paths to develop a sense of personal identity.

6. **Young Adulthood (Intimacy vs. Isolation)**

Virtue: Love

Maldevelopment: Exclusivity

Young adults form intimate, loving relationships with others.

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7. **Middle Adulthood (Generativity vs. Stagnation)**

Virtue: Care

Maldevelopment: Rejection

Adults need to create or nurture things that will outlast them.

8. **Maturity (Ego Integrity vs. Despair)**

Virtue: Wisdom

Maldevelopment: Disdain

Older adults reflect on their lives and either feel a sense of fulfillment or regret.

Each stage builds upon the outcomes of previous stages; unresolved conflicts can impede future development. Achieving a balance between the opposing tendencies is crucial; overemphasis on either side can lead to maladaptive behaviors. The theory underscores the importance of social relationships and cultural context in personality development. Erikson's framework has significantly influenced various fields, including psychology, education, and human development, by providing a structured lens through which to understand the complexities of human growth and identity formation.

Schemas, Schemas, And More Schemas: Schema Theory by Young

Schema theory provides a robust framework for understanding personality development and psychological vulnerability. Rooted in cognitive-behavioral and attachment theory, schema therapy proposes that early maladaptive schemas (EMS) are pervasive cognitive-emotional patterns that develop in childhood when core emotional needs are unmet (Young, Klosko, & Weishaar, 2003). These schemas are internalized beliefs about the self, others, and relationships, often shaped by early experiences of neglect, rejection, or enmeshment, and they continue to influence behavior and emotional functioning into adulthood.

Bach, Lockwood, and Young (2018) offer an updated empirical model of EMS, organizing them into 18 distinct schemas that capture various domains of psychological functioning, including emotional deprivation,

mistrust/abuse, abandonment, and defectiveness. Their research highlights the role these schemas play in shaping long-term patterns of interpersonal behavior, affect regulation, and identity coherence.

Notably, EMS have been empirically linked to personality pathology, particularly Cluster B personality disorders, due to their association with emotional dysregulation, unstable self-image, and maladaptive relational dynamics. A peer-reviewed study by Kunst et al. (2020) examined the relationship between EMS and PD traits in a clinical inpatient population. The study found that traits of borderline, dependent, avoidant, and obsessive-compulsive PD were associated with specific EMS, suggesting that EMS can serve as both general vulnerability factors and specific markers for particular PD. This supports the use of EMS in understanding and treating various PD. As illustrated in Table 1, certain early maladaptive schemas are strongly associated with traits of personality disorders, particularly Cluster B disorders (Young et al., 2003; Bach et al., 2018).

Table 1.

Schema	Core Belief	Description	Link to Personality Disorder (Cluster B)
Emotional Deprivation	Emotional needs won't be met by others.	A belief that one will not receive emotional support or nurturing.	Associated with Borderline PD due to emotional instability and feelings of abandonment.

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Schema	Core Belief	Description	Link to Personality Disorder (Cluster B)
Abandonment/Instability	Others will leave or cannot be relied on.	A perception that others are unreliable and will ultimately abandon you.	Contributes to Borderline PD through emotional reactivity and unstable relationships.
Mistrust/Abuse	Expectation of being hurt, humiliated, or used.	A deep belief that others will intentionally hurt, cheat, or manipulate you.	Related to Borderline and Narcissistic PD with emotional sensitivity and interpersonal distrust.
Social Isolation/Alienation	Feeling different and not belonging.	A sense of being isolated or an outsider in social situations.	Contributes to Borderline PD, leading to feelings of detachment and difficulty forming stable relationships.
Defectiveness/Shame	Feeling inherently flawed or unlovable.	A pervasive belief that one is defective, flawed, or unworthy of love and acceptance.	Key feature of Borderline and Narcissistic PDs, where shame and self-loathing drive emotional instability.
Failure	Belief of inevitable failure or inadequacy.	A sense of being destined to fail, leading to self-doubt and avoidance of challenges.	Contributes to Narcissistic PD, as this belief fuels a fragile self-esteem and fear of failure.
Dependence/Incompetence	Inability to function without help.	A belief that one is incapable of functioning independently and needs others to manage life.	Seen in Borderline PD and occasionally Dependent PD, with reliance on others for emotional regulation.
Vulnerability to Harm/Illness	Expecting catastrophe or danger.	An exaggerated fear of being harmed, injured, or ill, leading to constant anxiety or hypervigilance.	Common in Borderline PD, fueling emotional dysregulation and impulsivity.

Enmeshment/Undeveloped Self	Identity overly tied to others.	The inability to differentiate oneself from significant others, often leading to poor self-identity.	Contributes to Borderline PD, where lack of self-identity leads to confusion and emotional instability.
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Schema	Core Belief	Description	Link to Personality Disorder (Cluster B)
Subjugation	Surrendering control to avoid conflict.	A tendency to suppress personal desires and needs to avoid conflict, often leading to resentment.	Seen in Borderline and Histrionic PDs, as these individuals may suppress their needs to maintain relationships.
Self-Sacrifice	Putting others' needs above one's own.	A tendency to prioritize others' needs to the detriment of one's own well-being.	Related to Borderline PD, where neglecting self-needs leads to burnout and emotional volatility.
Emotional Inhibition	Suppressing emotions to avoid disapproval.	A fear of expressing emotions due to concerns about rejection or negative judgment.	Contributes to Narcissistic and Avoidant PDs, leading to a façade of emotional control.
Unrelenting Standards/Hypercriticalness	Must meet high standards to avoid failure.	A belief that one must constantly meet high standards to avoid criticism or failure.	Common in Obsessive-Compulsive and Narcissistic PDs, as perfectionism drives rigidity and anxiety.
Punitiveness	Belief that mistakes deserve punishment.	The belief that any error must be met with harsh self-punishment.	Associated with Borderline PD, where self-punishment exacerbates feelings of inadequacy and shame.
Entitlement/Grandiosity	Belief in superiority or special status.	A pervasive sense of entitlement and belief that one is unique or deserving of special treatment.	A core feature of Narcissistic PD, where grandiosity drives entitlement and interpersonal conflicts.
Insufficient Self-Control/Self-Discipline	Inability to tolerate frustration or delay gratification.	A tendency to give in to impulses and difficulty regulating one's behavior or emotions.	Seen in Borderline and Histrionic PDs, where impulsivity undermines stability and emotional regulation.
Approval-Seeking/Recognition-Seeking	Need for external validation to feel worthy.	A constant desire for validation and recognition from others to maintain self-worth.	Common in Narcissistic and Histrionic PDs, where external praise dictates self-esteem.

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Schema	Core Belief	Description	Link to Personality Disorder (Cluster B)
Negativity/Pessimism	Chronic focus on the negative or fear of failure.	A tendency to focus on negative outcomes or anticipate failure, often leading to anxiety.	Contributes to Borderline PD, where pessimism fuels emotional reactivity and difficulty managing expectations.

You Are What You Post: Social Media, Upward Comparison and Self Esteem

Vogel et al. (2014) conducted two complementary studies to investigate the role of social comparison in shaping self-esteem through social media use, particularly on Facebook. Drawing on social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), the authors argue that social networking sites (SNS) offer an abundance of upward comparison opportunities due to users' ability to selectively curate idealized versions of their lives.

