

THE PROMISE OF EMANCIPATION OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES AND THE RISKS OF ALIENATION IN THE SELF-CONSTRUCTION: THE CASE OF INSTAGRAM AMONG ALGERIAN YOUTH AGED 15 TO 25

Imen Hanane Benarab ¹

¹ Higher School of Management and Digital Economy (Algeria)

ibenarab@esgen.edu.dz

Abstract: This study examines the ambivalent effects of digital technologies on self-construction, focusing on the experiences of young Algerians on the Instagram platform. The introduction presents the socio-cultural context in which these users evolve, highlighting the growing importance of social media platforms in shaping their identity, and poses the question: *How can we articulate the emancipation promised by digital technologies and the risks of alienation that they entail for the self-construction of young people?* Using a descriptive methodology and a thematic analysis, we conducted a qualitative study with a sample of young people aged 15 to 25, to understand how they navigate on Instagram between the quest for authenticity and the pressure of a performative presentation by optimising their personal image dictated by this network. The findings reveal a strong tendency towards the idealisation of self-image on social media platforms, accompanied by a pervasive sense of exclusion and lack of recognition. A constant pressure is felt to optimise and curate one's digital identity to align with the standards of beauty, success, and popularity valorised by these environments. Moreover, the analysis reveals that algorithms reinforce this dynamic, encouraging uniformity in self-presentation and limiting individual expression. By bridging theory and practice, this research offers solutions for articulating the emancipation promised by digital technologies with the risks of alienation they engender, while proposing strategies for resisting normative pressures. It offers valuable implications for researchers seeking to foster more reflexive and empowering digital identity practices, ultimately contributing to a more nuanced understanding of self-becoming in the digital age.

Keywords: Digital identity; digital technologies; emancipation discourse; self-construction; subjectivation

How to cite the article :

Benarab, I. H. (2024). The Promise of Emancipation of Digital Technologies and the Risks of Alienation in Self-Construction: The Case of Instagram among Algerian Youth Aged 15 to 25. *Journal of Studies in Language, Culture, and Society*, 7(3), pp. 214-230.

¹ Corresponding author : Imen Hanane Benarab
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-5070-6584>

1. Introduction

The rapid development of digital technologies has significantly reshaped how we live, form social connections, and construct our identities. Social media platforms and virtual communities have introduced new ways of interacting with others and presenting ourselves, offering a unique digital space for self-expression and experimentation with various facets of personal identity (Aulia & Putri, 2024). These platforms allow individuals, particularly young people, to construct their personalities online and explore different aspects of their identity through curated representations of self (Purnama et al., 2024). The digital world, more than any other context, provides this experimental space, enabling both the redefinition and reinforcement of personal identity.

As Granic et al. (2020) point out, these transformations in identity construction are closely linked to the rapid expansion of digital tools that facilitate self-presentation and social interaction. Young people, in particular, are deeply engaged in this process, navigating between the pursuit of authenticity and the pressures of performative self-presentation (Chen, 2023). The relationship between users and these platforms often redefines how subjectivity is formed, with constant interaction shaping how individuals see and express themselves (Savolainen, 2023). However, this exploration of identity is not without challenges. The rise of algorithm-driven platforms such as Instagram introduces new pressures on individuals, including the risk of alienation and the standardization of self-expression. According to Gross et al. (2024), these algorithms encourage a uniformity of behavior and self-presentation, as users feel compelled to adapt to the norms of visibility and engagement set by the platform.

Contemporary research has delved into how digital platforms impact the process of subjectivation and identity formation. Aulia & Putri (2024) emphasize how Instagram serves as a medium for young people to experiment with their identity, while Savolainen (2023) explores how algorithms mediate this self-construction, influencing what aspects of identity are highlighted or suppressed. The algorithmic nature of these platforms can either empower users by offering them control over their self-representation or constrain them by encouraging conformity to platform-specific norms (Register et al., 2023). Furthermore, Chen (2023) highlights how the tensions between authenticity and performativity are becoming more pronounced in the digital sphere, where the desire for individuality must coexist with the demands of algorithmic engagement.

Building upon these studies, our research based on a descriptive methodology and a thematic content analysis, aims not only to understand approaches of subjectivation and online self-construction, but also to analyse the discourses of emancipation carried by the digital medium and the processes of alienation and standardisation of subjectivities that it underpins. Through an empirical investigation based on a qualitative interview study, our goal is to anchor the theoretical reflection on the challenges of digital self-construction through an in-depth case study of the Instagram platform, and thus enrich the current discourse by offering new perspectives.

