OnLife Teenagers: Social Development and Cyber-development Today

Gianluca Mariano Colella, Maura Perrone, Giovanna Maciariello

Department of Cultures, Education and Society, University of Calabria

DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.910000195

Received: 20 October 2025; Accepted: 27 October 2025; Published: 07 November 2025

ABSTRACT

Today, with the spread of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), adolescents experience onlife lifestyles, where the boundaries between online and offline experiences are increasingly blurred. Social media platforms serve as a privileged spaces for identity exploration and relationship-building, offering opportunities for socialization, learning, and self-fulfillment. However, intensive use of these platforms exposes adolescents to significant risks, including cyberbullying, social isolation, and body image insecurities. On the one hand, adolescents may feel fragile and exposed to the judgment of others; on the other, they may adopt bold or performative behaviors to gain approval and social status. A central theme in contemporary discourse is the "multiple bodies syndrome", the conflict between a teenager's real-life identity and their curated digital personas, where the real self and ideal self-clash in online self-presentation through curated avatars and digital personas. Perceived attractiveness plays a crucial role in this conflict: social media platforms encourage the creation of highly curated and idealized images, often far from reality, fueling a cycle of comparison and dissatisfaction. This phenomenon can negatively affect self-perception, widening the gap between digital and physical identity. This paper aims to explore the psychological implications of these dynamics, examining their impact on adolescents' mental health and social relationships through a preliminary review of the literature. Promoting a mindful use of social media and developing socio-emotional literacy strategies are essential to addressing the challenges faced by an increasingly interconnected generation.

Keywords: Adolescence, Onlife, ICT use, multiple bodies syndrome, self-perception, body image

ADOLESCENCE TODAY

In today's world, adolescence is shaped by digital interactions, social media platforms, and online communities, blurring the boundaries between real and virtual identities, defined as the data, features and information that people share through their online profiles, as well as the online social worlds they build (Allison et al., 2025; Yau & Reich, 2018). Adolescents navigate a landscape where self-exploration, social interactions, and emotional development unfold both offline and online. Social media platforms serve as spaces for self-expression, validation, and identity construction, yet they also expose young individuals to new challenges, such as cyberbullying, social comparison, and digital stress, affecting both their self-esteem and self-efficacy (Chen et al., 2020; Naslund et al., 2020). Connectivity fosters opportunities for learning and engagement and risks related to mental health and well-being (Bashir & Bhat, 2017). Nowadays, adolescents strive for a balance between self-presentation, digital literacy, and emotional regulation.

The current study proposes an overview of today's adolescents, identified as young people struggling to grow both physically and psychologically (Ahn & Reeve, 2021), through a preliminary review of the literature. To reach a balance between technologies and humanities, the study interrogates ICTs' opportunities and risks in OnLife adolescence (Floridi, 2015). In Italy, for example, Carmela Pace, UNICEF Italy President, recently spoke of adolescence as a social emergency, manifesting through aggressive behaviors, delinquency, school drop-out and social retreat; the crises that adolescents face today are characterized by self-determination, emotional emancipation, and the need to reach a stable adulthood[1]. This paper aims to answer: 1) How does the presentation

[1] https://www.unicef.it/media/la-presidente-carmela-pace-in-commissione-parlamentare-su-femminicidio/

of curated avatars affect adolescents' self-perception? 2) What is the impact of perceived attractiveness on mental health?

In the past decades, Western society showed an increasing attention towards psychological well-being of individuals and communities (Keyes, 2007). Particularly, the global COVID-19 pandemic further evidenced the need for psychological support and led to progressive attention towards mental health (Gualano et al., 2021). According to recent clinical studies, more then a half of Italian citizens declare that they need psychological support to face daily challenges (Barari et al., 2020), with a steady increase of female adolescents asking for psychotherapy consultations between 2019 and 2023 (Petruzzelli et al., 2024). Nowadays, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) influence adolescents' cultural representations: they live, feel, think, experience their body-self and develop their body image and communicate through Internet and social media. In conclusion, the study offers open questions on the role of digital technologies in the future generations, hoping to provide suggestions to build supportive relationships and safer online environments for adolescents.