Study 1, using a correlational design, found that frequent Facebook use was associated with lower trait self-esteem, and this relationship was mediated by increased upward social comparison. Participants who engaged more frequently with Facebook reported both more upward and downward comparisons, but upward comparisons were more common and had a stronger negative impact on self-evaluation.

Study 2 employed an experimental design to test whether temporary exposure to idealized profiles would affect current state self-esteem. Participants viewed fictitious social media profiles manipulated to convey either upward or downward comparison content via personal behaviors (e.g., healthy habits) and social network feedback (e.g., number of likes/comments). Results indicated that exposure to upward comparison targets—especially those with highly active social networks—lowered participants' self-esteem and self-evaluations. Interestingly, social network cues (likes, comments) were more impactful than personal profile content, suggesting that perceived social validation of others' content intensifies comparison effects.

These findings suggest that SNS environments amplify upward comparison and may contribute to lower self-esteem, particularly among heavy users. The study highlights how digital platforms facilitate exposure to idealized selves, potentially distorting self-perception and reinforcing negative self-evaluation cycles.

Cluster B Personality Disorders

Huang (2023) provides a comprehensive review of Cluster B personality disorders, including antisocial, borderline, narcissistic, and histrionic personality disorders. Huang outlines their diagnostic features, etiology, and treatment challenges, while also examining the impact of stigma on individuals living with these disorders.

Cluster B disorders are broadly characterized by emotional dysregulation, erratic behavior, and interpersonal dysfunction, with overlapping symptoms that complicate both diagnosis and treatment. For instance, antisocial personality disorder (ASPD) is associated with impulsivity, aggression, and a disregard for social norms, while borderline personality disorder (BPD) presents with affective instability, fears of abandonment, and frequent self-harm. Narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) involves grandiosity, a fragile self-image, and a deep need for validation, whereas histrionic personality disorder (HPD) is marked by excessive emotionality and attention-seeking behavior.

Huang emphasizes the biological, psychological, and environmental roots of these disorders, citing factors such as genetics, childhood trauma, poor attachment, and adverse social conditions. Of particular importance is the finding that childhood maltreatment, especially sexual abuse, is a key predictor of borderline personality disorder.

Individuals with Cluster B disorders frequently meet criteria for other psychiatric conditions, including mood disorders, PTSD, and substance use disorders. BPD, for instance, shows a high co-occurrence with bipolar disorder, complicating treatment efforts and diagnostic clarity. Treatment remains a significant challenge. While psychotherapy—particularly DBT and MBT—shows promise for BPD, other disorders like ASPD have shown limited response to therapeutic interventions. The review stresses the importance of early intervention, especially through parental support and psychoeducation.

Crucially, Huang addresses the pervasive stigma surrounding personality disorders. This stigma operates on multiple levels—societal, clinical, and institutional—and significantly undermines access to care and treatment outcomes. Patients with BPD, in particular, are often perceived negatively by clinicians, which may lead to reduced empathy and lower quality of care. Stigma also discourages individuals and families from seeking help, exacerbating the cycle of dysfunction and emotional distress.

Digital Personality Behaviour Patterns

Collins and Grant (2025) conducted a pioneering survey to explore the intersection between social media addiction (SMA) and borderline personality disorder (BPD). Utilizing validated instruments—the McLean Screening Instrument for BPD (MSI-BPD) and the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS)—they assessed 289 adult participants. The study revealed that 13.1% of participants screened positive for BPD, and notably, 25% of these individuals met the criteria for SMA, a rate significantly higher than the 9.6% observed in the control group.

The findings underscore that individuals with BPD are more susceptible to SMA, particularly using social media platforms for specific maladaptive purposes:

Distraction from interpersonal problems: Social media serves as an escape mechanism from tumultuous relationships.

Reassurance seeking: Individuals seek validation and affirmation through online interactions.

Self-confidence issues: Platforms are used to bolster self-esteem and self-worth. **Anger/revenge seeking:** Some engage in online behaviors driven by anger or a desire for retribution.

Importantly, among those with BPD, the severity of SMA correlated positively with the frequency of these behaviors, except for anger/revenge seeking. The study suggests a bidirectional relationship: BPD symptoms may drive individuals toward excessive social media use, and in turn, SMA may exacerbate BPD symptomatology. For instance, the reliance on social media for reassurance can lead to heightened sensitivity to online feedback, potentially intensifying feelings of abandonment or worthlessness when expectations are unmet.

If We Knew Now, What They Knew Then: Social Media Executives Are Aware of The Risk

Haidt and Rausch's (2025) investigative article *Snapchat is Harming Children at an Industrial Scale* offers a revealing critique of Snapchat's internal awareness of the platform's detrimental effects on minors. Through internal emails, corporate research presentations, and lawsuits, the authors demonstrate that Snapchat executives were well aware of how specific features of the app, particularly Snapstreaks, ephemeral messaging, and third-party anonymous applications, contributed to significant psychological distress, compulsive use, and cyberbullying among adolescents.

The authors cite several internal communications among Snap employees that reflect an alarming level of indifference or resignation to harmful activities on the platform. For example, one internal message laments, "God I'm so pissed that we're over-run by this sextortion shit right now..." Another admits to the normalization of illicit activity: "That's fine it's been broken for ten years we can tolerate tonight." Regarding age verification, which is crucial for child protection, one executive stated plainly that it is "effectively useless in stopping underage users" (Haidt & Rausch, 2025).

The feature most frequently scrutinized in the article is Snapstreaks, a mechanism designed to encourage users to send messages daily to maintain their "streak." An internal email from January 2017, titled "Snap streak distribution first look," included employee reflections on the addictive nature of this feature, with one person noting, "Wow, we should add more addicting features like this." Another expressed concern over the quality of engagement, questioning whether the act of sending meaningless photos just to maintain a streak aligned with

healthy user behavior. The email continued, “If I open Snapchat, take a photo of the ceiling to keep my streak going and don’t engage with the rest of the app, is that the type of behavior we want to encourage?” However, the same communication also expressed strategic interest in the addictive potential of the feature, proposing that if streaks could evolve from being a by-product of engagement into a driver of it, they might ultimately contribute to long-term retention (Haidt & Rausch, 2025, NM p. 111, para 273).

In December 2018, Snap conducted online surveys and focus groups to evaluate user experiences, which revealed that Snapstreaks had become “pressure filled.” Gen Z users reported that mobile connectivity fostered constant FOMO, or fear of missing out, and that social media usage felt “*obligatory rather than voluntary*.” The data presented in Snap’s internal research showed that 45% of Snapchat users aged 13 to 17 used the platform “almost constantly,” with similar figures reported for YouTube (41%) and Instagram (34%) (Haidt & Rausch, 2025, NM p. 112, para 276). A later presentation from October 2019 acknowledged that “streaks make it impossible to unplug for even a day” and that “maintaining streaks and keeping up with conversations... causes pressure,” particularly when notifications amplified the urgency (Haidt & Rausch, 2025, NM p. 113, para 278).