Hence, in a context marked by the omnipresence of digital technologies in our lives, we will attempt to answer the question: *How can we articulate the emancipation promised by digital technologies and the risks of alienation that they entail for the self-construction of young people?* by highlighting the complexity of the processes of self-construction in the digital age and proposing paths of reflection and action to guide young people for a wise and benevolent use of digital technologies.

This question raises a number of issues:

- What are the emancipation messages conveyed by digital technologies?
- What are the challenges raised by these new ways of becoming oneself in the digital age?
- Is the risk of alienation inevitable, or are there strategies for resistance?

To answer these questions, we put forward the following hypotheses:

- Self-optimisation is the main message conveyed by digital technologies.
- Through its algorithms, digital technology threatens the autonomy of individuals and reduces the possibilities for expressing a singular identity.
- Digital technologies do not only represent risks for identity, they also offer opportunities for identity exploration, enabling individuals to re-appropriate the processes of subjectivation to their advantage.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Philosophical and Sociological Approaches to Self-Construction

Self-construction and subjectivation are key concepts in the fields of philosophy and sociology. Defined by the philosopher Foucault, cited by Gros (2017), subjectivation is the process by which an individual becomes a subject, i.e. a being who is autonomous and responsible for his or her actions. It therefore refers to the various ways in which the individual constructs himself as a moral subject, by resisting the various powers (Cornu, 2014). According to this latter, it involves both a process of emancipation and self-improvement.

According to Cahn (2006), this involves complex psychological work, mobilising both the conscious and the unconscious, and the self-relationship is critical in this construction (Gros, 2017). For this author, who drew on the work of Foucault, subjectivation therefore refers both to the processes of objectivation and constitution of the subject, and to the practices by which individuals relate to themselves.

In this context, Desroches (2013) explores the way in which subjects relate to themselves, through practices of veridiction, i.e. the subject constitutes himself as telling the truth about himself. This leads us to ask whether this veridiction exists in the digital world, where anyone can express himself anonymously, and where youtubers and influencers expose a lifestyle that is often romanticised and embellished.

Cahn (2006) has defined the obstacles that can hinder this construction, namely:

- Failures in the surrounding environment (emotional deficiencies, trauma, etc.).
- Resistance on the part of the individual.
- The effects of normalisation and subjection.

This last obstacle is of interest to us in our research when we consider the virtual world and its dictates in the construction of identity, particularly in the case of young users of digital tools. In this context, Butler (2007) shows that in the process of subjectivation, the subject is constituted through norms that subjugate him, but that at the same time, it is this subjugation that enables him to emancipate himself. This ambivalence is also highlighted by Rambeau (2016), who sees subjectivation on the one hand, as a means of resistance and emancipation in the face of power, but on the other hand as a tool of domination and

subjugation. We will explore this when we look at the discourses of emancipation carried by the digital.

2.2 The Role of Digital Tools in the Self-Construction

Digital tools, particularly social media platforms such as Instagram, play a central role in the construction and management of personal identity in the digital age. By providing a public and interactive space, these platforms allow individuals, particularly young people, to explore and shape different versions of their identity based on the reactions and expectations of their peers. Aulia and Putri (2024) point out that adolescents use Instagram as a tool to elaborate and revisit their public image, influenced by the cultural and social norms with which they are confronted. Instagram thus becomes a space for self-presentation where every post, every story and every interaction contributes to the creation of a socially acceptable 'self'. This process is also addressed by Bailey (2019), who points out that users construct an 'Insta-Identity', a polished and stylised representation of the self, shaped according to the interactions and expectations of followers.

According to Simanowski (2019), platforms like Instagram enable a rapid and widely visible self-construction, where the individual partly controls the narrative of their identity. However, this construction is limited by the formats and expectations imposed by the digital interface.

In this context, Chan (2022) introduces the concept of the 'digitised self', explaining that identity is no longer a stable entity but a constantly evolving process, shaped by online interactions and the digital traces we leave behind. This fluid nature of digital identity not only allows individuals to constantly reinvent themselves, but can also lead to the creation of multiple identities depending on the contexts and expectations of the social network in which the individual evolves.