Onlife social opportunities

Adolescents today might be vulnerable and bold at the same time, (Pietropolli Charmet, 2019), and face a struggle between daily appearance and authenticity, challenging between uncertainty and the need to self-express (Livingstone, 2008). The World Health Organization (WHO) has been promoting annual initiatives on world mental health day, October 10th[2], and during 2023 the universal right to mental health has been declared. In a society characterized by inequalities, discrimination, violence and disrespect, scholars are calling upon the need for concrete actions (George et al., 2019; Mezzina et al., 2022). Violence and aggressivity represent biological and philosophical concepts closely related to human nature, thus studies on developmental and evolutionary trajectories always contributed to shedding light on their risk and protective factors, both offline and online (Beckmann et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2021).

Through digital devices, adolescents engage in positive and negative behaviors and habits, encountering opportunities and risks previously beyond reach (Lahti et al., 2024). Among the risks associated with problematic Internet use and problematic social media use (PSMU) in adolescence is cyberbullying, a pervasive social problem progressively studied as a digital evolution of traditional bullying (Giumetti et al., 2022). Cyberbullying perpetration is defined «as the use of digital technologies to harass, intimidate, or embarrass others» (Smith et al., 2012). Global systematic reviews indicate that among children and adolescents, cybervictimization currently rates range from approximately 14% to 57.5%, while cyberbullying perpetration rates lie between about 6% and 46%—figures that highlight both the widespread nature of the problem and its variability worldwide (Zhu et al., 2021). Additionally, the pressure to cure an idealized online identity can contribute to low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression (Keles et al., 2020). The educational challenge today lies in maximizing the benefits of social media while implementing strategies to reduce its negative psychological and social impacts, promoting digital literacy, critical thinking, and emotional resilience among users (Spies Shapiro & Margolin, 2014).

Freud's concept of civilization and its discontent (1929) suggests that societal progress comes at the cost of individual psychological tension, as social norms and restrictions suppress instinctual desires. In today's digital age, adolescence reflects this struggle in new ways. Social media, online validation, and digital self-presentation impose external pressures, shaping adolescents' self-perception and behavior. The need for social approval and belonging clashes with the constraints of curated online identities, often leading to stress, anxiety, and self-doubt. For example, OECD data show that about one in six adolescents aged 11-15 worldwide report being victims of cyberbullying, while EU survey findings indicate that over 90% of 15-year-olds use social media daily, with around 37% spending more than three hours a day on these platforms—patterns seen in Italy as well[3]. Just as Freud described the tension between individual impulses and societal expectations, current adolescents navigate a world where authentic self-expression is mediated by digital norms and virtual peer surveillance, amplifying both opportunities for identity exploration and new forms of psychological distress. In 1937, Melanie Klein claimed: "A positive relationship with us is a condition to love, tolerate and being wise to others [...especially towards those] people that meant a lot to us in the past, and who became part of our minds and spirits. If we are

[2] World Mental Health Day 2023
[3] How's life for children in the digital age?

capable, in the deep of our Id, to erase resentments feelings towards our parents, then we can be at peace with ourselves and we can love and be loved in the true meaning of this statement".

The distress and violence in human nature have been subjects of reflection for many psychoanalysts. René Kaës, in Le Mal-être (2012), explores the concept of collective trauma and the psychic inheritance of metapsychic and metasocial guarantors, emphasizing how familial and social contexts transmit suffering across generations. This process destabilizes the cultural foundations that support individual and collective psychic life. Acts of violence within families—such as patricide or fratricide—not only trace back to the Oedipal conflict but also highlight the struggle to process intergenerational trauma, often left unspoken or unresolved.

