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# Adolescents, Social Media, and the Use of Self-Portraiture in Identity Formation

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ADOLESCENTS, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND THE  
USE OF SELF-PORTRAITURE IN IDENTITY FORMATION

by

Sharee N. Allen

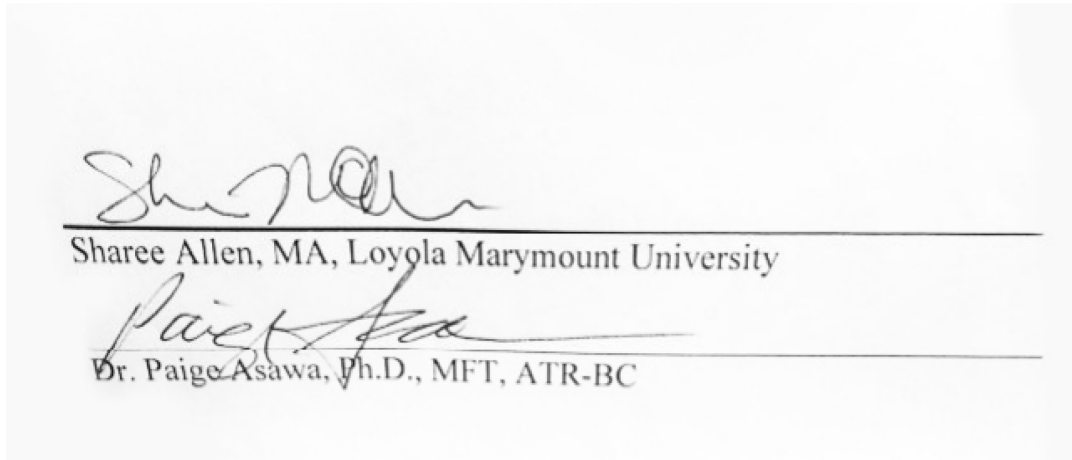
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FACULTY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF  
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LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

In partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree  
MASTER OF ARTS

May 2015

ADOLESCENTS, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND THE USE OF SELF-PORTRAITURE IN  
IDENTITY FORMATION

**Signature Page**



# ADOLESCENTS, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND THE USE OF SELF-PORTRAITURE IN IDENTITY FORMATION

## **Abstract**

Adolescence is a time of maturation, integration of selves, and, in the modern age, digital performance on social media. Conflicts in the identity vs. role confusion stage of Eriksonian development are addressed throughout this research, although the existing literature rarely connects them to online trends. A qualitative survey, sent to high school students, explores the tension between self-doubt and the desire to be seen. Responses indicate that teens who post on social media are attempting to make sense of their formative years via the reactions of this networked world. Certain participants show resistance to the phenomenon of the Selfie, implying that some adolescents may view it as merely a passing fad. Participants' contradictory attitudes concerning social media and the Selfie reflect the four most recurrent themes: duality, insecurity, freedom of expression, and the communication gap between adolescents and adults.

# ADOLESCENTS, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND THE USE OF SELF-PORTRAITURE IN IDENTITY FORMATION

## **Disclaimer**

The information found in the research paper is based on the independent study derived from the Principal Investigator's review of the literature and data collected from the submitted qualitative questionnaire surveys. Loyola Marymount University cannot be held accountable for any of the information provided in this research paper. The names and identities of the participants were not collected in this study to maintain confidentiality.

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## **Dedication**

This research is dedicated to anyone who has struggled, in his or her youth, to move forward despite uncertainty, criticism, and rejection. The Principal Investigator thanks all of the participants for their open, honest responses and the rich information they shared for this study. The project is an attempt to lend a scholarly voice to a generation that is already expressing so much.

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## **Acknowledgments**

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## **Introduction**

### The Study Topic

This research serves to investigate the role of social media in adolescent identity development. Specifically, the Principal Investigator (PI) is interested in the phenomenon of the Selfie within the world of social media. As an art therapist, the PI is also curious about the use self-portraiture in therapeutic practice with the adolescent population.

The research questions originally posed by the PI were the following:

1. What is the connection between an adolescent's ego strength and social media reputation?
2. How do adolescents use Selfies to seek validation during the identity development process?
3. How can therapists use this knowledge in our work within this segment of the population?

### Significance of the Study

Sometimes called Generation Z, adolescents of today are growing up in the internet age, never having known a world without cell phones, personal computers, and social media. The PI is working with individuals and groups from this population in an agency setting, and is finding that with most teens, a tension exists between insecurity and the desire to be seen. When navigating and limiting youth's access to technology, counselors, teachers, and parents must pay special attention to the functional benefits of social media in adolescent development.

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Little has been written about the inclusion of the Selfie in art therapy, but photography and self-portraiture may be the media most widely used by teens today. It is the PI's expectation that this research will serve to illuminate the unique ways in which this age group uses the Selfie and social media in identity development – ways that are drastically different from older generations who may already have intact ego strength. In order for us to encourage the productive use of social networking in the adolescents we serve, it will be necessary to embrace these outlets as a powerful tool. The findings of this study may indicate a relationship between number of followers or likes on an individual's social media profile and that person's ego strength. Of course, it will likely bring up more questions than answers, and in that case, further research will be warranted.

## **II. Background of the Study Topic**

Adolescence is a time of growth and exploration in many areas: educational, physical, emotional, and relational, to name a few (Newman, 2004). As peer acceptance provides vital affirmation of the developing teen's character (O'Keefe and Clarke-Pearson, 2011), these areas of growth are informed by a modern-day adolescents' social media presence. There is a large incongruity between the calculated pace of research on this population and the fleeting patterns of trending topics, social networking sites (SNSs), and apps, making it challenging to keep studies current and relevant (Dolcini, 2014).

There are distinct advantages to the popularity of social media in the lives of adolescents. Some of these benefits include opportunities for networking and community building, a creative outlet for sharing of the arts, expansion of ideas from open forum discussions, and a wider diversity of "friends" outside of those in close physical proximity (O'Keefe and Clarke-Pearson, 2011). Substantial evidence exists supporting the perceived approval from parents and peers as an indicator of an adolescent's global self-esteem (Harter et al, 1997).

On the other hand, sharing one's journey through identity formation online may arouse the negative effects of groupthink, such as malicious comments by anonymous accounts (Belkofer and McNutt, 2011). With anonymity comes a false power, which may exploit the inherent vulnerability of the Selfie-poster. The artist/subject posts in order to engage, to share his/her message with the community and involve them in a global discourse (Nunez, 2013). As therapists working with this population, we must consider each teen's sensitivity and desire to communicate.

### III. Review of the Literature

“In no other stage of the life cycle, then, are the promise of finding oneself and the threat of losing oneself so closely allied.”

- Erik H. Erikson, *Identity Youth and Crisis*

Adolescents are using social media in creative ways all over the world: filming narrative web series for YouTube, creating memes that play with text and image, and writing new hashtags to maximize their exposure. One way to understand the transmission of images among adolescents is relative to brain development during that period (Judge, 2012). Because they are still in the process of developing higher order executive brain functioning (Restak & Grubin, 2001), they may calculate risk-reward differently than adults. They may post more offensive content for shock value, or they may over-identify with celebrities or characters from pop culture.

As prevalent as social media is among teens, little exists in the literature about the parallels between their evolving web presence and their identity formation. This literature review, although not exhaustive, examines social media-related issues that may affect clinical work with the adolescent population. When working with teenage populations, one phenomenon in particular that therapists (especially art therapists) could benefit from studying is referred to as the “Selfie.” This photographic self-portrait can be sent via text message, posted online, or simply kept in one’s own archive. It is a method of including oneself in the universal space and developing a sense of tangible and immediate presence (Kopytin, 2004).

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## **The Adolescent and Social Media**

Prior to the age of 25, key developments in the prefrontal cortex influence a young person's capability to plan, judge, rationalize, make decisions, and balance cognition with impulsivity (Judge, 2012). Adolescents may lack the neurobiological structures to effectively anticipate and self-monitor their own reactions to their surroundings (Belkofer & McNutt, 2011). Due to their limited capacity for self-regulation and vulnerability to peer pressure, young people are at significant risk as they navigate and explore social media (O'Keefe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011).