Purnama, Eralida and Arianti (2024) examine how adolescents in Palembang use Instagram to construct and deconstruct their identities. They show that this platform enables these young people to conform to societal expectations while creating their own space for rebellion or differentiation. The framework offered by digital tools thus provides a unique flexibility in identity management, offering opportunities for experimentation, but also for self-regulation according to online norms.

However, in a context where online interactions sometimes outnumber real ones, online identity construction can become a privileged space for experimentation, as Yilmaz (2021) points out, creating multiple and sometimes contrasting identities, adaptable to the different social contexts encountered on digital platforms.

Moreover, this self-presentation is also strongly influenced by the algorithmic logic that governs social networks. Simanowski (2019) warns against this 'construction of the self' mediated by algorithms, where users' behaviour is partly shaped by the mechanisms of visibility and social approval specific to these platforms. The digitised self thus becomes a compromise between personal aspirations and the constraints imposed by the norms of the digital community.

2.3 Digital Emancipation Discourses

The discourse on digital empowerment focuses on the ability of individuals to use digital tools as a means of empowerment and liberation to break free from traditional social constraints and express their individuality. Young, Zhu and Venkatesh (2021) approach the issue of empowerment through the integration of concepts such as agency, dialogue and

inclusion. They argue that digital platforms offer users the opportunity to assert themselves and reclaim discourses previously controlled by rigid institutions or norms.

Furthermore, digital empowerment offers an opportunity for individuals to claim a degree of independence in their self-expression. Chan (2022) stresses the importance of digital platforms in redefining identity, by allowing users to transcend geographical and cultural boundaries. Instagram and TikTok, for example, provide individuals with global visibility and the opportunity to connect with diverse audiences, encouraging a diversity of identity expressions. These platforms function as catalysts for personal empowerment, where identity is reimagined and reconstructed according to individual needs and collective reactions.

Hällgren and Björk (2022) argue that young people see themselves as more autonomous and in control of their identity thanks to the fluidity offered by digital worlds. They can choose to participate in online communities that share their values and emancipate themselves from the social constraints of their physical environment. This emancipation is also enhanced by platforms that encourage the visibility and recognition of different forms of identity expression.

However, Simanowski (2019) tempers this view by emphasising that digital emancipation is never completely free of social and technical constraints. Platform algorithms, like the implicit norms of each online community, impose often subtle rules that frame users' choices. Although social networks offer spaces of freedom for self-exploration, these freedoms are modulated by systems of social approval that can limit the spontaneity and diversity of personal expression.

2.4 The Risks of Alienation and Standardisation of Subjectivity

Despite the promise of emancipation offered by digital platforms, this ability to construct oneself freely in a digital environment is not without risks, as these platforms also carry risks of alienation and standardisation of subjectivity. The process of constructing oneself online is often influenced by the dynamics of social validation and popularity algorithms, which tend to favour certain behaviours over others. In this context, Granic, Morita and Scholten (2020) point out that the emphasis on perfect self-presentation can lead to forms of alienation, where users feel obliged to conform to unattainable social standards. This pressure to perform socially online can lead to a disconnect between the authentic self and the projected identity.

Bailey (2019) also echoes these concerns by noting that on Instagram, in particular, the quest for validation can lead to uniformity in self-presentation. The pressure to gain likes and followers encourages individuals to follow dominant trends and shape their identity to fit the expectations of the platform and its users. This can lead not only to a loss of authenticity, but also to a feeling of disconnection from one's true self.

Similarly, Huang, Kumar and Hu (2021) note that the reconstruction of online identity can become an alienating process, where users adjust their behaviour and image according to the general expectations of the digital community. The algorithm often favours conformist content that responds to popular trends, which pushes users to conform to homogenised norms, thus reducing the diversity of identity expressions and generating a standardisation of subjectivity.

According to Huang, Kumar and Hu (2021), one of the perverse effects of digital self-construction is alienation. Individuals can feel disconnected from their own identity, conforming to external expectations rather than their own aspirations. Simanowski (2019)

also criticises this trend, explaining that social networks encourage a form of identity competition where authenticity is sacrificed for popularity.

Bulmer et al (2024) highlight the impact of commercial influence on platforms such as Instagram, where the pressure to conform to brand images or values promoted by influencers can alter personal expression. Furthermore, as Garbett and Ovens (2017) note, in this context, the individual is caught up in a dynamic where differentiation becomes a marketing tool, rather than a true expression of self.