Snap’s approach to user engagement extended into school environments. In its first official blog post, the company stated it was “thrilled” to learn that high school students were using the app during class time, often to send “behind-the-back photos of teachers and funny faces.” Internal research conducted in 2018 revealed that over a third of Snapchat users believed keeping a streak alive was “extremely” or “very important.” Users also reported that the stress of maintaining streaks was “large” or even “intolerable.” Further internal findings showed that Snapchat use was highly compulsive, with teens engaging with the app immediately upon waking, before and during school or work, after these obligations, on vacations, and even while in the presence of others (Haidt & Rausch, 2025).

In addition to compulsive use, the article emphasizes how Snapchat’s features contribute to cyberbullying. The platform’s ephemeral design and allowance for anonymous third-party applications created conditions in which harassment could flourish with minimal accountability. From 2019 to 2021, Snap integrated apps such as YOLO and LMK, which enabled anonymous Q&A and polling, into its interface. Haidt and Rausch highlight the case of Carson Bride, a sixteen-year-old who died by suicide in 2020 after receiving 105 anonymous messages on YOLO, 62 of which were cruel or sexually explicit.

Snap’s own research aligns with parental concerns. A July 2023 report titled “Snap Parent Perceptions Research” revealed that the features most strongly associated with Snapchat—ephemerality, location sharing, and Snap Streaks—were also the ones most closely tied to concerns about bullying, inappropriate contact, and mental health. According to this study, parents found that ephemeral messaging undermined their ability to monitor their children’s communication, which often involved strangers or inappropriate content, including sexting. Some parents also feared the use of Snapchat for illicit drug transactions, although these concerns were less frequently mentioned (Haidt & Rausch, 2025, NM p. 60–61, para 136). Finally, internal Snap research from February 2022 acknowledged that the platform’s disappearing messages “embolden bullies to harass people with less fear of consequence.”

According to the “In-App Reporting Research” presentation, cyberbullying from both anonymous users and known contacts was widely cited by users as a significant problem, exacerbated by Snapchat’s core design of ephemerality (Haidt & Rausch, 2025, NM p. 126–127, para 317).

Individually these issues present operational or management challenges but collectively, these findings suggest that Snapchat’s leadership had extensive internal knowledge of the risks associated with its platform but failed to act in ways that prioritized adolescent well-being. The company’s internal discussions, coupled with third-

party litigation and survey data, reinforce the argument that Snapchat's most engaging features may also be its most psychologically harmful.

Get Influenced: Influencer Culture

An article by Ekinci, Dam, & Buckle (2025) critically explores the growing body of literature surrounding the negative impacts of social media influencers (SMI), emphasizing the deceptive marketing practices they may engage in and the psychological, ethical, and regulatory challenges they pose. While SMI have emerged as powerful figures in digital marketing, capable of shaping consumer behavior through seemingly authentic engagement, the authors argue that this influence harbors significant risks that deserve closer academic and regulatory scrutiny.

Drawing on *parasocial interaction theory* the authors suggest that SMI cultivate a sense of intimacy with followers by mimicking real-life social bonds. This simulated relational closeness allows influencers to operate as “*secondary attachment objects*”, a concept borrowed from *attachment theory*, creating emotionally resonant connections that enhance consumer trust and loyalty. These affective ties are instrumental in driving the perceived authenticity of influencers, a crucial element in the success of influencer marketing

Influencers frequently portray aspirational lifestyles brimming with travel, luxury, and effortless beauty. It's curated content that not only inspires but also reinforces exclusive ideals and social hierarchies. While followers may feel they are gaining access to previously unattainable lifestyles, the article underscores the psychological cost of this content, particularly for younger, impressionable audiences. As influencers increasingly enter into brand partnerships and monetized content deals, their role as “authentic” figures becomes compromised. The boundary between organic self-expression and sponsored content grows murky, creating confusion for consumers about what is genuine and what is commercially driven. The authors highlight how this blending of authenticity with visibility and engagement metrics (likes, followers, and reach) further complicates the consumer experience and introduces ethical concerns regarding transparency, disclosure, and intent.

Beyond the marketing and ethical dimensions, the article delves into the broader psychosocial effects of influencer culture. Drawing on *Social Cognitive Theory*, SMI are framed as idealized behavioral models whose curated lifestyles may be internalized by followers. This modeling can distort self-perception, elevating unrealistic expectations around appearance, success, and happiness. The result is a culture steeped in social comparison, where followers—especially adolescents and young adults—grapple with body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, and mental health difficulties as they struggle to reconcile their real lives with the polished realities (fantasies) they consume online.

Their search strategy, conducted through Google Scholar in August 2024, initially returned 23,700 results. After screening titles and abstracts, excluding review articles, and addressing a gap in literature about counterfeit promotion, the final dataset comprised 13 core sources. From these, the authors identified six thematic clusters reflecting the “dark side” of influencer culture, each associated with a research proposition and behavioral implications. The review presents six thematic areas in which SMI negatively affects follower's quality of life, either directly (physical, mental, or financial harm) or indirectly (stress, addiction, or erosion of trust). Each theme reveals a distinctive facet of harm and builds toward a broader research agenda:

1. Promotion of Harmful Products

Influencers often exploit follower trust to endorse products with adverse health effects such as diet supplements, detox teas, and alcohol, often without proper disclosure. These endorsements not only glamorize harmful behaviors but may also breach advertising laws, especially when targeting minors. The link between influencer content and increased unhealthy consumption, particularly among youth, is well-supported by empirical studies.

2. **Dissemination of Misinformation**

Influencers, while perceived as trustworthy, often lack the expertise to responsibly discuss health, politics, or science. This mismatch between perceived credibility and actual knowledge enables the spread of misinformation, especially dangerous in times of public safety (e.g., COVID-19 or vaccinations). Without regulation, influencers can manipulate beliefs, sow distrust in institutions, and contribute to disinformation.

3. **Reinforcement of Unrealistic Beauty Standards**

Idealized, heavily curated images that are often enhanced by filters set unattainable beauty benchmarks, particularly impacting young women and men. Studies show that frequent exposure to such content correlates with body dissatisfaction, lower self-esteem, and unhealthy behaviors, including extreme dieting and cosmetic enhancements.

4. **Fostering of Comparison Culture**

SMI projects glamorous lifestyles that fuel constant upward social comparison among their followers. This can generate envy, self-doubt, and lifestyle dissatisfaction. Individuals with existing vulnerabilities, such as low self-esteem or social anxiety, are particularly susceptible. Even influencers themselves are not immune to the psychological toll of maintaining an idealized online persona in a validation-driven environment.

5. **Deceptive Consumption Practices and Counterfeit Promotion**

Many influencers engage in deceptive marketing by failing to disclose paid partnerships, buying fake followers, or promoting counterfeit goods. These practices damage consumer trust, blur ethical boundaries, and can pose health or legal risks. While consumer behavior around counterfeit goods is well-researched, the influencer's role in facilitating such transactions is underexplored and demands greater scrutiny.