According to Boyd (2014), adolescents' identity exploration can be seen in such visible choices as what handle or screen name they choose. While some teens choose to use the same handle across all sites or apps, others may feel that they have outgrown their previous identity, or simply find that their favorite nickname is taken already. Regardless of the rationale, the outcome is a collection of online personas that leave ample room for interpretation (Boyd, 2014). Correspondingly, Bruner (1960) illustrated the motivation behind youth's exploration of many potential identities at once. The adolescent years may be viewed as a time test out various options before entering adulthood and committing to a more solid self. Making a series of interconnected choices surrounding personal preference, sexuality, hobbies, vocation, and beliefs can serve as an enlightening process, readying the young person to gradually cultivate one unique identity (Erikson, 1968).

For today's teens, social media profiles turn into a visual diary of development, through which young people may scroll, looking for something that they have yet to learn about themselves. They may judge themselves harshly compared to their peers, or alter

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their behavior so that their digital image will be more acceptable to others. No matter what the youth attempts to project, his or her core human struggle will always be expressed (Nuñez, 2013).

The subject of sexuality is especially charged when dealing with minors. During the pubescent years, sexual curiosity is heightened, and social networking sites (SNSs) are developing into greatly influential platforms for sexual and romantic validation. However, as Doornwaard (2014) discovered, this exploration does not necessarily decrease as adolescents approach maturation. The display of sexually charged posts in their sample of those in their early and middle teens was not more common than that of late adolescents.

Increased exposure to sexual messages online can lead to overestimation of the prevalence of sexual and romantic behavior in this age group. As a result, some behavioral norms in these areas may be reinforced, especially among younger preadolescents (Doornwaard, 2014). Added to this pressure is the continuation of age-old double standards. One study found that girls who sent sexualized images of themselves to boys were described – by both male and female classmates – as “skets” who lacked any self-respect (Ringrose, 2014). The attribution of the same derogatory term to these girls by both sexes is evidence of the problematic mixed messages being sent to teens.

For boys in a hetero-normative social structure, acquiring provocative female Selfies may serve as proof of their prestige and access to girls’ bodies, which establishes new norms in masculine performance (Daniels & Zurbriggen, 2014). Images of girls’ bodies can hold a certain exchange value for boys, almost acting as a form of coolness currency. If one’s SNS profile is viewed as a collection, then the act of posting these

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images contributes to one's popularity because the photos can be accumulated and shown to other boys (Ringrose, 2014).

The internalized message isn't limited to physical desirability, either. Female peers rated adolescent girls and young adult women who post sexualized profile photos as being not only socially unattractive, but also less competent (Daniels & Zurbriggen, 2014). The potential for this criticism is constant: once the images have been sent to another device or posted online, a girl's likeness can be saved and used to shame her repeatedly (Ringrose, 2014).

Some subsets of the young population must navigate sexuality and the development of self in unique ways – particularly those who identify as LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans.) As Pelton-Sweet and Sherry (2008) put it:

Through books, magazines, internet chat rooms, movies, television, sports, music, LGBT adolescents are able to find others with whom they identify and “try on” these various identities. In addition, self-expressive hobbies and interests offer new contexts in which to understand themselves in relation to gender and sexual norms. Finally, these activities provide a chance to find others “like” them and to develop a social network. (p. 171)

Mention of the youth attempt to “fit in” often evokes a negative connotation: when adults address issues surrounding peer pressure, it is easy to forget about the advantages of adolescent social media activity (O'Keefe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). A very broad array of social skills is exercised during the daily navigation of SNSs and apps, and this could be viewed as the modern era's underscoring of an ancient set of teen challenges.



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Although missteps do occur, teenagers lead the way in figuring out how to utilize “a networked world in which collapsed contexts and imagined audiences are par for the course” (Boyd, 2014, p.30). One factor that influences social media interest is exclusivity: web apps are not as novel for today's young people, and with older generations increasingly joining facebook, the appeal of using this outlet to discuss personal information may be declining. (Doornwaard, Suzan M., et al, 2014).

In addition to, or instead of, facebook, teens may use apps and SNSs like instagram, twitter, WhatsApp, Snapchat, kik, Vine, tumblr, and YikYak, to name only a few that the PI is actively aware of. Of course, this list will never be complete, due to the constant ebb and flow of social media trends (Belkofer and McNutt, 2011). One recent development is the built-in transience of posts: some apps, such as Snapchat, are designed so that images are automatically deleted after a few seconds (Dolcini, 2014). Posts on other SNSs are often flagged, censored, or forgotten very quickly. The ephemeral nature of SNSs evokes some discussion about the values of youth culture. Some suspect that new trending topics indicate radical changes in the current generation that dominates the web, but often the overarching patterns remain as the context shifts what is rendered visible and noteworthy (Boyd, 2014).

### **Adult Regulation of Social Media**

The web's contents are not only fleeting; they can also be overwhelming. Erikson's (1968) description of the passivity of movie-watching can be applied to modern-day internet browsing as well: he says that the viewer sits “with his emotions racing, fast and furious motion in an artificially widened visual field interspersed with

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close-ups of violence and sexual possession – all without making the slightest demand on intelligence, imagination, or effort” (p. 244).

As important as it is to examine the nuances of the ways that teens use social media, it is also vital to remember that each of these apps is a business, and those who manage the sites are attune to users’ patterns and preferences as well. There may be subliminal messages intended to target certain audiences, such as advertisements based on one’s cultural demographics, or even one’s web browsing history. These ads “influence not only the buying tendencies of preadolescents and adolescents but also their views of what is normal,” (O’Keefe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011, p.803).

In order to preserve the notion of safety, SNSs are continually updating their privacy options so that youth and parents alike have control over how their personal information is shared to the public. This matter is far from simple, however. Regardless of how they use privacy settings, teens must navigate who has access to their profile on each SNS or app, which of these people actually chooses to view it, and how those who see it will understand it (Boyd, 2014). Frequently, there is a knowledge and proficiency gap between parents and adolescents, which leads to a disparity between the ways these parties view the online world (O’Keefe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011).

One major consideration in the distinct way each person uses social media is perhaps connected to that individual’s relationship with control. Many teens post fictitious identifying information on their personal pages. Falsifying items like their age, location, and names of their relatives may allow them to feel in command of their profiles, especially considering how often they find it ridiculous for SNSs to demand this information (Boyd, 2014).

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Age in particular is an issue that comes up often, as most sites have a minimum age requirement to join. While the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) encourages the site's requirements to be honored, misrepresenting one's age has become common practice by many preadolescents and some of their parents. (O'Keefe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). Some kids and parents believe that doing so will limit their visibility to those people who they don't want to find their profiles. Again, this is a method of controlling the online social environment (Boyd, 2014).

The key component here is that although they may seek to monitor their web presence in an attempt to protect their children, "parents often lack a basic understanding that kids' online lives are an extension of their offline lives," (O'Keefe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011, p.802). A comprehension of how real-world perspective, audience feedback, and ego strength intersect is one of the key challenges that users face in the exploration of social media (Boyd, 2014). Adults working with young people must remember that their regurgitation of web content is not a direct indicator of the degree to which they necessarily agree with the mass media. Rather, it may be viewed as one piece in the larger puzzle of the youth's fluid development of character (Belkofer & McNutt, 2011).

In the adolescent developmental stage, it is not necessarily that pressing questions surrounding the norms of intimacy and identity make technology hazardous for teens. Instead, the issue is the prevalence of electronic devices in their lives, which could usurp behavioral choices before a young person has psychologically matured (Judge, 2012).

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## **Self-Portraiture and Photography**

An adolescent who views his/her own likeness – either online, on a camera’s LCD screen, or through a mirror – processes the self-image in very specific ways. The teen may see the image as appealing and identify with it, as unattractive and reject it, or as inaccurate and strive to *become* the image (Ferrari, 2002). Therefore, facing the camera and pressing the shutter may take one instantly to that very first process of defining the self, and in preadolescents, this is even more intense in their being comparatively new to the world (Nuñez, 2013).

Unlike longstanding associations in which people have established rapport in person, SNS profiles necessitate that people consciously create the snapshot version of their digital presence. This process has been described as people “typing themselves into identity” (Boyd, 2014, p.37). The result is a portrait of one’s creative self, that is, an idealized or supreme self, able to create, predict, and relate to others (Nuñez, 2013).

The ability to envisage better versions of themselves is strengthened by the visual element of social media: people may be freed of the limitations of their physical or corporeal identities (Boyd, 2014). Often, the discovery of such unknown potential results in the immediate empowerment of the individual. This entire process is cathartic and may continue to resonate in time: the subject/artist posts a picture, then becomes the viewer, taking new meaning from the photographic history on his/her social media page, depending on the current context (Nuñez, 2013).