Chen (2023) highlights the growing influence of platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, where aesthetic and behavioural norms are often dictated by algorithms and popular trends. This can lead to a standardisation of identity, where users seek to align themselves with dominant norms to gain peer approval, to the detriment of authentic expression.

2.5 Instagram's Algorithmic Influence on Self-Subjectivation: Alignment or Contradiction?

Instagram's algorithmic practices play a decisive role in the way users construct their identity. The platform's algorithm is designed to maximise engagement by prioritising certain types of content, and this selection profoundly affects the dynamics of user subjectification. The question here is whether these algorithmic practices reinforce or contradict theories of self-construction and identity emancipation.

Armano, Briziarelli and Risi (2022) analyse algorithmic subjectivities, demonstrating how digital platforms transform users into subjects of algorithms, shaping their actions according to the recommendations and content promoted. In other words, the algorithm becomes an agent that guides users' experience, influencing the way they perceive and present themselves online. Instagram, in particular, adjusts the flow of images and stories according to user behaviour, creating a continuous feedback loop where individual choices are in fact strongly guided by invisible calculations.

According to Savolainen (2023), this dynamic raises the question of who really controls online identity. The algorithm becomes a kind of invisible authority, shaping users' behaviour and interactions. In this sense, Instagram's algorithm may contradict theories of self-subjectification that promote greater autonomy and freedom of identity. Although users have some leeway to express themselves, they are nonetheless strongly influenced by the mechanisms of valorisation and visibility that favour certain types of identity over others.

Despite these constraints, Instagram's algorithm can also offer opportunities for emancipation. As Register et al. (2023) show, some users adopt strategies to manipulate the algorithm and increase their visibility. This phenomenon of 'algorithmic precarity' occurs when content creators, particularly influencers, modify their behaviour to meet algorithmic expectations while asserting their unique identity. The algorithm then becomes a playground where users can experiment and reinvent themselves, although this emancipation is still conditioned by the logic of performance and engagement.

Langlois and Elmer (2018) address this tension by analysing how digital infrastructures impose an impersonal subjectivation. Users are embedded in a complex network where algorithmic power and control dynamics influence their subjectivity, creating a dissonance between the perception of autonomy and the reality of algorithmic processes.

Gross et al. (2024) dismantle the myth of Instagram's algorithmic 'sugarcoating', pointing out that the platform presents a soft and attractive image, whereas behind this façade, algorithms standardise behaviour. Users are made to conform to specific aesthetic and behavioural norms in order to maximise their visibility. The result is a standardised identity,

where creativity and diversity are limited by algorithms that favour content that is already popular.

So while theories of self-subjectification put forward the idea of emancipation via digital platforms, Instagram tends instead to reinforce conformity to rigid social and aesthetic norms. The algorithms encourage behaviour that is part of a logic of social approval, where users adapt their personal expression to align themselves with predefined models of success. This process can be detrimental to authenticity and individuality, as shown by the work of Savolainen (2023), who highlights the tension between self-determination and the external forces imposed by algorithms.

3. Methodology

3.1 Context

Our study was conducted by means of semi-structured interviews with young Instagram users aged between 15 and 25. The choice of this platform is justified by the fact that it differs from other social networks in that it is primarily visual, allowing users to share photos and videos in a simple and intuitive way (Leaver et al. 2020). Launched in 2010, this network focuses on images as the main mode of expression, which gives it an important role in terms of identity construction. This is particularly true of the ability to showcase oneself through the various filter, photo editing and ephemeral stories features offered by the platform, which are very popular with teenagers and young adults, who see it as a great way of building and enhancing their digital identity. These reasons make Instagram a particularly relevant case study for our work, which aims to analyse the processes of subjectivation and self-construction through digital technologies.

3.2 Participants

Our study focuses on young Instagram users aged between 15 and 25. Our sample is made up of 30 individuals.

The choice of this age group is justified by its relevance to our study. Adolescence (15-19 years) and early adulthood (20-25 years) are sensitive periods for identity construction (Farnsworth Finn, 2020), during which individuals are in intense search of recognition and social validation.

The choice of this number of individuals is justified by the fact that in qualitative interview research, a number of 30, in addition to being realistic to mobilise within the constraints of time and resources, represents the limit at which data saturation begins (Marshall et al. 2013), i.e. beyond that number, the responses become redundant and offer no novelty.

The sample is balanced in terms of gender, with 15 girls and 15 boys. The average age is around 20, with a standard deviation of around 2.2 years, which is a good reflection of the age range targeted.