Psychoanalysis confronts the painful and hidden dimensions of the human psyche, unlike other psychological disciplines that primarily focus on conscious experiences. It demands constant mourning of definitions, recognizing that conscious awareness represents only a small fraction of human psychic life. In the digital era, these reflections are crucial in understanding adolescents and their relationship with digital tools. Social media and online interactions mediate the transmission of intergenerational trauma, shaping identity construction and emotional processing. The unspoken suffering of past generations may manifest in cyber-aggression, self-destructive online behaviors, or identity conflicts exacerbated by the pressure to curate a digital self. Psychoanalytic, rather than serving as spaces for authentic self-expression, often reproduce unresolved psychological legacies, making psychoanalytic insights essential in addressing contemporary adolescent distress in hyperconnected environments.

While much attention has been given to the risks of online self-presentation, digital spaces can also serve as meaningful arenas for self-exploration and community building. For many adolescents, managing multiple online personas allows them to experiment with different facets of their identity in a flexible and creative way. A recent survey of 1,038 adolescents aged 15-17 found that about 45% reported using social media primarily to connect with others, while 20% described it as a place for positive self-expression and identity formation, showing that youth harness these platforms for more than just passive consumption (Alluhidan et al., 2024). This process can foster autonomy, self-efficacy, and a sense of belonging, particularly when online interactions provide validation and support that may be lacking in offline contexts. When guided by emotional awareness and digital literacy, such explorations can strengthen rather than fragment the self, transforming online identity into a constructive extension of adolescent development.

Multiple bodies syndrome

Adolescents increasingly curate online identities, not only reflecting a more aesthetically pleasing version of themselves but also portraying a psychologically and socially superior self. This phenomenon, deeply embedded in their digital socialization, has prompted a growing body of research on what has been termed the "multiple bodies syndrome"—the conflict between a teenager's real-life identity and their curated digital personas. This framework explores the dissonance between the real self and the idealized self as constructed and projected in digital environments (Digennaro, 2024; Meeus et al., 2023). Social media platforms, through filters, avatars, and performative interaction rituals, encourage young users to continuously refine their digital personas. These idealized versions are not merely cosmetic enhancements; they embody aspirational traits, confidence, sociability, success, aligning with current online norms and metrics of validation, such as likes, shares, and followers.

This cultural transformation, fueled by the pervasive influence of social media and digital technologies, imposes unprecedented pressures on preadolescents and adolescents to conform to hyper-curated standards of beauty, success, and popularity. These ideals amplify narcissistic tendencies, reinforce performance-based identities, and undermine opportunities for authentic self-exploration and expression. Adolescents are increasingly caught in a feedback loop where social validation depends on external metrics—likes, shares, followers—rather than internal values or meaningful relationships. The psychological cost is high: chronic comparison, fear of missing out, body dissatisfaction, and emotional dysregulation are on the rise, while self-esteem, empathy, and deep connections erode. For example, a recent global study of over 21,000 adolescents aged 10-17 found that 55% reported being dissatisfied with their bodies — rates that increase with greater social media use — and a

systematic review showed that adolescent weight dissatisfaction is found in 18%–56.6% of youth depending on sex and country[4].

Thus, the challenge is not only psychological, but also pedagogical and ethical. How can we prepare younger generations to inhabit digital environments critically and autonomously, rather than passively conforming to the image-based systems of recognition that dominate them? Addressing this question means moving beyond narrow conceptions of digital literacy focused on technical skills. It demands a profound reexamination of the values, relational practices, and modes of self-understanding transmitted through educational systems, families, media, and social institutions. In this context, Freud's provocative assertion that education, like governance and psychoanalysis, is an "impossible profession" (Freud, 1937) acquires renewed urgency. The impossibility lies in the inherently unpredictable and unfinished nature of human development — especially in a world where traditional cultural anchors have been destabilized and the collective imaginaries that once structured identity have become fragmented or obsolete. The educational task today is caught between the disintegration of shared meaning and the growing complexity of social and technological systems shaping subjectivity.