Through the medium of photography, one can often ‘pose’ objects or people, and in doing this, one may establish control, possibly even creating a new reality (Kopytin, 2004). The artist controls the camera by choosing what, when, and how the image is

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captured (Newman, 2004). Along with the prospect of control, however, there is also the danger of losing this control. As Newman (2004) indicates, “the mechanics of the camera determine the final image. There is an element of surprise when looking at the final image as it appears to be different than the perceived idea of the image trying to be captured” (p. 17).

Regardless of the camera used, the subject in a portrait is always performing to a certain extent. What we present to the lens is guided by the way we prefer to be viewed by others. A dialogue exists between the artist’s intentions, the body of the subject, and the likely community of spectators (Nuñez, 2013). The interpretation of a photograph is situational, in that it reflects the connections between all of these people, space, and time. Finding subjects and arranging them in specific ways in order to make a photographic picture of them is a way to represent one’s dominance over this complex environment (Kopytin, 2004).

Nuñez (2013) describes the self-portraitist as playing all three of these roles:

“At the same time, author, subject and spectator of himself. As I see it, each of the three roles makes a statement: the subject says ‘Yes, I am – and I’m ok as I am’; the author says ‘I am creating, I am the creator,’ and the spectator says ‘I am looking at myself, I can see myself.’ All these statements imply acceptance to some degree” (p. 99).

In documenting this grapple with self-recognition, self-portraits are an important visual reference that can be both negative and positive, but ultimately cultivate our perceptions of our environments and ourselves (Newman, 2004). When one stands alone in front of the camera, these perceptions of self are challenged, stimulated and

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transformed into artworks. The piece is produced in the here and now, so the artist/subject is less conscious of the act of taking the photo, because he/she is immersed in a kind of internal monologue (Nuñez, 2013).

### **Applications in Art Therapy**

It is usually during the post-production reflection on an artwork that self-perceptions actually begin to sink in. Editing and captioning a photograph is akin to one's ability to alter and define an identifiable mood or emotion, categorizing it into a system of personal significance. This process can be important in making the unconscious known – both to self and others (Kopytin, 2004).

By depicting our sinister unconscious in a photograph, we recognize what is painful about us, and open ourselves up for catharsis or regeneration (Nuñez, 2013). If a client is a willing participant in art therapy and expresses an eagerness to grow, he or she will be an activator of the creative process. A self-portrait project can be a great first step to the acceptance of this leadership role: the client begins to generate an artistic body of work that brings out raw material, which will ideally spawn new projects or creative concepts (Nuñez, 2013).

There is, of course, some level of anxiety that accompanies a self-portrait project in the context of therapy. Many clients may fear the camera lens. In some cases this speaks to the gap between how clients see themselves (which remains more or less unchanged from adolescence) and the image that they see in the finished photograph or product (Nuñez, 2013).

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Adding to that fear or anxiety is the decision of what to do with the final art piece. All confidentiality issues aside, if the client possesses a certain level of ego strength and values the experience of the self-portrait project, posting photographs online can make a compelling statement. Online images are said to have a stronger influence than text in shaping beliefs, because photographs are understood as representing the normative truth (Doornwaard, 2014). If the client wants to show his or her journey, but internet is seen as too risky an outlet, displaying the art in more controlled public forums like community art shows can be empowering and help cultivate an artist identity (Belkofer & McNutt, 2011).

#### **IV. Research Approach**

In academic research, many paradigms have been established in order to guide our process. These paradigms may be shifted depending on the researcher's reality, acquired knowledge, data gathering methods, and the language used to draw conclusions. To expect a quantitative study to delve into the profound meanings clients make of their experiences – or to presume that a case study will be applicable in predicting behaviors of a larger group – would be to miss the point of the research approach (Morrow et al, 2012).

The purpose of this study is to glean from the data the essence of the adolescent experience of social media and Selfie-posting. The PI therefore chose a qualitative phenomenological method (Creswell, 2002) for information gathering via an online survey. Rationale for the survey being conducted on a website is twofold. First, use of online survey is a simple way to acquire information from a sample of the population in different locales without having to resort to mailing handwritten questionnaires (Gibbons, 2010). Second, the online vehicle for collecting data necessitates that participants are comfortable navigating the internet, which is, after all, the topic of the research.

The PI started writing a survey investigating this topic, using mostly open-ended essay questions that would allow participants to describe their online habits in their own words. The search for these participants began by sending a letter of inquiry to multiple high schools, describing the intent of the research and seeking permission to deliver surveys to their students. After a series of refusals and non-responses from administrators, one assistant principal agreed to be involved.



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This initiated a negotiation with that school's principal. A letter of commitment to participate was required for submission to the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Before that letter was granted, the survey underwent several rounds of revision. It was during this amendment period that the PI decided to include a requirement for participants to verbally describe a Selfie instead of uploading the actual photograph.

## **V. Methods**

### Introduction

An awareness of a researcher's intent behind the chosen methods of conducting any study is essential, as it may shed light on potential weaknesses or biases in the research. Methods of the study will be outlined in this section, beginning with key terms that may be less familiar to the readers, especially adult readers. The aim in this section is not to assume that the reader knows nothing of the topic at hand, but rather to clarify terms that may have multiple meanings dependent on context. Next, the study design will be elaborated upon in three subsections: population sampled, approach to data gathering, and methods for analyzing the data.

### Definition of Terms

1. Adolescence – Erik Erikson (1970) defines adolescence as “the critical phase marked by the reciprocal aggravation of internal conflict and of societal disorganization” (p. 156).
2. Hater – According to Oxford Dictionary, the informal definition of a Hater is “a negative or critical person” (2015).
3. Selfie - Oxford Dictionary defines the Selfie as “a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smart phone or webcam and shared via social media” (2015). When this research was conducted, Selfie was the third most popular word on Oxford's website.
4. Social Media - Dolcini (2014) refers to social networking sites as SNSs, and emphasizes the dramatic changes in patterns of their use by adolescents. In this study,

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the PI includes the following social media apps and SNSs: Instagram, facebook, twitter, Snapchat, kik, WhatsApp, Vine, tumblr., and YikYak.

Following is the author's brief description of each app or SNS:

Instagram – mobile photo and video sharing application; in this study, teen participants ranked it as their most accessed. Owned by facebook

facebook – arguably the leading online social networking site for adults, however, adolescent use of facebook is complex and may be deteriorating.

twitter – online social networking platform that allows users to send and read 140-character messages, which may include links to other media

Snapchat – mobile application in which users set a time limit for how long recipients can view their photos and videos before they're deleted

kik – instant messaging application for mobile devices

WhatsApp - instant messaging application for mobile devices, less used than kik

Vine – short form looped video sharing application, owned by twitter

tumblr. – microblogging platform for users to post photos, videos, blog content

YikYak. – anonymous forum for users to post short messages and “vote up” or “vote down” posts within their localized region

The influence of these last two terms, Selfie and social media, on the complexity of modern adolescent development is the primary concern of this study.

### Design of Study

For the purposes of this study, an online survey was created via the Qualtrics survey software website. The survey consisted of twenty-four questions: fifteen multiple-

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choice and nine short answer. Study questions were designed to seek information about each adolescent's number of followers, time spent on various social media platforms, and feelings about a Selfie they've taken previously.

## *1. Sampling*

The sample was a group of willing participants, ages 13-18, from a high school in Ohio. The school's commitment to participate was confirmed by contacting school administrators. The PI sent a website link to the teachers of Health, Art, and Social Studies classes, who then distributed it to approximately 100 students enrolled in their classes. Some teachers offered an extra credit incentive for their students to fill out the survey.

## *2. Gathering of Data*

Teachers delivered a letter to students containing:

- a web URL link to an informational website about the research.

(See Appendix A for example of the website.)

- a brief description of the research, including a consent form and assent form for minors.

(See Appendix B for the parental consent form.)

- school counselor's contact information in case a therapist referral was desired

The students logged onto the informational website, and followed links to a consent form, which required a digital signature from the student's parent or legal guardian.

Once consent was acquired, a link to the survey was made available to the student.

Survey was hosted via Qualtrics, and it required the students to locate a Selfie they'd taken in the past and reference it when answering certain questions. Questions

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were multiple choice and short answer, asking students to choose from a list of SNSs they may use, and allowing them to elaborate on their opinions about the Selfie. The survey was open and available to students for one week, from April 6, 2015 to April 13, 2015.

### *3. Analysis of Data*

In examining qualitative data, it is necessary to identify a few prevalent themes in the participants' responses. The PI read the text data, divided it into segments of information, and labeled each segment with a code. Next, the redundancy or overlap of codes was minimized. Lastly, codes were collapsed into themes, which will be expanded on in the findings, analysis, and final conclusion.