3.3 Procedures

We will firstly analyse the emancipation discourses conveyed by Instagram, and secondly conduct interviews with young users of the platform to understand the self-construction processes of young people exposed to digital technologies. The intersection of these two analyses will shed empirical light on the issues linked to self-construction in the digital age.

For the analysis of the discourses conveyed by Instagram, we will base ourselves on the thoughts of professionals about this network and on what the heads of this platform have to say about it.

For the field study, we conducted semi-structured interviews using an interview guide. The interviews were conducted between June 1st and 10th 2024, with Algerian young Instagram users approached at various youth and leisure centres in the region of Algiers.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The coding process followed an inductive approach, allowing themes to emerge from the data. First, we performed open coding to identify recurring patterns, such as the use of Instagram for self-promotion, peer validation, or experimentation with identity. These initial codes were then grouped into broader categories during the axial coding phase, such as "self-authentication through visual curation" and "negotiation of social norms." We applied constant comparison to ensure that the codes and categories accurately reflected the participants' experiences.

The identification of themes was carried out using a process of triangulation, which involved cross-referencing the participants' responses with the existing literature on digital identity (e.g., Aulia & Putri, 2024; Chen, 2023). Through this iterative process, we were able to refine our themes, focusing on key insights such as the tension between authenticity and performativity and the role of Instagram's algorithm in shaping users' digital personas.

The guide we drew up comprises 4 main areas of reflection. These areas and the objectives assigned to each are presented in the following table:

Table 1: Areas of reflection and their objectives

<p>Area 1: Instagram practices and uses</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Understanding the habits and motivations of users in their use of Instagram. - Identify the most frequently used features and their role in building identity.
<p>Area 2: Positive and negative experiences of using Instagram</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gathering accounts of concrete positive and negative experiences on Instagram. - Analyse users' reactions and strategies in the face of negative experiences. - Assess the impact of these experiences on self-image and identity construction.
<p>Area 3: Representations of oneself and others on Instagram</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understanding how users represent and stage themselves on Instagram. - Analyse the processes of social comparison and influence between users. - Question the notion of authenticity and reality in online representations.
<p>Area 4: Perceived effects on identity-building and well-being</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Evaluate the effects perceived by users of their use of Instagram on the construction of their identity. - Identify the positive and negative impacts on self-esteem, self-confidence and psychological well-being. - Gather the strategies developed by users to manage the negative effects.

Source: Author's own construction

The interview process is shown in the figure below:

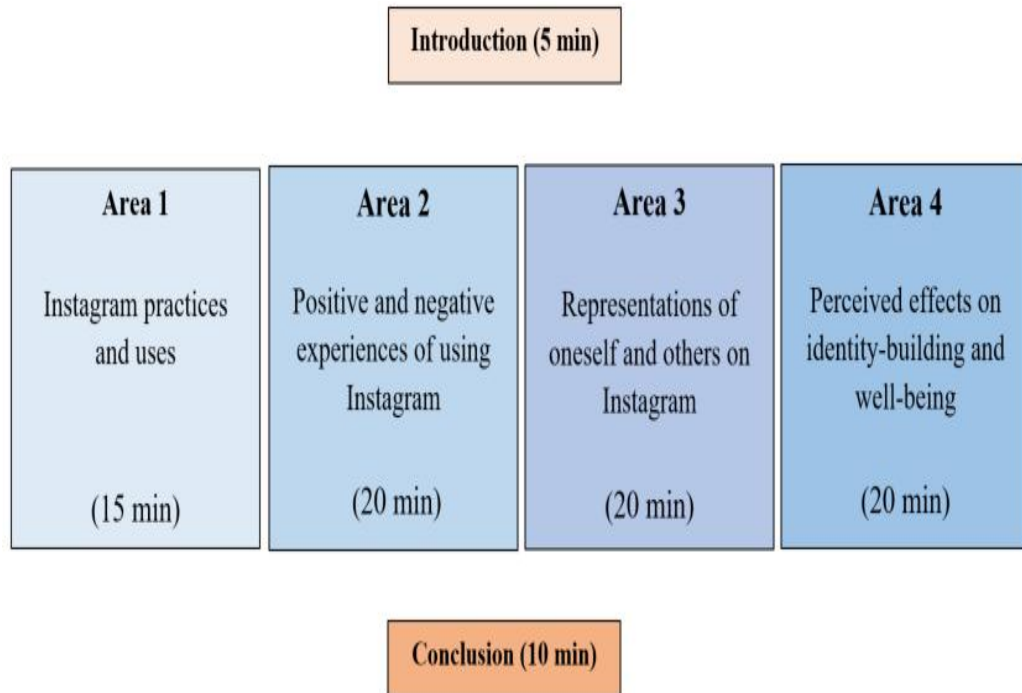


Figure 1: The interview process

Source: Author's own construction

In Introduction, after presenting the study and its objectives to the interviewees, we asked them for permission to make an audio recording, guaranteeing the anonymity of the data.