The multiple bodies syndrome can be interpreted through the lens of self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987). According to this model, tensions arise when individuals perceive a gap between their actual and ideal selves, leading to emotional discomfort such as shame or anxiety. In digital environments, avatars and curated online personas often embody these ideal selves, projecting traits, appearances, and social success that adolescents aspire to. This virtual embodiment can temporarily bridge self-discrepancies, offering a sense of control and validation; however, it may also deepen the psychological divide when the online self becomes unattainable offline. Thus, avatars serve as tools of identity experimentation and mirrors reflecting the emotional consequences of striving toward idealized digital selves. Under these conditions, proposing a universal, standardized model of education appears not only inadequate but dangerously reductive. Instead, we must advance toward a new educational paradigm that is adaptable, critical, and participatory—capable of engaging with plural identities and life experiences. Such an approach must center socio-emotional learning, cultivate ethical sensitivity, and foster critical thinking, especially around media representations, power dynamics, and the commodification of identity. By doing so, we can support young people in developing resilient, reflective selves capable of navigating the digital age with agency, responsibility, and care for others.

Moreover, today's adolescents engage with the digital world not merely as passive consumers but as active agents who often possess superior technological fluency compared to their adult counterparts. This proficiency, as Wang et al. (2022) observe, contributes to a reversal of traditional intergenerational roles, challenging long-standing power dynamics in family and educational settings. Such a shift demands a recalibration of adult authority and pedagogical approaches, favoring dialogic and co-constructive models of learning that honor the digital capital of younger generations while addressing the psychological and relational complexities of growing up in a hyperconnected world.

Conclusions on digital well-being

Whether we call it Media Education, Media Literacy, or Socio-Emotional Education, both neuroscience and psychology confirm that the relational nature of the brain and synapses (Gallese & Morelli, 2024) is inevitably pushing us toward a rejection of forced virtuality. Hannah Arendt, in The Life of the Mind (1978), explored the link between thought, responsibility, and action. According to Arendt, when the ability for critical thinking fades, individuals become vulnerable to the forces of evil, which can manifest extreme violence, such as that committed by certain adolescents. This "void of thought" opens the way to what Arendt defines as the banality of evil (1963), where the absence of reflection enables atrocious acts to occur without a true understanding of their moral consequences—just as in the case of Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi officer at the center of her report on the Jerusalem trial.

Extreme violence, in this sense, can be seen not just as an individual failure, but as a collective one—a failure of society in addressing trauma and existential boredom, in creating psychological and relational containment structures, and in transmitting values that integrate rather than suppress aggression, preventing its eventual

[4] Study: negative body image among teens is a global issue

explosion. This tragedy forces us to reflect on the fragility of psychological balance and on the fundamental need for society, families, and individuals to seriously and consciously address the deep roots of psychological distress, rather than ignoring the warning signs that can lead to extreme and devastating consequences.

Anna Ancona, President of the Order of Psychologists of Emilia-Romagna, clearly states: "job insecurity does not only destabilize economic conditions, but also deeply affects psychological well-being. Young people remain dependent on their families, unable to build an autonomous life, trapped in a state of 'suspended adolescence.' Many live in conditions close to poverty, with frustration and a loss of social identity; even when they have jobs, they are often underpaid".

Rebuilding cultural and psychological support structures through technological humanism offering new perspectives to contemporary society is not just an academic necessity, but a concrete and urgent one. Whether it is integrating the virtual with the real or reconciling artificial identities with natural ones, it is evident that recovering an educational approach based on Heidegger's existentialism—centered on Dasein and its life project as being-towards-death (Cambi, 2023)—emerges as the only viable response to the crises of modern society. Also, psychological settings and psychotherapy might represent key transformational hybrid environments to promote digital and real identity integration in adolescents, fostering their body self-awareness, their social development, as well as their growth (Siegel, 2013). Nowadays, technology is increasingly overpowering humanity, altering not only our behaviors but the very structure of human subjectivity (Benasayag, 2022). The digital world, once envisioned as a tool to expand human potential, now often risks subsuming it. In particular, the dialectic between the real and the digital body underscores a growing tension between what is human—authentic, embodied, emotionally complex—and what is inhuman—disembodied, performative, algorithmically shaped. This contrast reveals how our reliance on screens can generate experiences of detachment, dissociation, and depersonalization, especially among youth immersed in digital environments during critical stages of identity development.