The identification of emerging themes aimed to provide deeper insight into the following three factors:

- - The subject's social media preferences and popularity, including prevalence of various SNSs in his/her daily life
- - The subject's understanding of the function of the Selfie, as described in terms of one particular Selfie that may or may not have been previously posted on social media
- - Indications of the subject's ego strength, including facets such as body image, proclivity for socialization, and visions for the future

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## **Results**

### Presentation of Data

During the week that the survey was accessible, 48 responses were started. However, 9 participants chose to withdraw from the survey, providing incomplete responses that were then eliminated from the final data set. Ultimately, the number of participants whose responses were usable and valid was 39.

The multiple-choice section of the survey inquired about specific social media preferences, (which apps participants use, number of followers, frequency of use, etc.) The short answer section that followed was more personal in nature, examining feelings about self-portraiture, one Selfie in particular, and its representation of the participant's current phase of life.

The population sample was limited to high school students between the ages of 13-18 years old. Perhaps because the PI is working with teens in a variety of settings and is gaining a greater understanding of the complexity of their development, many potential limits to the survey were considered.

First, an awareness of the adolescent struggle to be accepted by peers, while simultaneously presenting an air of confidence, led the PI to pay close attention to particular language choices. This is evident in the following question: "Overall, how satisfied are you with the way your Selfies turn out?" which was changed from the more confrontational version "Overall, how satisfied are you with the way you look?" and followed a series of questions about the process of editing, captioning, and posting Selfies.

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Second, the survey was crafted with an awareness of the challenges presented to teachers and parents as a result of the vastness and anonymity of the internet. For example, the survey began with a requirement for the participant to locate a previously taken Selfie, and to use it for reference during certain questions. Any request for the participant to upload the Selfie would likely have caused alarm for the parent or guardian providing the Informed Consent. By making this request, the researcher was able to gather data about the participant's use of the Selfie, while still minimizing parental concern. This was also intended to empower the participant to describe the image in his or her own words.

### **Participant Demographics**

The adolescents who participated were self-selected within a small (less than 100) cross section of American teenagers, all attending the same high school in rural Ohio. This sample may present some differences in self-concept than youth growing up in more densely populated cities or in different regions of the U.S. On the other hand, the prevalence of social networking as a way for teens to connect with others outside of their demographics may have served to undercut some of these differences.

Also of note when considering this demographic is the fact that these participants are peers, enrolled in the same four classes. Although the survey was anonymous, it is possible that friend groups discussed their answers or filled out this survey in close proximity to each other, potentially even on the same device. This risk is virtually impossible to eliminate in an online survey method for data gathering.

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The potential social desirability factor here may have swayed participants in many directions. Yet, as Harter et al. postulated, the smallest amount of false self-behavior is reported in interactions with close companions (1997), therefore this proximity with peers could have actually influenced the participants to report more truthfully.

### **Response Rate**

Although 39 survey responses were valid and included in the following data, many participants answered some, half, or most of the questions. This raises the issue of response rate. Why were some questions skipped by some adolescents, and for what reasons?

One possible explanation connects to the academic extra credit incentive, which may have been some participants' only motivation to complete the survey. Because there was no penalty for skipping questions, participants who discovered this early in the process were permitted to scroll to the end and submit their incomplete response. In doing so, they were able to earn extra credit in their class for very minimal effort.

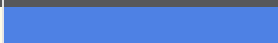



The PI's aim to lessen demand characteristics was facilitated by physical distance, which required communication with the participants to happen indirectly. The anonymity and self-administration style of the survey were intended to reduce any anxiety associated with potentially intrusive questioning about one's self-image. Despite the choices made to alleviate participant resistance, the first instance of a subject skipping a question occurred as early as question six. (Refer to Table 1.)

Prior to question six, participants were asked about their demographics such as age and gender, and less invasive questions about their social media preferences (which



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apps they use, if any). As shown in Table 1, when the nature of the questions shifted to the participants’ online popularity, there was a drop in the total number of answers recorded, from 39 to 36.

<b>Table 1. Initial Decrease in Number of Responses</b>				
<b>6. Which of the following do you have the most followers/subscribers/friends on?</b>				
#	Answer		Response	%
1	Instagram		21	58%
2	Twitter		2	6%
3	Facebook		11	31%
4	Snapchat		0	0%
5	Kik		1	3%
6	WhatsApp		0	0%
7	Vine		0	0%
8	Tumblr		1	3%
10	YikYak		0	0%
	Total		36	100%

Of the 39 responses recorded, 15 participants filled out all of the questions except for the final optional space allowing them to include any additional thoughts. 9 answered the survey in its entirety, and 9 more neglected a few questions throughout. Five participants filled out only the multiple-choice portion, disregarding the last section of short answer questions. The PI chose not to impute any of the missing responses, as there was sufficient data to analyze without imputation. In fact, the truncated responses illuminated participant resistance, and led to speculation about what subtopics may have less interesting or more challenging for these adolescents to address.

Curiously, one participant declined to answer eleven questions – almost half of the survey – explaining that she is “not on any social media at all, and to be honest... social media is more of a waste of time than it is actually worth.” She also mentioned, “it

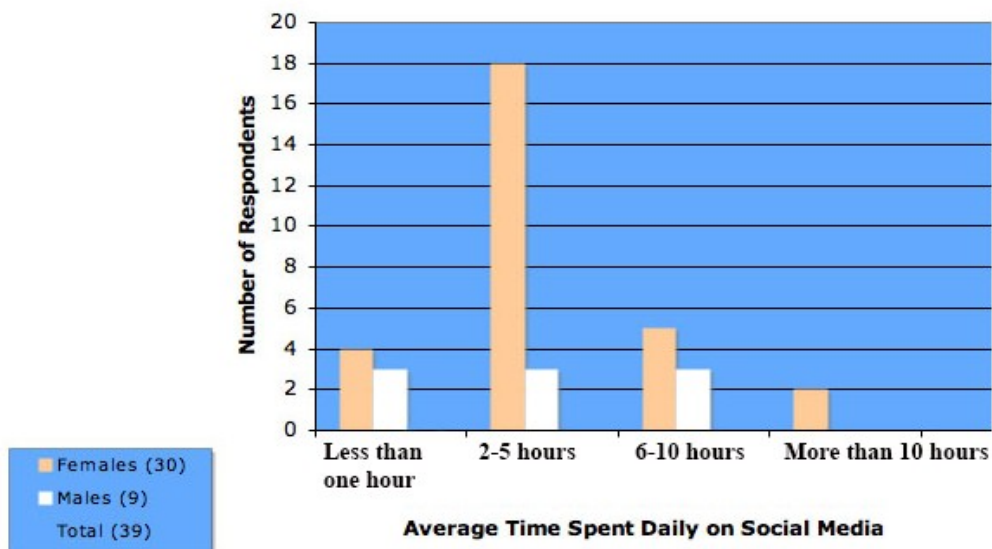
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would be nice to maybe have a snapchat,” which caused the PI to speculate about whether the absence of social media in her life was actually her choice at all. Discussion of adult resistance to social media compared to its popularity in youth culture will follow in the section on data analysis.

A prominent disparity in response rates existed between genders.<sup>1</sup> There are numerous variables that may have contributed to this: gender proportions in the sample, differences in motivation for extra credit, parental permission, or interest in the subject matter, to name only a few. One controlled variable in this case was internet access, as students were allowed to utilize their school’s computer lab if necessary to complete the survey.

In Table 2 below, notice that the nine male responses were equally distributed across three different groupings of time spent on social media. The female participants,

**Table 2. Adolescent Social Media Tendencies By Gender**



<sup>1</sup> Note: Two additional options were included in the gender demographic question: “Other” and “Prefer not to respond.” These were eliminated from Table 2, as all participants selected either “Female” or “Male.”

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in contrast, showed more mixed responses. This distribution of female responses could be connected to the greater total of female participants who answered this question.

Throughout history, self-portraiture has traditionally been examined through male examples, and was often used for self-promotion (Muri, 2007). As digital media and gender norms shift the cultural context, the modern playing field can be more level, giving females more of an open forum to express themselves. Also in this table, note that the mode answer is 2-5 hours, and that answer occurred about three times as often as any other answer overall (for both sexes combined).

### Data Concerning the Selfie

In Table 3, notice that very few participants reported uploading the initial Selfie they capture on “the first try.” Of those who elected to answer this question, 79% indicated that, on average, they retake their Selfies at least twice before one is deemed satisfactory to share with friends and followers.