In conclusion, before thanking the young participants, we asked them if they wished to add anything important that we had not covered and if they had any comments to make. These exchanges will be incorporated into the content analysis for processing the data obtained.

3.4 Limitations

While the qualitative approach offers in-depth insights into young people's experiences, there are several limitations to consider. First, the sample, drawn from specific youth and leisure centers in the Algiers region, may not fully represent the diversity of Algerian youth. Factors such as socio-economic background, access to technology, and regional disparities may have influenced the findings. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data through interviews may introduce a degree of social desirability bias, as participants may have felt pressured to present themselves in a certain way during the discussions.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into how young people navigate identity construction in the digital age, while recognizing the influence of Instagram's platform design and algorithmic systems.

4. Results

4.1 Analysis of Emancipation Discourses Conveyed by Instagram

This analysis enabled us to highlight the discourses and representations that the platform conveys in terms of identity construction, which we can summarise as follows:

The pressure to perform and put on a show. Instagram encourages users to constantly optimise and present themselves in an idealised way, through photos that reflect a perfect and inspiring image (Marwick, 2015).

Valorisation of certain aesthetic standards and lifestyles. Instagram's algorithms tend to highlight bodies, clothing styles and lifestyles that correspond to the beauty and success canons of dominant influencers, creating a kind of tyranny of the image that pushes individuals to conform to these models in order to be recognised and validated by their peers (Mamann, 2022).

Social validation through likes and comments. The latter indicators play a major role in the social validation of users on Instagram (Instagram, 2022) and the latest version 2023 of its algorithm favours recommendations and Reels more than ever (Mamann, 2022). This plays a key role in the construction of identity, because even if Instagram insists on the importance of creating a benevolent environment of exchange, the inevitable social comparisons that its functioning entails can also generate forms of anxiety linked to the quest for social validation.

4.2 Analysis of the Interview Responses

After transcribing the recorded interviews and carrying out a content analysis, which consists firstly of de-contextualising the comments in order to highlight the main themes they address, and secondly of re-contextualising these themes in line with our research objectives, we drew up the categories presented in the table below, using extracts from the interviews to illustrate them. For reasons of anonymity, the comments will not be followed by the respondent's name but only by their gender (G for Girl, B for Boy) and their age:

Table 2: Categories identified by content analysis

Categories	Extracts from interviews
<p>Social comparison and young people's quest for recognition</p>	<p>- « When I see other people's photos and their stories, I find that their lives are more interesting and exciting than mine, which sometimes depresses me » (B-17).</p> <p>- « I'm obsessed with likes. When I post a photo and I don't get as many likes as my friends, I feel like a loser and I delete it » (G-15).</p> <p>- « I always feel like I'm competing with others on Insta, their lives seem so much cooler than mine, it frustrates me » (G-19).</p> <p>- « The life of the influencers I follow seems so perfect, I want to be like them even though I know it's not necessarily reality, I still feel bad in comparison » (B-21).</p> <p>- « When I'm on Insta, I have the impression that my life sucks and that everyone else's life is more fulfilling, so I question myself a lot for that » (G-20).</p>
<p>The quest for perfection and an idealised self-image</p>	<p>- « I always try to post the photos that make me look my best, I want to give people the image of a cool, fulfilled person » (G-16).</p> <p>- « Before posting a photo, I take time to edit it because I want my image to be perfect in the eyes of others » (B-18).</p> <p>- « On Insta, you feel judged all the time and that puts enormous pressure on me to give a perfect image of myself » (G-22).</p> <p>- « Sometimes I wonder if people would find me as interesting if I really showed myself as I am » (B-19).</p>
<p>Challenging online representations</p>	<p>- « I know that most people on Instagram show an idealised and unreal version of their lives » (B-19).</p> <p>- « When I see what the influencers I follow post, I realise that it's all staged and has nothing to do with reality » (G-22).</p> <p>- « I don't trust everything I see on Instagram, I have doubts about people's sincerity. I know they only show what they want to show, sometimes I even wonder why they do it and if they're not lying to themselves by trying to give themselves this perfect image » (G-21).</p>
<p>Feeling of exclusion and lack of recognition</p>	<p>- « I feel invisible on Instagram when I see that my friends have got lots of likes on their comments and posts and I haven't » (B-17).</p> <p>- « When my posts don't get likes on Instagram, I often delete them, and that makes me feel like I don't exist » (G-15).</p> <p>- « No one seems to notice what I do and share on Insta, even my friends, it makes me feel rejected » (G-18).</p>
<p>Risks of depression, anxiety and unhappiness</p>	<p>- « When I stay on Insta for a long time, I always end up feeling useless and ugly, I feel bad and I'm in a bad mood for days » (G-16).</p> <p>- « When I'm on Insta, I'm always comparing myself to the girls I see and I feel bad about myself, sometimes it makes me feel terrible » (G-17).</p> <p>- « I feel so bad comparing myself to others on Insta that sometimes I want to delete my account, it's becoming toxic » (G-20).</p> <p>- « When I see all these blossoming and happy people on Instagram, who lead the perfect life, I feel like a failure and stress all the time about not measuring up » (B-22).</p>