6. **Privacy Concerns and Data Vulnerability**

SMI, particularly large-scale follower accounts, function as data aggregators. Followers often share personal data casually, despite known risks, giving rise to the "privacy paradox". Both behavioral and normative theories suggest people disclose data even when privacy concerns exist. The risk grows when SMI lack awareness of data regulations (e.g., GDPR, UK DPA), raising the possibility of both accidental breaches and cyber threats. Brands collaborating with influencers also face legal exposure through vicarious liability.

It All Comes Out In The Wash - Mental Health Rates & Changes In Living Standards Among Young People

The mental health of adolescents and young adults has seen significant deterioration in recent years with increases in mood disorders, anxiety, and suicidal behaviors, particularly since 2012. Numerous studies and national surveys indicate rising rates of depressive symptoms, anxiety, and suicide-related outcomes, highlighting the increasing mental health crisis among youth. This growing prevalence aligns with the rapid adoption of smartphones and social media, and changes in societal and family structures, which are believed to contribute to these trends (Bender, 2021; Friedrich, Green, & Brown, 2022; Mojtabai, Olfson, & Han, 2016; Schaeffer & Johnson, 2018; Twenge et al., 2019; Zhang & Lee, 2020).

A comprehensive analysis of mood disorder and suicide-related outcomes by Twenge et al. (2019) utilized data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) to assess trends in major depressive episodes, serious psychological distress, and suicidal behaviors from

2005 to 2017. The study revealed a 52% increase in major depressive episodes among adolescents aged 12-17 from 2005 to 2017, and a 63% increase among young adults aged 18-25 from 2009 to 2017. These trends were particularly pronounced for adolescents born from the early 1980s (Millennials) to the late 1990s (iGen), suggesting a cohort effect where younger generations are significantly more affected by mood disorders compared to older generations. Notably, the rise in depression and other mental health issues began around 2012, coinciding with the widespread use of smartphones and social media, with adolescents reporting higher levels of depression from 2011 onward. The study also noted that the increase in depression was not attributed

to the 2008 Financial Crisis and recession, as the rise in depression among teens began after the recession's impact had already receded.

Mojtabai, Olfson, and Han (2016) also documented the increase in depression prevalence among adolescents and young adults from 2005 to 2014. The prevalence of major depressive episodes (MDE) rose significantly, from 8.7% in 2005 to 11.3% in 2014 for adolescents aged 12-17. For young adults, the rate of MDE increased from 8.8% to 9.6%. These increases were greater among individuals aged 12 to 20 years, suggesting that this group experienced the most notable rise in depression.. Despite the increase in depression prevalence, the study found that mental health treatment remained largely unchanged, with only a modest increase in the use of mental health services, particularly specialty mental health providers.

Rates of suicidal ideation and attempts have also risen dramatically. The National College Health Assessment (2018) tracked trends in suicide-related outcomes among U.S. college students from 2007 to 2018, revealing that the rates of suicidal thoughts and attempts more than doubled during this period. This increase was consistent across multiple datasets and was particularly marked in the younger cohort of students aged 18-22. Similar findings were reported by other studies that observed a significant rise in emergency department visits for suspected suicide attempts, particularly among adolescent girls, which increased by 51% between 2019 and 2021 (Friedrich, Green, & Brown, 2022).

In addition to these findings, data from the National Vital Statistics System highlighted a disturbing trend. Between 2007 and 2018, suicide rates among U.S. youth aged 10-24 increased by 57%. This trend accelerated in 2020, with more than 6,600 deaths by suicide among young people, a sharp increase from previous years. This surge in suicide rates, combined with the rising prevalence of suicidal thoughts and behaviors, underscores the severity of the mental health crisis among youth and young adults (Bender, 2021).

Gender differences have been observed in the mental health trends of adolescents, with girls showing more significant declines in certain domains. The SDQ (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire) data from 2022 indicated that girls scored higher on emotional symptoms such as sadness, anxiety, and feelings of hopelessness compared to boys. Girls were significantly more likely to experience depression and anxiety. The emotional distress among girls was more pronounced than in boys, aligning with broader trends showing that girls have been disproportionately affected by the mental health crisis in recent years (Schaeffer & Johnson, 2018).

In contrast, boys showed more significant increases in hyperactivity and externalizing behaviors, such as fidgeting, restlessness, and impulsivity. These behaviors were less common among girls, who showed more pronounced emotional symptoms. Interestingly, girls also had higher scores on the Prosocial Behaviors domain, indicating that they may be better at forming social connections, though this protective factor did not increase as much for girls as it did for boys. This disparity in emotional and behavioral challenges between genders calls for more targeted mental health interventions for girls, who appear to be facing a more severe mental health crisis (Zhang & Lee, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the mental health crisis, particularly for adolescents and young adults. The disruption of in-person interactions, the closing of schools and learning online, and the rise of social isolation during lockdowns significantly impacted the mental health of young people. Global studies reported a doubling of depression and anxiety symptoms among youth during the pandemic, with 25% of youth experiencing depressive symptoms and 20% experiencing anxiety symptoms (Friedrich et al., 2022; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). These figures are consistent with earlier findings from the National Youth Risk Behavior Survey, which showed a sharp increase in feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and suicidal ideation during the pandemic (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020).

Additionally, data from emergency departments revealed a rise in suicide attempts among adolescents, particularly adolescent girls, with emergency visits for suspected suicide attempts rising by 51% in early 2021 compared to 2019 (Friedrich et al., 2022). The isolation resulting from school closures, lack of in-person support from friends, teachers, and counselors, and the increased reliance on digital communication likely exacerbated feelings of depression, anxiety, and hopelessness among youth (Bender, 2021; Schaeffer & Johnson, 2018).

The increase in mood disorders, anxiety, and suicidal behaviors among adolescents and young adults in the U.S. since 2012 reflects a growing public health crisis that warrants urgent attention. While factors such as the rise of social media and smartphones, changes in parenting styles, and economic pressures have contributed to these

trends, the COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the mental health challenges faced by young people. The gender disparities observed in mental health outcomes, with girls being disproportionately affected, highlight the need for targeted interventions to address the specific needs of different youth populations. The ongoing rise in depression, anxiety, and suicide-related outcomes among youth emphasizes the importance of expanding mental health services and increasing efforts to address the root causes of these trends.

These trends underscore the importance of further research and intervention to mitigate the mental health challenges faced by youth today, including the need for more comprehensive mental health education, improved access to care, and strategies to reduce the negative impact of digital media and social isolation. (Friedrich et al., 2022; Mojtabai et al., 2016; Twenge et al., 2019).

In addition to mental health rates increasing (mood disorders, suicidal ideation/deaths by suicide, anxiety, hospitalizations), data from Statistics Canada show a substantial increase in the number of young adults living with their parents over the past two decades. In 2001, 22.5% of Canadians aged 25 to 29 were residing in the parental home (Statistics Canada, 2021). By 2021, this figure had surged to 35.2% of Canadians aged 20-29 (Statistics Canada, 2022), reflecting broader social and economic shifts (see table 2). Factors contributing to this rise include escalating housing prices, the financial burden of post-secondary education, prolonged schooling, and challenges securing stable employment. These realities have made it increasingly difficult for young adults to achieve financial independence and move out of the family home.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the living situations of young adults. The pandemic not only caused widespread job loss and educational disruption but also intensified social isolation and mental health concerns. As universities shifted to remote learning and jobs became remote or scarce, many young adults moved back in with parents for financial support or emotional stability. Importantly, the pandemic also accelerated the use of digital technology, particularly cell phones, as a primary tool for communication, entertainment, and education. Increased screen time during this period was associated with higher levels of reported stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms, particularly among young adults. Reliance on digital devices became a coping mechanism while simultaneously contributing to deteriorating mental health. As such, the interplay between economic challenges and heightened digital immersion may have further influenced the decision for many to remain in the parental home, creating a feedback loop where financial dependence and psychological strain were mutually reinforcing.