<b>Table 3. Retaking of the Photograph Prior to Posting</b>				
<b>9. On average, how many times do you retake a Selfie before you post it?</b>				
#	Answer		Response	%
1	I don't. I post the first try.	8	8	21%
2	2-3 times	16	16	42%
3	4-5 times	3	3	8%
4	More than 5 times	11	11	29%
Total		38	38	100%

Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	4
Mean	2.45
Variance	1.28
Standard Deviation	1.13
Total Responses	38

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The limited options presented in this question should be noted. Perhaps because they were not provided with a “Non-Applicable” alternative, many participants who said that they do not upload Selfies at all chose Answer 1: “I don’t. I post the first try.” This is problematic when considering the mean score, as it skews the data negatively. The PI’s assumption that every participant would report posting Selfies at least once in awhile proved to be incorrect.

In this inquiry, it is the relationship between these values and the qualitative data that the PI is most compelled by. Upon examining the short-answer responses retrieved from the same participants who replied to Question 9, more nuanced habits involving the Selfie became apparent. One participant described the Selfie as an interactive mirror: “I think a Selfie is a good way to see how good you look each day, or how much potential you have to look good, but I almost always delete them right after.”

For a few of the participants, there was some confusion caused by the survey’s initial instruction to choose a previously taken Selfie. Many elected to discuss their philosophy of the Selfie in general, as opposed to explaining one specific photo. Although restating the instruction at the beginning of the short answer section could have lessened this confusion, some intriguing responses arose as a result.

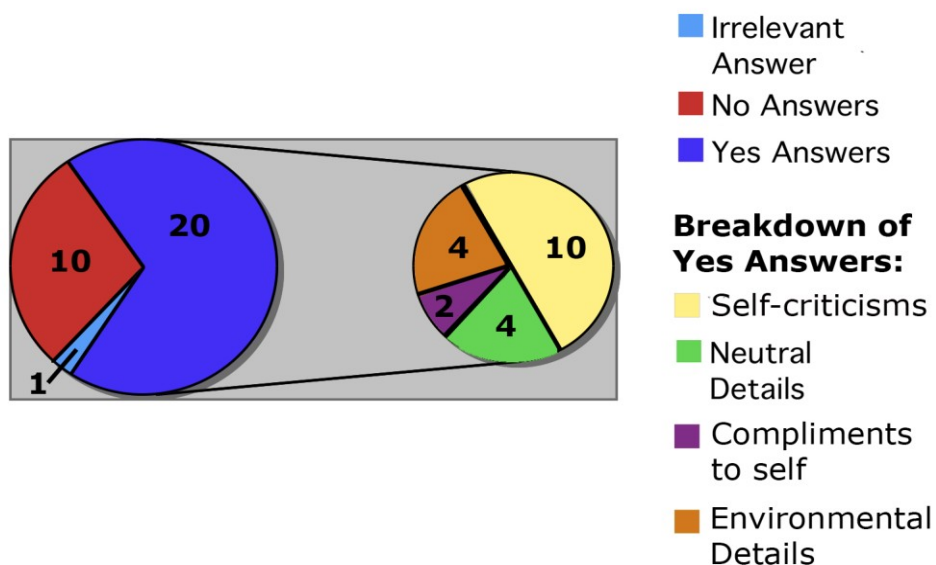
One of the best examples of this relates to the transience of youth. In Question 19, “Describe (in 3-4 sentences) what story you would tell someone about this Selfie in 10 years,” nostalgic narratives emerged for many participants. These answers ranged from depictions of their teenage existence as a time when they “used to look good,” or “might have been a happy person,” to statements about the special occasion or friend group depicted in the photo.

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Also recurrent in these responses was the dominant belief that Selfies themselves are a fleeting trend, one that they don't necessarily identify with. 29 out of 39 participants answered this question, and of those, at least seven participants mentioned that they would also have to explain the current popularity of Selfies to this imaginary friend a decade in the future. One participant elaborated, "I would tell someone ten years from now that Selfies were a waste of time. They were for people too consumed with themselves. It also made people worry too much about what others thought of them." Still others lacked insight into the process altogether, stating that they "just take pictures for no reason."

Within the answers recognizing the Selfie as a positive means of documenting their present social settings, a certain amount of wistfulness was evident. A female participant selected a Selfie containing two of her friends. In response to Question 19,

**Table 4. Responses to Question 18. Reflecting on this Selfie now, do you see things that you didn't notice when taking the picture?**



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she said, “I love these girls even though we may not talk now, they will always be a part of my life.”

Perhaps without realizing it, participants illuminated the passage of time and its effect on their self-image. One question asked them to examine their Selfie, taking note of anything new that they didn’t see originally. 31 out of 39 participants responded, and of those, 20 confirmed that they observed at least some new detail. In the pie chart on the right side of Table 4, notice the breakdown of the affirmative replies.

The chart shows that of those who recognized a new detail, half were critical of themselves in some way. These answers included three participants who described themselves as “awkward,” plus a variety of other self-conscious adjectives such as “uncomfortable,” “dirty,” “annoying,” and “tired.” The other half was made up of neutral details, environmental observations like the lighting of the photo, or self-assured remarks (only 2 participants).

One answer, which was charted as irrelevant to the question asked, was still noteworthy in related topics like social networking and peer acceptance. The participant said, “There [are] a lot of haters on there but it really doesn’t bother me.” Based on the participant’s other responses, the PI can assume that “on there” referred to SNSs.

For more details about this particular respondent’s definition of the term “haters,” see the participant snapshot below (Table 5). Notice his conflicting language: in response to Question 16, he says that a Selfie is useful “to get more followers and for people to like you more.” Then, in the very next question, he declares, “I don’t care what people think of me and [I’ll] post a Selfie of myself because I feel like it.” This duality implies

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that although he holds certain beliefs about his peers' use Selfies to gain validation, these beliefs do not actually apply to him.

Also, the participant brings up “haters” or “people wanna hate” in three separate questions. The expression “haters” was named in the definition of terms in the Methods

**Table 5. Participant Snapshot Exemplifying Duality and Integration of Selves**

16. Describe the Selfie you chose in 3-4 sentences (including descriptions of color, composition, foreground, background, other people/things in the frame.)

**Text Response**

A selfie is a good picture of yourself to get more followers and for people to like you more. The background should be outdoors in a cool place. never a bad place you should take a selfie. The buetiful outdoors is the best place to take one.

17. What do you think the Selfie says about you?

**Text Response**

It says that i don't care what people think of me and ill post a selfie of myself because i feel like it.

18. Reflecting on this Selfie now, do you see things that you didn't notice when taking the picture?

**Text Response**

Theres a lot of haters on there but it really doesn't bother me.

21. What does this Selfie say about how people see you?

**Text Response**

The selfie means they know that i don't care about if people hate on me for taking selfless. If people wanna hate they can hate. I love when people hate on me... It makes me a better person.

23. How can teachers, counselors, parents, and other adults in your life use social media to better understand you?

**Text Response**

They understand my life as a non caring person about what people say and think.

24. Please feel free to add any other thoughts you may have in the box below.

**Text Response**

i love haters because it makes me a better person to react to haters.

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section, and refers to anyone who is often negative or critical of others. His frequent mention of these disapproving people in his life is matched with an equally frequent identification as a “non caring person about what people say and think.” A more in-depth exploration into the theme of duality and the process of integrating multiple selves will follow in the data analysis.

**Table 6. Participant Snapshot Illustrating Insecurity and Communication Gaps**

17. What do you think the Selfie says about you?

**Text Response**

I think a selfie can say a lot. I think a selfie can show ones confidence level. If people don't post a lot of selfies they may not be accepting of themselves. But some people may post selfies to have more self confidence, by getting likes this could make someone feel better about there selfie and themselves.

18. Reflecting on this Selfie now, do you see things that you didn't notice when taking the picture?

**Text Response**

Yes i do. I see i don't really take the pictures to please myself but hopefully please other people and if it pleases other people then my self confidence is boosted.

19. Describe (in 3-4 sentences) what story you would tell someone about this Selfie in 10 years.

**Text Response**

I would say you don't need to please other people but you need to please yourself.

23. How can teachers, counselors, parents, and other adults in your life use social media to better understand you?

**Text Response**

I don't think i want my parents and teachers to see my social medias because i can be myself on social medias and not so much to my parents.