While the study underscores the risks associated with social media use, it is equally important to acknowledge its potential for positive psychological and social outcomes. Digital platforms can provide adolescents with valuable opportunities for creative self-expression, exploration of identity, and connection with like-minded peers—particularly for those who may feel marginalized or isolated offline. Online communities can foster belonging, validation, and support, allowing young people to share experiences and develop empathy across diverse backgrounds. When used mindfully and supported by adequate digital literacy, social media can thus serve as a space for growth, creativity, and meaningful human connection rather than solely a source of psychological risk. Recent evidence supports this view: a cross-national study involving over 150,000 adolescents found that positive online interactions and creative engagement on social media were associated with higher levels of well-being, social connectedness, and self-esteem across diverse cultural contexts (Orben et al., 2022).

The proliferation of curated digital personas and virtual interactions challenges the integrity of embodied experience and emotional attune. This is not merely a psychological concern but a cultural and philosophical one. The erosion of real-life relational contexts and the replacement of dialogue with reactive interactions creates a vacuum in which violence, apathy, and alienation may flourish. The risk is that young people, exposed to constant digital overstimulation, may lose touch with the reflective capacities necessary for ethical and emotional development. In this context, human creativity and cultural production become acts of resistance. Freud's notion of Kulturarbeit, or the labor of civilization, describes the human effort to sublimate instinctual drives into cultural forms that promote coexistence and meaning (De Rosa, 2019). A powerful cinematic representation of this idea is found in Charlie Chaplin's The Great Dictator (1940), where the character of Hynkel ultimately delivers a passionate plea for kindness and human dignity: "More than machinery, we need humanity. More than cleverness, we need kindness and gentleness. Without these qualities, life will be violent, and all will be lost." This invocation of shared humanity illustrates the potential of cultural tools to counterbalance technological domination and foster consciousness.

Promoting responsible Internet and social media use requires a multi-level approach that integrates education, family engagement, and platform design. Schools can implement evidence-based media literacy and socio-emotional learning programs—such as SEL (Ramirez et al., 2021) or Media Detective—to help students

critically analyze online content, manage emotions, and navigate peer pressure in digital spaces. Parents should be encouraged to adopt co-use and active mediation strategies, discussing online experiences rather than enforcing restrictive monitoring, which has been shown to foster trust and resilience (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). Educators can incorporate reflective digital storytelling and role-playing exercises to build empathy and self-awareness in online communication. Meanwhile, social media companies could integrate well-being by design principles, such as time-use reminders, algorithmic transparency, and prompts encouraging positive engagement, to reduce compulsive use and enhance digital well-being. These interventions create a culture of mindful connectivity, where technology supports rather than undermines psychological health. Thus, the challenge before us is to reimagine education and development as Kulturarbeit in the digital age: a collective effort to reclaim human values through creative, embodied, and relational practices. This means cultivating environments—both online and offline—where adolescents can explore identity, relationships, and emotions in ways that affirm their dignity and interconnectedness. Only through such integrative approaches can we hope to temper the dehumanizing effects of screen overuse and re-anchor digital life in the service of human flourishing.

LIMITATIONS

This paper presents several limitations that should be acknowledged to contextualize its findings. First, the discussion primarily focuses on adolescents within a specific cultural and developmental context, which may limit the generalizability of insights to other age groups or sociocultural settings. Second, the rapidly evolving nature of digital technologies and social media platforms poses a challenge for maintaining the study's relevance, as new online behaviors and norms emerge faster than academic frameworks can adapt. Third, much of the analysis relies on theoretical approaches rather than longitudinal or cross-sectional empirical data, constraining the ability to establish causal relationships between digital identity formation and psychological outcomes. Additionally, self-reported perceptions of online behavior may be subject to social desirability or recall biases. Future research should incorporate diverse samples, multimethod designs, and cross-cultural comparisons to strengthen the ecological validity and robustness of conclusions.

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