Table 2.

Percentage of young adults living with at least one parent, 1981–2021 (Statistics Canada, 2021).

Year	Percentage
1981 (Ages 25-29)	11.3%

2001 (Ages 25-29)	22.5%
2011 (Ages 25-29)	25.2%
2021 (Ages 20-29)	35.2%

Discussion and Critical Analysis

Three Tiers Please, And Does The Icing Cost Extra? Personality Fragmentation and Real World Spillover

One really has to ask: why *wouldn't* users of these apps be developing traits associated with personality disorders? When we look at platforms like Snapchat, we're not just seeing harmless messaging tools, we're seeing companies whose executives knowingly designed features to create addictive patterns of use. Add to that normalization of anonymous communication, FOMO, and online spaces that are saturated with fear, hostility, and even encouragement of self-harm or suicide (Haidt & Rausch, 2025). Influencer culture, on its own, is enough to fuel cycles of toxic comparison, internalized inadequacy, and a growing sense of obligation to engage with platforms that no longer bring joy, just pressure.

It's not only the consumers of this content we need to consider. It's not just the users who are bullied or targeted. We also have to include those who are engaging in bullying, or acting out online in aggressive or attention-seeking ways. We can't ignore the influencers themselves creating content, building followings, and performing curated versions of identity for validation. All of these roles: observer, victim, perpetrator, performer, fit into a framework that reflects the development or activation of Cluster B personality features, especially borderline and histrionic traits. To really understand how this happens, we can bring in Young's Schema Theory. When paired with knowledge of Cluster B traits, it gives us a strong framework for how personality disorders can form and show up in online behavior. Especially in young users, these maladaptive schemas don't just pop up occasionally, they're *constantly* being activated. With social media use happening virtually 24/7, these belief systems are constantly being reinforced over and over. Below is an outline of those schemas and how they directly link to the features of Cluster B disorders in the context of social media.

Social Media Use, Cluster B Personality Disorders, And Schema Theory By Young

Schema	Core Belief	Social Media Expression	Link to Cluster B PD
Emotional Deprivation	Emotional needs won't be met by others.	Seeking constant attention; forming parasocial bonds.	Emptiness and neediness—common in Borderline PD.
Abandonment/Instability	Others will leave or cannot be relied on.	FOMO, clingy messaging, anxiety over responses.	Unstable relationships—central to Borderline PD.
Mistrust/Abuse	Expectation of being hurt, humiliated, or used.	Hypervigilance, suspicion in online interactions.	Paranoia and reactivity—Borderline & Narcissistic PDs.
Social Isolation/Alienation	Feeling different and not belonging.	Isolation despite digital presence, exclusion sensitivity.	Alienation, identity confusion—Borderline PD.
Defectiveness/Shame	Feeling inherently flawed or unlovable.	Over-curation, comparison, shame over self-presentation.	Shame-driven behavior—Borderline & Narcissistic PDs.

Failure	Belief of inevitable failure or inadequacy.	Avoidance of success posts, envy of others' achievements.	Inferiority complex—vulnerable Narcissism.
Dependence/Incompetence	Inability to function without help.	Overreliance on influencers or peers for self-image.	Dependency and indecisiveness—can overlap with Borderline PD.
Vulnerability to Harm/Illness	Expecting catastrophe or danger.	Doomscrolling, amplified anxiety via content consumption.	Emotional dysregulation and anxious reactivity.
Enmeshment/Undeveloped Self	Identity overly tied to others.	Blending with online subcultures, loss of individuality.	Weak self-identity—a hallmark of Borderline PD.
Subjugation	Surrendering control to avoid conflict.	Suppressing personal views online; conforming for acceptance.	Lack of boundaries and self-assertion—seen in Borderline traits.
Self-Sacrifice	Putting others' needs above one's own.	Online caregiving roles, burnout from overgiving.	Codependent dynamics—seen in Borderline PD.
Emotional Inhibition	Suppressing emotions to avoid disapproval.	Flat, curated personas; lack of vulnerability.	Emotional suppression—also seen in Narcissistic PD.
Unrelenting Standards/Hypercriticalness	Must meet high standards to avoid	Perfectionism in posts, fear of online failure.	Overcontrol, perfectionism—underpins Narcissistic and

	failure.		Obsessive traits.
Punitiveness	Belief that mistakes deserve punishment.	Harsh self-talk after poor online performance.	Self-blame and shame—seen in Borderline PD.
Entitlement/Grandiosity	Belief in superiority or special status.	Exaggerated personas, dominance-seeking behavior.	Core schema in Narcissistic PD.
Insufficient Self-Control/Self-Discipline	Inability to tolerate frustration or	Impulsive posting, overuse of platforms.	Impulsivity—key trait in Borderline and Histrionic PDs.

	delay gratification.		
Approval-Seeking/Recognition-Seeking	Need for external validation to feel worthy.	Obsessive tracking of likes/followers, status-driven behavior.	Strong driver of Narcissistic and Histrionic features.
Negativity/Pessimism	Chronic focus on the negative or fear of failure.	Cynical or depressive posting, engagement with negative content.	Emotional lability and pessimism—common in Borderline PD.

To take this another step further in understanding, it's necessary to explore Schema Theory, ***Social Media Use, Personality Disorders, And The Developmental Theory By Erikson.***

Stage/Concept	Developmental Theory (Erikson)	Early Maladaptive Schema (Young)	Social Media Influence	Personality Disorder Features
Infancy	Trust vs. Mistrust	Mistrust/Abandonment	Early attachment representations may be shaped by inconsistent digital presence of caregivers	Paranoid or avoidant traits due to core insecurity
Early Childhood	Autonomy vs. Shame/Doubt	Defectiveness/Failure	Performance anxiety from early exposure to judgment (e.g., toddler content online)	Avoidant or obsessive traits
Preschool	Initiative vs. Guilt	Dependence/Incompetence	Over reliance on parental guidance for online behavior; fear of doing wrong publicly	Dependent or avoidant patterns

School Age	Industry vs. Inferiority	Failure/Unrelenting Standards	Social comparison starts; academic/social pressure amplified by curated lives of peers	Narcissistic self-doubt or depressive introversion
Adolescence	Identity vs. Role Confusion	Identity/Approval-Seeking	Formation of “digital self”; validation through likes, followers; unstable sense of self	Borderline, narcissistic, histrionic features
Young Adulthood	Intimacy vs. Isolation	Emotional Deprivation/Abandonment	Superficial connections, ghosting, hookup culture; intimacy distorted by performative interaction	Borderline or avoidant traits, unstable relationships

Across Stages	Unresolved conflicts impact future development	Core schemas intensify over time	Algorithms reinforce cognitive distortions; online environments reward maladaptive traits	Fixed traits become diagnostic-level features
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To better grasp the issue of maladaptive schemas and personality disorder, Zhang et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis examining the effectiveness of schema therapy (ST) in treating personality disorders (PD). Their analysis included 18 studies and confirmed that schema therapy significantly reduces symptoms of PD, especially in Cluster B and C disorders. The study emphasizes that early maladaptive schemas (EMS) such as rigid, negative patterns of thought formed in childhood, play a central role in the development and persistence of personality pathology.