<p>Strategies of resistance and reappropriation</p>	<p>- « Once, I deleted the application from my phone, it did me a world of good. Today I'm back online, but I try to only post things that are similar to me, without worrying about whether other people like it or not, it's healthier for me » (B-19).</p> <p>- « I try not to worry too much about likes and comments, and I only publish things that give me pleasure, it's liberating » (G-25).</p> <p>- « I only publish things that are offbeat and that make me laugh. If people like it, that's fine, if they don't, I don't care, it's my way of reappropriating Insta and not getting in over my head » (B-23).</p> <p>- « I don't follow any influencers, I just chat with my friends, that way I have a realistic view of things » (G-18).</p>
--	--

Source: Author's own construction

These six categories represent the main ideas that emerged from the interviewees' responses. The responses were generally convergent, with rates of agreement ranging from 68% to 88% depending on the themes addressed. There was a broad consensus on the harmful effects of the platform on mental health (75% of responses highlighted this risk), as well as questioning the authenticity of online representations (80%). These statistics reveal some general trends, despite the diversity of respondents' experiences on Instagram.

5. Discussion

The analysis of the results reveals several key elements related to the self-construction and subjectivation of Instagram users, reflecting both the opportunities and risks posed by this platform:

Idealised Self-Presentation. Most participants expressed a strong inclination to publish idealised and perfect images of themselves on Instagram, spending significant time editing photos and curating their posts to elicit likes and comments. This behavior aligns with the platform's visual-centric design, which promotes aesthetic appeal as a form of social currency (Leaver et al., 2020). Instagram's design encourages users to prioritize appearance and performance, making self-presentation a competitive task.

Social Validation and Performance Pressure. The constant pursuit of validation, in the form of likes, comments, and followers, creates a sense of perpetual judgment. Many participants reported experiencing feelings of anxiety and stress when their posts did not receive the anticipated feedback. This correlates with findings from Yilmaz (2021), which suggest that the platform's algorithm amplifies the visibility of highly engaging content, perpetuating performance pressure.

Feelings of Invisibility and Rejection. Participants frequently noted that when their posts did not meet expectations in terms of engagement, they felt invisible or rejected by their online peers. This emotional response can lead to more profound consequences, such as self-doubt, anxiety, or even depression, reinforcing the negative impact of Instagram on self-esteem and mental health (Purnama et al., 2024).

Comparison and Feelings of Inferiority. Although most participants were aware that the representations on Instagram are often curated and insincere, they still found it difficult to resist comparing themselves to others. This comparison exacerbates feelings of inadequacy and insignificance, impacting their self-perception and identity construction. Savolainen (2023) highlights this paradox, where users are simultaneously aware of the platform's artifice yet continue to engage with it, leading to internal conflict and identity questioning.

Resilience and Resistance. Interestingly, some participants—particularly those in the upper age range of the sample—demonstrated a capacity to resist the pressures of comparison and performance. These individuals expressed a more critical stance toward the platform and managed to use Instagram as a space for expressing uniqueness, rather than conforming to normative standards. This aligns with recent studies on digital resistance and re-appropriation (Armano et al., 2022), where users develop strategies to subvert or navigate the platform's pressures.