Conflicts in the identity vs. role confusion stage of Eriksonian development are addressed throughout this research. Another participant, whose responses are shown in Table 6, verbalized the complicated relationship between insecurity and social media



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posting, “If people don’t post a lot of Selfies they may not be accepting of themselves. But some people may post Selfies to have more self confidence, [*sic*] by getting likes this could make [someone] feel better...” During the next question, she expands on this idea in a more personal light.

Question 21 of the survey, which was the question with the least amount of responses, asked participants what the Selfie says about how people view them. Many

<b>17.</b> What do you think the Selfie says about you?
<b>Text Response</b> It says that I am a fantastic, egotistical being.
<b>20.</b> What does this Selfie say about this time in your life?
<b>Text Response</b> That it was one of the best parts of my life.
<b>21.</b> What does this Selfie say about how people see you?
<b>Text Response</b> They see me as egotistical and full of myself, but amazing all the same.
<b>23.</b> How can teachers, counselors, parents, and other adults in your life use social media to better understand you?
<b>Text Response</b> By looking at what I write, not what I look like.
<b>24.</b> Please feel free to add any other thoughts you may have in the box below.
<b>Text Response</b> I only take selfies or any kind of picture when I feel it necessary. I only feel it necessary when I am with my friends and family. I need reminders of my past when I eventually must move on.

commented on the effects of social environments on one’s self-image, including recognition that typical teenagers “want acceptance from [their] peers.” One of the most

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poignant answers was, “people don’t pay attention to me, so I try to get attention sometimes.”

Later, the notion of social context was broadened in a question about adult use of SNSs as a way to understand youth. Some adolescents do not allow parents and teachers to view their online profiles because they can create new identities that are completely separate from their relationships with adults. As the participant in Table 6 put it, “I don’t think I want my parents and teachers to see my social medias because I can be myself on social medias and not so much to my parents.” This idea of digital performance being split from physical presence is central in the research findings.

Adult understanding of social media was the issue that generated perhaps the richest portion of survey results. Opinions about this varied greatly, from statements about privacy preferences designed to keep parents from finding their profiles, to one description of the constructive use of SNS trends by a teacher:

My teacher now uses a ‘weekly tweet’ every week. It’s where in 140 characters you have to explain the weeks [*sic*] topic. When we have to take the test about all the topics he shows us the best tweets in a booklet and it helps me study.

Also, the PI noted that collective identification within peer groups was frequently mentioned in the responses. 22 out of 39 participants designated a specific photo to discuss in the survey. Of these 22 participants, 15 selected one containing only themselves, and seven selected one that also included friends or family. The choice to include other individuals in the Selfie was addressed by one participant in her closing statements at the end of the survey: “I think the term

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‘selfie’ is beyond stupid. [I]t's just a picture. [A]nd when people say ‘let's take a selfie’ it's not a ‘selfie’ if there is more than one person in the picture.”

In addition to recognizing the inconsistency in the jargon, this participant's resistance to the phenomenon of the Selfie connects to the aforementioned idea that it may be merely a passing fad. Participants' contradictory attitudes concerning this and other related subjects reflect the four most recurrent themes, which will be dealt with in the findings. These themes are duality, insecurity, freedom of expression, and the communication gap between adults and adolescents. For many, each of the themes is met in the formative years with three parallel processes, elaborated on in the next section: maturation, integration of selves, and digital performance.

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### Analysis of Data

Based on the data collected, the PI was able to deduce that there is a range in ego strength among those who report the same affinity for, or time spent using, social media. The survey allowed participants to elaborate on the nuances of social networking as they see it. Data collected also demonstrated that for many teens, Selfies might serve to represent a moment in time within a given social context, rather than a moment of personal introspection.

Of the youth surveyed, most elected to mention their peers or families in at least one answer. Groupthink and socialization were not the primary focus of the research, and further study is warranted on the differences between online and offline teen interactions. After reflecting on the number of answers that included other people, the PI came to the realization that the questions about time spent on social media were perhaps too generalized.

To some adults, Question 12 (Refer to Table 2) may imply that time spent on social media is time spent isolated, ignoring one's surroundings. According to the results, however, most adolescents are using social media as a way to connect to those around them, to be heard, and to have their personal experiences validated.

Validation and interpersonal connection can be common ground for any therapeutic relationship. In this analysis, parallels between participant responses and potential treatment approaches will be explored. Art therapists possess a unique opportunity to include self-portraiture in directives with adolescent clients, particularly clients who are already employing these practices outside of the session.

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Before the PI attends to issues surrounding social media in the treatment of a teenaged client, it may be helpful to deal with three parallel processes that emerged in the results. These processes are nonlinear, and inform the participants' identity development. The parallel processes – maturation, integration of selves, and digital performance – were recurrent especially in the qualitative data.

Of course, reducing adolescent growth to only these three processes is an act of simplification, serving only to provide a context for this study. The multiplicity of teen experience creates a tension that has been described, by Harter & Monsour (1992), as “storm and stress.” Theorists who have attempted to negate the adolescent experience of “storm and stress” have failed to consider the self-system, and have primarily focused on external relationships (158).

The self-system is constantly being evaluated and reevaluated as it matures, which is the first of the three perceived parallel processes in adolescent development. Their bodies change, their level of independence and responsibility for their own lives increases, and ideally they learn to adjust accordingly. A male participant in the study reflected on his Selfie and declared, “I have really grown up and I am shaping up to be a well respected [*sic*] young man.” Similarly, a female participant commented on her physical maturation, “I've always had a baby face so [I] really liked this picture back then because [I] looked like my actual age at the time in this picture.” These answers indicate not only the recognition of their process, but also the benefit of Selfies as a self-directed art therapy technique for dealing with it.

The second process involves the constant comparison of self to others: an integration of the social, external self with the private, inner self. As the participant in

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Table 6 remarked, “I don't really take the pictures to please myself but hopefully [to] please other people and if it pleases other people then my self-confidence is boosted.” Participants in the study repeatedly exhibited this high level of insight concerning the importance of favorable reactions from others.

The third and final process is central to – and perhaps also specific to – modern day adolescent development, particularly as compared to that of previous generations. Referred to in this analysis as digital performance, it involves constructing one’s online likeness through the careful inclusion of certain images and the exclusion of others. The process is informed by the first two processes (transformation of self and comparison to others) but adds the digital component.

Each of these parallel processes connects to at least one of the original research questions. As outlined below, the relevant results for each question call attention to individual differences in social media use. For each participant, it was described slightly uniquely, and even between questions the same participant’s values and ideals seemed to shift.

### **1. What is the connection between an adolescent’s ego strength and social media reputation?**

Many participants reflected the idea that their social media profiles are meticulously curated. One put it bluntly:

Social media is a form of expression. People that [*sic*] look at my social media see the me that I want them to see. I only post things that I want people to see because I only want them to see the happy version of me.

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This statement addresses all three of the PI's initial questions. It speaks to curiosities surrounding ego strength, the search for external validation, and even potential incorporation of this modality into therapy sessions.

There was no variable in this study to directly measure ego strength. However, questions about the curation of one's social media profiles shed some light on the participant's resiliency and core sense of self. These questions also provided some information on the intentionality of this digital performance.

One question asked, "If you post a Selfie and it doesn't get enough likes to satisfy you, how likely are you to delete it?" To this, 41% of participants responded that they were either "Likely" or "Very Likely" to delete it. The implication is that peer appreciation and acceptance – here in the form of "likes" – is valuable to many of these teenagers.

On the other hand, some adolescents claim to be unaffected by the opinions of others their own age. One participant said, "I don't know what [this Selfie] says about how people see me, I could care less about how someone sees me." This was one of many comparable responses devaluing peer acceptance as an important part of their growth and development.

Thoughts on the subject of acceptance appeared to differ when evaluating others. An additional participant brought up the classmates whom she perceives as popular: "Another thing that changes how people act is their popularity," she maintained, "The more popular they are here at [school], the more Selfies they post and the more they edit to please others not just themselves." As in this case, participants' own reasons for using

social media are different than the motivations they perceive in others, which will be discussed further in the section on insecurity.

## **2. How do adolescents use Selfies to seek validation during the identity development process?**

Much of the feedback that teens receive from peers, both online and in person, is inevitably internalized in some way, and could influence their choices the next time they decide to post an image. Social pressures during adolescence force the individual to differentiate the self by fulfilling distinct relational roles. These roles may be constructed based on the variety of expectations perceived by the individual within different social contexts (Harter & Monsour, 1992).

Referring back to the participant snapshots (Tables 5-7), note the variety of responses to Question 17: “What do you think the Selfie says about you?” As participants were allowed to answer in more than one sentence, quite a few of them gave multi-layered answers. The most recurrent themes dealt with personality traits, insecurity and confidence levels, such as the participant in Table 7: “I am a fantastic, egotistical being.” Other less common topics were physical characteristics, social settings, and temporary emotional states.