The findings support the idea that these deeply ingrained cognitive-emotional structures underpin dysfunctional behavior, identity issues, and emotional dysregulation seen in personality disorders. Importantly, the review reinforces that schema activation is frequent and intense, suggesting a perpetual loop of maladaptive thinking and behavior unless therapeutically interrupted. This suggests strong empirical support for the use of schema theory as a framework for understanding how long-term, unmet emotional needs and early adversity shape pathological personality traits, which is an especially relevant insight for exploring the interaction between schemas, youth development, and social media exposure.

In addition to what's been outlined by Erikson and Young, Freud's theory of the self is still very much in play. People aren't just one thing at one time, we're layered. And especially during development, youth are experiencing a mix of things all at once: identity formation, emotional development, and early maladaptive schemas. At the same time, they're figuring out "the self". Freud's idea that we're made up of the id, ego, and superego gives us a useful way to visualize this. Think of it like a layered cake.

The id, driven by pleasure and instinct, is who we are when we're completely alone. Our raw thoughts, urges, and feelings are developed at birth. The superego comes in around age five, formed through interactions with others. It's that voice pushing us toward ideals and perfection, how we behave or who we try to be when with our friends or in public social settings. Then

we've got the ego, developed by age three, which balances those two forces with reality. This is the version of ourselves we show at work or school, calculated, in control, playing by the rules. If we imagine the ego as the base layer or foundation of the cake, the superego sits in the middle, and the id is on top, driving motivation and desire.

But now there's a new layer that's been added to this cake: the digital self. It's like icing—sticky, glossy, everywhere. Signing up for a social media account seems like no big deal, but it's actually giving shape to this extra layer that's seeping into everything underneath. And for youth, whose identities are still being formed, this digital self can seriously alter the way the rest of the self operates, or the cake tastes.

The id and superego get hit hardest. The id becomes hooked on instant gratification, from likes, views, validation. The superego, instead of striving for meaningful ideals, starts chasing filtered perfection and digital approval. And the ego, the part of the self that's meant to balance it all, becomes overwhelmed. It's trying to do its job, but now it's working with a self that has been reshaped by algorithms, influencer culture, and a need for constant online performance. The ego doesn't interact with the digital self directly, it gets smothered by it. And because the id and superego have changed, the ego struggles to keep up, and its control starts to slip. While the digital self might look like just icing, it's not sitting neatly on top. It's digitally sinking in, reshaping the whole structure, and changing how we think, behave, and see ourselves. Connecting all of the study outcomes and trends, a link appears connecting to features of personality disorders. Collins and Grant's (2025) study sheds valuable light on the emerging relationship between social media addiction and borderline personality disorder, offering real-world evidence that aligns with existing theory on emotional dysregulation, unstable identity, and fear of abandonment, the core features of BPD. Their survey-based research found that individuals meeting criteria for social media addiction also reported significantly higher levels of emotional instability, impulsivity, and interpersonal hypersensitivity. These are hallmark traits of BPD, suggesting that the very structure of social media may be reinforcing or even exacerbating these traits in vulnerable users.

What makes this study especially relevant is its focus on the bidirectional nature of the relationship. It's not just

that people with BPD are drawn to social media—social media itself may be contributing to the intensification of borderline features. For example, the cycle of rapid posting, feedback-seeking, emotional reaction to likes and comments, and volatile interpersonal online exchanges mirrors the same instability seen in offline BPD relationships. The craving for validation, paired with the fear of rejection or “being left on read”, plays out in real-time, often with no boundaries, and can lead to impulsive or even self-destructive online behavior. Pair this into the change of structure with the self and it’s understandable how these features may emerge. Certain platforms act as environments that are not just triggering for people with existing vulnerabilities but potentially shaping these vulnerabilities into diagnosable traits. In this way, social media becomes more than a context for symptom expression but may actually become a developmental factor in the disorder itself.

The Offline World Perception In The Age Of Influencer Culture

One of the most pervasive yet underappreciated consequences of influencer culture is the reconfiguration of how individuals—particularly youth—perceive the offline world. Beyond the curated performance of self that both influencers and everyday users engage in, and beyond the well-documented effects of upward social comparison, lies a deeper psychological shift: the internalization of an idealized life script. Through repeated exposure to content portraying extreme wealth, aesthetic perfection, and accelerated success, users begin to adopt unrealistic benchmarks and perceptions of what life is “supposed” to look like.

This digital mirage shapes not only the aspirations of young people but also the timeline on which these aspirations are expected to be achieved. Where previous generations may have aimed to acquire a stable career, homeownership, or financial security by midlife, contemporary youth increasingly feel pressured to achieve these milestones, often simultaneously, much sooner than realistically possible. The dream job and dream home are no longer long-term goals; they are now positioned as preconditions for adulthood. For many adolescents and young adults, especially those still developing their identities, this distortion of timelines can lead to a premature sense of failure, stagnation, and hopelessness. Imagine a toddler presented with a large plate of food. No matter how hungry the child is, they won’t eat. There’s too much food at once and their brain says no. This same effect appears to be happening to young adults, a home, car, job, vacations, clothing for each lifestyle event all must happen NOW! The underlying sense of entitlement in this generation just exacerbates the impossible demands of being a lifestyle instead of the lifestyle being the person.

Importantly, these pressures do not operate in isolation. They are compounded by familial and societal contradictions. While some parents may verbally assure their children that success takes time, they may simultaneously express admiration for those who have achieved rapid wealth or fame often reinforcing the very value system that social media promotes. The result is a confusing Catch-22, in which young people are told not to rush, yet constantly reminded, implicitly and explicitly, that being young and rich is the new norm.

What emerges from this dynamic is not merely envy or discontent, but a corrosive belief system. The experience of upward comparison transforms into a perceived deficit in self-worth: “I am not successful, therefore I am behind. I am behind, therefore I am failing”. Influencers are rarely viewed neutrally; they are assumed to be wealthy, exceptional, and effortlessly ahead regardless of the reality behind the screen. This perceived status gap breeds a sense of inadequacy that is less about material possessions and more about ontological despair, feeling that one’s life is fundamentally lacking in value or meaning. A human not being.