The high quantity of answers relating to personality indicates that perhaps these adolescents are seeking something more meaningful than just a validation of their appearance. As Muri (2007) observed, “Self-portraiture creates an auto-criticism that contributes to the artist’s understanding of the inner self” (p. 334). Increased awareness of the internal processes that transpire during one’s youth can serve as an important objective in therapeutic treatment.



### **3. How can therapists use this knowledge in our work within the teen population?**

Parallels between this curation of an online persona and the possible uses of self-portraiture in art therapy are plentiful. Because many participants reflected that their online persona is different than the version of themselves that adults see in real life, we can speculate that this “adult” category also includes therapists and counselors. In art therapy sessions, we can encourage the imaginative use of digital or photographic mediums. This may provide clients with alternative ways of viewing themselves (Muri, 2007).

By bridging the digital and internal worlds, art therapists can allow clients to discuss the fluidity of the self-image, as it exists and changes within social environments. Obviously, boundaries must be established when bringing up social media in treatment. An informed consent discussion may include that the therapist will not accept a friend request from a client, for example.

Once these limitations have been set, the art therapist might ask the client questions about online interactions, especially if there have been any indications of cyber-bullying. If the client feels comfortable, a printout of a profile picture may be used in session to create a new piece of art. Incorporation of text and image can also be powerful. For instance, the client could illustrate a narrative booklet made up of archived tweets from his/her twitter account.

It is important to point out that in this study, many participants denied the likelihood of adults using social media as a way to better understand them. In addition to the respondents shown in Table 6 and Table 7, several replies involved their parents. Some answers included statements like, “My tumblr. shares my opinions about multiple

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things; including political issues that my parents reject me for.” Social media as an outlet for free expression (within certain parameters) is a concept that will be touched on in the findings.

## **Findings**

The data gathered signifies that a communication gap exists between adults and teens, and that this gap is only complicated further by the prevalence of social media. Adolescent participants also brought up struggles with dual identities, insecurity, and freedom of expression. In this section, each of these themes will be elaborated on and connections will be made to other relevant literature regarding the use of social media and photography in the treatment of young clients.

### **Duality**

Many participants referenced dual selves in their descriptions of social media posting. One said, “[I] like to post [a lot] on these sites especially Instagram because [I] like people to see the real me and not just what they think they see.” The PI defines duality here as a two-sided characteristic, made up of parts that are opposing but not mutually exclusive. See Question 17 (Tables 5-7) for more examples of participants’ representations of duality.

Struggles to find and represent one “real” version of the self tend to intensify during Erikson’s identity vs. role confusion stage. In the process of constructing a self-narrative, an individual attempts to create a sense of continuity across time and coherent connections among pertinent life milestones (Harter et al, 1997). Participants’ conflicting self-assessments tell of these efforts to integrate the personality. Although older generations are increasingly joining SNSs (Doornwaard et al. 2014) they may still lack a fundamental understanding that kids' social media profiles are an extension of their offline lives. (O’Keefe and Clarke-Pearson, 2011).

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Timing and developmental levels are crucial in understanding dualities of character. In early adolescence, pinpointing concrete personality traits that one can identify with seems to be an important skill. More advanced cognition allows the older adolescent to intuitively coordinate and resolve seemingly conflicting selves (Harter & Monsour, 1992).

According to Harter et al. (1997), the more an adolescent has developed, the more he or she will be able to integrate the dual selves. They propose:

With increasing development, further skills emerge which equip the individual with strategies that normalize the construction of multiple selves, that allow one to selectively occupy those contexts in which self-evaluations are more favorable, and that provide for a phenomenological sense of unity through the construction of a meaningful narrative of one's life story (p.851).

Additionally, a challenge of the narrative construction comes in connecting one's permanent traits with more temporary emotional states. One participant told of this in her Selfie narrative: “[I] think it says that [I] am sort of dark as my personality but [I] am happy.” In a later question, she added an admission of her own insecurity: “[I] try to be happy but [I] am insecure with my looks and take Selfies because in a certain light [I] think [I] am prettier.” Here, she also touched on the impact of a physical image on one's self worth.

### **Insecurity**

Harter et al. (1997) quote adolescent participants who describe false self-behavior as “being phony,” “not stating your true opinion,” and “saying what you want others to hear” (p.844). Insecurity is often the root motivation for this lack of authenticity. Because insecurity is multifaceted and caused by many complex forces, special care must be taken to approach an insecure teen as an individual and not as a statistic. This individual nature is, by definition, difficult to study, impossible to generalize, and is one of the reasons for the qualitative approach to research.

In a discussion of self-concept, the self-portrait can be particularly powerful for insecure clients with a history of body dysmorphia, physical illness, abuse, or trauma. Qualified clinicians can use this art to assess the value that the clients place on themselves (Muri, 2007). One participant outlined her symptoms:

I struggled with depression and [a lot] of social anxiety and had a very low opinion of myself so sometimes it would help to take a picture even if by the time [I] was done with it the photo [didn't] look exactly like me in real life.

Having recognized the client's perceived weaknesses, a conversation might ensue comparing these qualities to the perceived strengths or weaknesses of peers. Simply looking at self-portraits that also contain friends can spark this discussion in therapy. In a study by Zhao et al. (2008) facebook users who post pictures of themselves with peers are referred to as social actors. The mention of “acting” suggests that there are specific roles in mind, although these roles may be constantly in flux.

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Timing in the therapeutic process is very important when giving a self-portrait directive: too soon in treatment may cause an insecure adolescent to regress or to misinterpret a self-image (Muri, 2007). One way to curb this regression is to promote insight into the so-called social acting. There is a distinct power in projecting one's visual self, particularly in a group context. By doing this, individuals encourage their online audience to know them via the friends they are depicted with, attempting to generate an impression of them as socially desirable (Zhao et al. 2008).

### **Freedom of Expression**

The authoring of a social media post can be a vehicle for adolescents to step back from an experience and reflect on the process. If there is no visual component, such as with a standard tweet, the posters are omitting their physical likeness from the equation, an attempt to exist solely via words and ideas. Participants in the study repeatedly identified their thoughts as more meaningful than any Selfie or profile photo.

One expression (seen in Table 7) states that adults can understand the participant "By looking at what I write, not what I look like." Many others articulated worries that their ideas are not taken seriously enough. One instructed adults in her life to "pay attention [to] how people express their words or quotes that may show that the person is not happy..."

Because it is normally during the post-production reflection on a post that insights begin to sink in, there is also an opportunity for freedom of thought while processing an art directive in therapy. Whether or not they actually upload them to social media, clients can generate an image of self, recognize the emotions implicit in the self-portrait, and

then distance the self from those emotions (Muri, 2007). In this case, the freedom allotted is the freedom to deny any unwanted aspects of reality that were enhanced or created with the portrait.

### **The Communication Gap**

Descriptions of clashing views among some participants and their parents or teachers brought up the communication gap between generations. Perhaps it is necessary to clarify that this gap is not caused by an absolute adolescent desire to remain disconnected. There are incidental differences in the ways that each generation, each demographic, and each individual uses social media. Special attention should be paid to these differences, and to the tenuous nature of youthful expression.

In response to the question about adult understanding of teens' SNS patterns, one participant remarked that parents, teachers, and counselors "just have to talk to me and ask the right questions. I'm like an open book." Yet another responded, "Adults would be able to tell when I was sad or depressed because I express my emotions through pictures and writing rather than discussing my problems with adults."

Both of these responses imply, to some degree, a desire to be sought out by adults in their lives. This is not to say that adult attempts to connect to young people are all inherently flawed, or even that they go unnoticed. There are complicated dynamics at play here. For adolescents, stress may arise as a result not only of inconsistent parental and peer validation, but also of a perceived conditional "support" that may actually be unattainable. The teen, therefore, may set himself up for failure in the eyes of these significant others (Harter et al, 1997).

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One intervention that could help lessen the communication gap is for each generation to role-play what the other may be experiencing. In treatment, directives can be authored in a style that mixes art therapy with play therapy. Clients of any age may use costumes or playacting with their self-portraits to depict positive roles that emphasize their strengths (Muri, 2007). Adolescents who do not feel supported or understood by adults might use this a simultaneous channel to realize and practice asking for what they need. Once they have achieved that, the strength to provide for their needs, if only in the role-play, comes from within.

Another facet of the communication gap refers back to the literature about the inherent struggle with control. For many parents, a fear of losing control over their children's daily lives can be a driving force in the regulation of their online profiles. This fear is not without some merit: the teen's impulse to publish a Selfie on social media may have potentially dangerous outcomes when unrestricted, because viewers of all ages may have access to the image, regardless of the age of the artist/subject of the Selfie (Dolcini, 2014).

Although dangers exist outside of the safety parents can provide, the threat of this fear taking over is also dangerous. By recognizing the importance of audience feedback in the development of a young person's ego strength (Boyd, 2014), adults grant adolescents the freedom to express their evolving selves without fear of reprimand. And this is absolutely vital to healthy growth, because it allows fluidity as the adolescent creates and edits the autobiographical story, adding future direction and purpose (Harter et al, 1997).



## **Conclusion**

Adolescent use of social media is a complex web of identity formation, complete with quantifiable validation in the form of “likes.” Most participants reported that they regularly upload Selfies, editing and captioning them until they are pleasing enough to share with peers. Self-portraiture is so rampant in modern society that individuals – especially those who haven’t yet developed effective decision-making skills – may miss the opportunity to assess the impact of digital feedback on their self worth.

The circulation of Selfies online can be a therapeutic act. There exists a distinct advantage in projecting one’s visual self. Even when depicting our id in a published photograph, we recognize what is damaged within us, and open ourselves up for honest healing. Several participants in this study identify themselves within a group context, an attempt to label the self by association. This approach may have similar advantages to group therapy: the formation of and the client’s integration into a group identity based on a common characteristic.

Posts that contain no image might serve different purposes. In these cases, the validation of one’s ideas is being sought, and the poster is classified by his or her thoughts. Participant’s attempts to interact solely via words have been met with some resistance, reminding us of the power of the visual sphere.

Finally, nuances in the ways that each generation uses social media warrant much more research on the subject. Indications for further research could include case studies of multi-generational social media patterns within the same family, longitudinal studies interviewing adolescents about specific SNSs and apps over extended periods of time, or an exploration of the tendencies of young adults who participate in online dating.

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It may be concluded from this study that the social media experience is simultaneously interactive and individualized.

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Appendix A:

Informational Website Connecting Participants and Parents to the Survey

The image shows a screenshot of a website with a black background and orange and white text. The main title is "ADOLESCENTS SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE SELFIE" in a large, orange, serif font. Below the title, there are three navigation links: "HOME", "The Research", and "Survey Informed Consent Link". The "The Research" link is highlighted in orange. Below the navigation links, there is a section titled "The Research" in a white, serif font. The text in this section describes the research's purpose and the investigator's background.

**ADOLESCENTS**  
**SOCIAL MEDIA**  
**AND THE SELFIE**

**HOME**      **The Research**      **Survey Informed Consent Link**

## The Research

This research serves to investigate the role of social media in identity development of adolescents. Specifically, the Principal Investigator, Sharee Allen, is interested in the phenomenon of the "Selfie" within the world of social media, and how art therapists can use self-portraiture in practice with teenaged populations.

Ms. Allen is conducting this research as a completion requirement for her Master's Degree in Marital and Family Therapy from Loyola Marymount University in May 2015.

**Appendix B:**  
**Informed Consent Form for Parents of Participants**

LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

**Informed Consent Form**

Date of Preparation March 13, 2015

**(Teens and the Selfie)**

- 1) I hereby authorize (Sharee Allen, Graduate Student, LMU MFT program) to include my child/ward in the following research study: Social Media and Self-Portraiture as used by Adolescents in Identity Formation.
- 2) My child has been asked to participate on a research project which is designed to Inquire about the Role of the "Selfie" in Social Media for Adolescents and the survey will last for approximately 20-30 minutes.
- 3) It has been explained to me that the reason for my child's inclusion in this project is that he or she is an adolescent between the ages of 13-18.
- 4) I understand that if my child is a subject, he/she is required to complete the survey by April 13, 2015.

The investigator(s) will collect the data, which will be analyzed by the Qualtrics software and disseminated electronically in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a graduate degree in Marital and Family Therapy, spring of 2015 (no Selfie will be included in this).

These procedures have been explained to me by (Sharee Allen, P.I.), via the teachers and faculty at my child's school.

- 5) I understand that my child will not be photographing him/herself in the process of these research procedures. It has been explained to me that a previously taken photo will be used by my child to inform his/her description of the use of the Selfie, and that his/her identity will not be disclosed in the survey.
- 6) I understand that the study may involve the following risks and/or discomforts for my child: being asked questions about his/her social media use and self image. Benefits of the study are increased self-awareness and an understanding of where he/she falls on the spectrum of teen's social media use
- 7) I also understand that the possible benefits of the study are increased self-awareness and an understanding of where he/she falls on the spectrum of teens' social media use.

**Appendix B (cont'd):**

**Informed Consent Form for Parents of Participants**

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- 8) I understand that the faculty research mentor Dr. Paige Asawa, LMFT, ATR who can be reached at paige.asawa@lmu.edu will answer any questions I may have at any time concerning details of the procedures performed as part of this study.
- 9) If the study design or the use of the information is to be changed, I will be so informed and my consent reobtained.
- 10) I understand that my child and I have the right to refuse to participate in, or to withdraw from this research at any time without prejudice.
- 11) I understand that circumstances may arise which might cause the investigator to terminate my child's participation before the completion of the study.
- 12) I understand that no information that identifies me or my child will be released without my separate consent except as specifically required by law.
- 13) I understand that my child has the right to refuse to answer any question that he/she may not wish to answer.
- 14) I understand that my child will receive no compensation for participation in this study.
- 15) I understand that in the event of research related injury, compensation and medical treatment are not provided by Loyola Marymount University.
- 16) I understand that if I have any further questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may contact David Hardy, Ph.D. Chair, Institutional Review Board, 1 LMU Drive, Suite 3000, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles CA 90045-2659 (310) 258-5465, [david.hardy@lmu.edu](mailto:david.hardy@lmu.edu).
- 17) In signing this consent form, I acknowledge receipt of a copy of the form, and a copy of the "Subject's Bill of Rights".

Subject is a minor (age \_\_\_\_\_), or is unable to sign because \_\_\_\_\_

Name of subject (print) \_\_\_\_\_.

Parent/Guardian Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian Name (print) \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix C.**

**Copy of All Survey Questions**

**1. I have read, understood, and printed a copy of, the above consent form and desire of my own free will to participate in this study.**

**2. How old are you?**

**3. How do you identify your gender?**

**4. How often do you post Selfies (on any form of social media)?**

**5. Which of the following do you have accounts with? (Check all that apply.)**

**6. Which of the following do you have the most followers/subscribers/friends on?**

**7. How many followers/subscribers/friends do you have on the site/app you selected in the previous question?**

**8. Which of the following do use the most?**

**9. On average, how many times do you retake a Selfie before you post it?**

**10. If you post a Selfie and it doesn't get enough likes to satisfy you, how likely are you to delete it?**

**11. On average, how much time do you spend editing and captioning a Selfie before you post it?**

**12. On average, how much time do you spend on social media per day?**

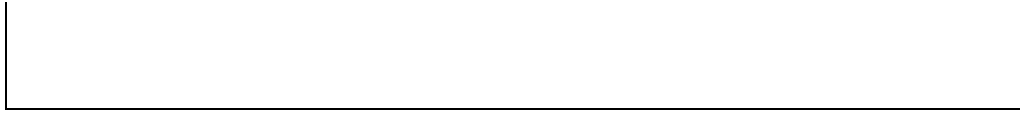
**13. Overall, how satisfied are you with the way your Selfies turn out?**

**14. Do you consider yourself a good photographer when photographing other people or things?**

**15. Do you consider yourself a good photographer when photographing yourself?**



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**Appendix C (cont'd).**  
**Copy of All Survey Questions**

**16. Describe the Selfie you chose in 3-4 sentences (including descriptions of color, composition, foreground, background, other people/things in the frame.)**

**17. What do you think the Selfie says about you?**

**18. Reflecting on this Selfie now, do you see things that you didn't notice when taking the picture?**

**19. Describe (in 3-4 sentences) what story you would tell someone about this Selfie in 10 years.**

**20. What does this Selfie say about this time in your life?**

**21. What does this Selfie say about how people see you?**

**22. Did you post this Selfie on any Social Media Apps? If so, which ones?**

**23. How can teachers, counselors, parents, and other adults in your life use social media to better understand you?**

**24. Please feel free to add any other thoughts you may have in the box below.**