As a result, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and future orientation begin to erode. Young people may abandon career paths that require long-term commitment, rejecting opportunities that do not offer immediate gratification or visible reward or aren’t the “right” job. Employment becomes disillusioning when the financial returns are dwarfed by the performative affluence seen online. Even basic steps toward adulthood such as renting an apartment or enrolling in post-secondary education can feel illegitimate or insufficient when measured against influencer lifestyles. There is a growing perception that unless one is purchasing a home or driving an expensive car by their early twenties, they are not truly succeeding. As a result, many young people opt to delay or forgo traditional developmental milestones, staying in their parental homes not simply due to economic necessity, but because the pathways available to them no longer feel socially or personally valid within the context of what they observe online.

Meanwhile, the perception that the influencer life is inherently better, even when intellectually discredited, continues to dominate emotional processing. Dunning Kruger Effect (Kruger, J. & Dunning, D., 1999) suggests that influencers know actually very little about the information they are sharing; how to “make lots of money fast”, the act of edited photos, and a portrayal of wealth and happiness when behind the scenes this is rarely the case, suggests that factual knowledge about the curated nature of social media does little to buffer its psychological impact; the emotional weight of comparison overrides rational insight.

This dissonance feeds into broader psychological vulnerabilities. As negative belief systems deepen and maladaptive schemas take hold, young users may become more susceptible to features associated with Cluster B personality disorders, particularly narcissistic and borderline traits. The continuous exposure to idealized lives fosters emotional dysregulation, impulsivity, unstable self-image, and a chronic sense of emptiness, all features characteristic of these disorders. Simultaneously, platforms such as Snapchat with their emphasis on immediacy, quantification of interaction (e.g., Snapstreaks), and hyper-connectedness further entrench addictive behaviors and dependency on digital validation.

Ultimately, the digital world begins to over-run the offline world. The illusion of how life is supposed to look colonizes reality, replacing it with unattainable expectations. For many young people still living at home or navigating early adulthood, this gap between online perception and offline experience becomes a breeding ground for despair. Relationships are strained, goals dissolve into abstractions, and employment feels futile, not because the offline world lacks value, but because its value has been reframed as inadequate in the shadow of influencer culture.

Personality.exe: Contribution From The Digital Self To The Real Life Self

In the current social media landscape, personality is no longer something that passively develops; it is increasingly something that is performed, curated, and reinforced through digital platforms. The digital self—what a person presents online—has become not just a version of who they are, but often, the primary version. This digital self is treated as a product, a brand, and in many ways, a public-facing identity that users not only manage, but begin to live by. Over time, this performance ceases to be optional. It becomes integrated into how a person thinks, behaves, and views themselves in the real world.

What begins as a conscious choice to post a specific photo, share a certain opinion, use a particular filter or caption will quickly morph into habit, and then identity. The constant validation cycle built into apps such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat reinforces this process. Likes, comments, views, and reactions all serve as feedback signals, silently instructing users on what parts of themselves are most “accepted” and what should be “edited” or removed altogether. In this way, social media doesn’t just reflect personality traits, it actively shapes and rewires them. The line between authentic self and digital self becomes so blurred that many users don’t even realize the shift is happening until they are seeking help or experiencing suicidal ideation.

For young people still in the process of figuring out who they are, the consequences are especially heavy. Instead of experimenting with different interests, values, or styles naturally and without pressure, many begin to anchor their identities in what performs well online. The image becomes the identity. Over time, users become so emotionally and psychologically attached to their online persona that they feel the need to live up to it offline. They begin to *perform* confidence, aesthetic perfection, success, and even happiness in their day-to-day lives, because that’s what their digital self-promises to the world, or perceives how the world sees them, the *concept of themselves*. When the internal world doesn’t match the external performance, it creates dissonance, insecurity, and a fractured sense of self.

The digital self becomes not just a version of the person, or a performance, but an entirely separate identity that carries real psychological weight, it is the “icing on the cake”, the idea of the fourth person introduced earlier. It is no longer just the private self, the public self, or the imagined self, it is the fourth self, made entirely of pixels, projections, and platform feedback. And yet, this fourth person begins to hold more power than the others. It becomes the benchmark, the expectation, the identity that must be protected, maintained, and eventually embodied. This is no longer a self that exists solely online; it infiltrates and begins to reprogram the user’s real-world personality; a personality that is not supposed to be perfect, nor perceive the world as perfect. This further expresses the maladaptive schemas by Young, as these schemas can develop from harsh judgement and futile belief systems about oneself and the world around them. It is the layer of perception; the icing which

affects all layers; hoping people see in themselves what they want to be seen as, based on what they believe others want to see.

This constant divide between the curated digital self and the messy, slower, more human offline self leads to a deep emotional exhaustion. Young people often feel that they cannot live up to the lifestyle and associated expectations they've built for themselves online. They may begin to suppress traits that don't fit the image, vulnerability, uncertainty, even long-term goals that require patience and invisibility. Personality becomes a function of what is "seen" rather than what is felt. Even qualities that are traditionally personal such as humour, kindness, intelligence, or sensitivity are redefined by their online performance value.

For some, this distortion evolves into a complete disconnection from the offline self. The digital version becomes the only self that feels acceptable, and everything else begins to feel insufficient or flawed. In this way, the digital self acts almost like a controlling software, a literal algorithm-following app, running in the background, influencing decision-making, relationships, self-talk, and behavior. And while users may believe they are choosing who they become, they are often following a script written by the performance metrics engineered into the platforms designed to reward engagement, not authenticity.

This disconnect has serious implications for the development of self-worth. When identity is built through an interface that rewards perfection and constant availability, users begin to internalize the idea that their real self is never enough. The offline world feels dull, slow, and unsatisfying in comparison. As a result, personal growth, goal-setting, and emotional resilience begin to suffer. Many young people find it increasingly difficult to tolerate delayed gratification or invisible effort, which are essential to long-term development. There is no patience for progress when the digital self has already conceived, planned and portrayed the end result.

In many ways, the digital self becomes a trap. It not only dictates how young people should look, speak, and live, it redefines what it means to be someone. The traits rewarded online become the traits people aspire to in the real world, even when they contradict real emotional needs or long-term values. This leads to a growing detachment from inner experiences, and in some cases, a complete collapse of identity. It's not just a matter of people trying to live up to others online, it's that they are now trying to live up to the concept of themselves, as they have been digitally imagined.

Users are not just affected in how they see themselves, but in how they become themselves, how personality becomes distorted. The digital self, when internalized over time, begins to replicate the patterns seen in certain personality disorders, particularly those within Cluster B. Features associated with borderline personality disorder, such as unstable self-image, emotional volatility, impulsive behaviors, and intense fear of abandonment, can be reinforced through platforms that reward attention-seeking, rapid emotional expression, and public displays of distress or intimacy. At the same time, traits tied to histrionic personality disorder, including a need for approval, dramatization of emotion, superficial charm, and an overwhelming desire to be seen and admired, are not only encouraged by the structure of social media, they are often required.

The problem is that these features are not being shaped in a therapeutic setting, or even consciously recognized. They are being reinforced algorithmically, subconsciously, and socially as they merge and modify how users regulate emotion, define self-worth, and form relationships. The result is not a stable or cohesive personality, but one deeply performative, reactive, and fragmented. The digital self becomes a blueprint for how to survive socially, carving deep grooves into the psyche that resemble disordered ways of relating to the world. In this space, emotional regulation becomes difficult, interpersonal relationships become high-stakes and volatile, and the boundary between expression and manipulation collapses. Eventually, the digital self no longer feels like an act but rather like the only version of the self that holds value. And in that illusion, the true self is lost to the concept of a self.

The Medium Becomes The Self: A Capstone To Recovery

In light of the psychological and developmental harms linked to social media use—particularly its association with Cluster B personality traits among youth—it is essential to shift from analysis, to meaningful pathways for prevention, intervention, and recovery. The rise of narcissistic, histrionic, and borderline traits in adolescence

cannot be separated from the conditions in which identity formation is taking place. As this review has illustrated, social media platforms shape and reward maladaptive schemas related to emotional deprivation, defectiveness, and unrelenting standards. These schema activations are not only reinforced through digital interaction but increasingly normalized through influencer culture, comparison loops, and the performative self; the fourth person. Addressing these risks requires a coordinated response at multiple levels: therapeutic, institutional, familial, and cultural.

Therapeutically, there is growing evidence that schema therapy and dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) are particularly effective in treating young people exhibiting subclinical traits of borderline and other Cluster B disorders. These modalities target the underlying cognitive-affective schemas and maladaptive coping strategies that social media tends to amplify. For instance, a youth prone to abandonment fears or emotional instability may find these fears continually triggered in digital spaces characterized by intermittent reinforcement, fear of missing out which feels like social exclusion, and a lack of feeling “good enough” for the world they have been presented with online. Therapy can offer a reparative process—one that not only addresses behavior, but fosters the internal emotional literacy and relational stability that are increasingly absent in online environments. It is crucial to recognize the importance of early intervention, particularly for adolescents who are immersed in environments of constant comparison and external validation.

Alongside therapy, emerging cultural and educational interventions aim to reduce digital harm at the source. A number of school systems globally are implementing smartphone bans during instructional time, with research suggesting improved attention, academic performance, and peer engagement as outcomes. These policy changes are not punitive, but protective—they reflect a recognition that digital environments have saturated attention and disrupted natural developmental tasks. Likewise, the growth of digital minimalism movements, including the popularity of “dumb phones” and social media fasts, reflects a cultural hunger for boundaries, focus, and cognitive rest. These grassroots shifts suggest that young people are not oblivious to the harms they experience—they are, in many cases, seeking alternatives.

What is more concerning, however, is the overwhelming inaction from institutions and parents in response to known corporate harm. Snapchat executives, for example, have been fully aware of the psychological damage their platform causes, particularly through addictive features like Snapstreaks and the facilitation of cyberbullying through anonymous apps. Internal company emails and research presentations have documented that these features are “pressure filled,” create “intolerable” levels of stress for minors, and make it “impossible to unplug”—yet the platform has chosen retention and profit over responsibility. Despite these revelations, most parents continue to allow unmonitored access to the app, failing to intervene in meaningful ways. This apathy cannot be justified by ignorance: the information is public, the consequences are visible, and the cost is measurable in the rising rates of anxiety, self-harm, and suicidal ideation. The question is not whether social media is harming youth—it is whether adults are willing to do anything about it. Passive parenting in a digital age enables the very systems that are destabilizing young people’s mental health.

One of the most overlooked yet powerful alternatives is literature. In contrast to the rapid, fragmented consumption of content on social media, literature requires presence, imagination, and symbolic engagement. It offers space to reflect, to process, and to explore identity through narrative coherence rather than curated personas. Literature enables the reader to witness internal conflict and transformation in others, which in turn strengthens the capacity for internal integration and empathy. It is a form of psychological recalibration—an antidote to the emotional dysregulation, disembodiment, and attention fragility fostered by algorithmic media. In therapeutic terms, it functions as a medium that invites re-narration, symbolic self-exploration, and delayed gratification, all of which are essential for emotional development and resilience.

However, none of these interventions can succeed in isolation from the family environment. Parents, caregivers, and educators must be equipped to understand the digital landscapes in which their children are growing up. The burden cannot fall solely on young people to regulate their digital use or understand the consequences of their online behaviors. It is crucial for adults—particularly Gen X and Millennial parents—to understand how identity development has fundamentally changed under digital capitalism. Simon Sinek argues that parents and older generations must work with the younger generations to better understand their lack of joy and motivation, being convinced that they are not making an impact (Sinek, 2016). Generational misunderstanding exacerbates the issue: adults often dismiss digital distress as trivial, failing to recognize how deeply embedded

these platforms are in young people's self-concept and relational world. When parents fail to engage with these new cultural norms, they risk reinforcing disconnection and failing to model alternative behaviors. Parental awareness must go beyond content monitoring; it must extend to a deeper psychological literacy. Caregivers must learn to recognize the signs of maladaptive comparison, identity diffusion, and validation-seeking behaviors as expressions of emotional need, not immaturity. Encouraging offline creativity, relational depth, and safe emotional expression are not simply lifestyle choices—they are protective factors against personality pathology. When parents promote environments that value process over performance and inner life over image, they foster the kind of relational security that can buffer against the dysregulating effects of social media.

Understanding comparison culture as a structural force—not a matter of individual weakness—is also essential. Low self-esteem is not just a symptom of social media use; it is embedded in the very mechanics of engagement. The platforms function by monetizing insecurity and sustaining attention through dissatisfaction. Helping young people name and understand this system is a form of psychological empowerment. It validates their experience and opens the door to therapeutic dialogue. Ultimately, interventions must address not only what social media users do but why they are doing it—and what unmet needs lie beneath their online personas.

Conclusion

The findings explored in this review reveal a deeply concerning shift in identity development shaped by the rise of social media. The fragmentation of the self, accelerated by platforms that reward performance and validation, is not only altering behavior but encouraging the emergence of Cluster B personality features in youth. This fragmentation is captured in the conceptual model of the self as layered—id, ego, and superego—now disenfranchised by a fourth presence: the digital self, or “icing on the cake.” This sticky, image-based identity layer interrupts development and compromises the ego's regulatory control, fueling emotional dysregulation, impulsivity, and comparison-based schema activation. Psychological frameworks such as Erikson's developmental stages to Young's schema theory illustrate how prolonged exposure to social media creates a distorted environment for personality formation. Yet, where the digital medium fractures, literature offers integration.

As Marshall McLuhan foresaw, the medium is not neutral. Social media, as a medium, encourages disembodiment and reactivity; literature, by contrast, cultivates presence, empathy, and symbolic self-understanding. Recovery lies not in simply logging off, but in re-engaging the tools that foster depth, imagination, and internal coherence. In understanding the mechanisms at play: both cognitive and cultural, interventions can be crafted to not only mitigate harm, but to restore the possibility of authentic selfhood in a digital age. The recovery of identity, and the prevention of personality disorder features, requires a rebalancing of environment, media, and meaning. Solutions must combine clinical intervention, cultural literacy, and relational attunement. If the digital medium has helped shape the self into a fragmented, performative entity, then the path to integration lies in practices that restore wholeness: narrative, reflection, connection, and creativity. These are not luxuries—they are psychological necessities. And they offer a foundation upon which young people can begin to form a self that is not only adaptive, but authentic.

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