These findings highlight the dual-edged nature of Instagram: it offers spaces for creativity and self-expression while simultaneously fostering environments of comparison, judgment, and performance that can be detrimental to young users' self-construction. They allow us to underline the complex identity issues raised by young people's use of Instagram. Between questioning the authenticity of what they find on it, the desire for recognition they feel and the pressure to perform subtly dictated by the platform, this latter can have harmful effects on the self-construction, particularly among teenagers and young adults.

To answer our research question, which is *How can we articulate the emancipation promised by digital technologies and the risks of alienation that they entail for the self-construction of young people?* And based on our findings, we propose the following actionable recommendations to mitigate the negative effects of Instagram on young users' identity construction:

For Educators. Schools should integrate digital literacy programs that teach young people to critically assess content on social media platforms like Instagram. These programs can help demystify the idealized images users see online and encourage self-expression that prioritizes authenticity over performance. Workshops and debates on the impact of digital technologies on identity could involve students, parents, and educators to foster an open dialogue about these issues.

For Parents. Parents should be educated on the complexities of social media use among young people and be encouraged to engage in discussions with their children about the pressures they face online. This could include encouraging children to use Instagram more mindfully, refraining from following influencers who promote unrealistic lifestyles, and engaging with peers in more meaningful, authentic exchanges.

For Policymakers. Governments should work on developing a regulatory framework that ensures transparency in Instagram's algorithmic practices and personal data usage. This framework could prohibit the exploitation of user data for behavioral manipulation, particularly in ways that affect young people's self-perception and identity construction.

For Platform Developers. Instagram developers should design more inclusive and benevolent features, such as tools that promote diverse expressions of identity and discourage comparison-based metrics like public "like" counts. Incorporating features that allow users to customize the content they are exposed to based on their emotional and mental well-being could reduce the platform's harmful effects. Algorithms should be designed to prioritize content that encourages healthy self-expression and diverse identity representations rather than content that adheres to narrow aesthetic ideals.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to explore the intricate relationship between the emancipatory potential of digital technologies and the risks of alienation in self-construction for young people aged 15 to 25. Our research underscores that platforms like Instagram offer unique opportunities for self-expression and identity exploration. The theoretical framework demonstrates that while digital technologies facilitate new forms of subjectivity and enable

individuals to curate their online personas, they simultaneously impose subtle mechanisms of social control and standardization. Young users are encouraged to conform to certain aesthetic and behavioral norms in order to gain recognition and validation within these digital spaces.

Through empirical research, we illuminated these dynamics by examining the experiences of young Instagram users. The data revealed a prevalent inclination toward idealizing self-image, leading to a significant sense of exclusion and lack of recognition when their curated representations did not elicit the expected social validation. This trend highlights the paradox of social media: the desire for connection often leads to deeper feelings of isolation and inadequacy. As many participants expressed awareness of the curated nature of online content, they still struggled with the compulsion to compare themselves to others, resulting in emotional turmoil, anxiety, and self-doubt.

However, amid these challenges, some participants showcased resilience and agency by developing strategies to navigate the pressures of Instagram. These individuals articulated their unique identities and resisted the impulse to conform to societal expectations, illustrating that the effects of digital engagement are not uniformly negative. This finding resonates with recent research on digital resistance and the potential for users to reclaim their narratives in an increasingly algorithm-driven landscape.

Thus, fostering healthier digital habits among young users requires a multifaceted approach, involving educators, parents, policymakers, and platform developers. By promoting critical engagement with digital content, regulating algorithmic practices, and designing more inclusive features, we can mitigate the negative effects of social media on identity construction and support young people in developing a stronger, more authentic sense of self in the digital age.

The findings of this study have broader implications for understanding the ambivalence of digital technologies in the construction of identity. While Instagram provides opportunities for self-expression, it also exacerbates the risks of alienation through constant comparison and performance pressure. Future research could extend this analysis to other social media platforms, such as TikTok, to generalize the identified risks and explore whether similar patterns of self-construction and subjectivation emerge.

As we look to the future, the implications of our findings extend beyond Instagram. The ambivalence of digital technologies is a theme that resonates across various platforms, each presenting unique challenges and opportunities for identity construction. Future research should explore how emerging platforms, such as TikTok or emerging virtual reality spaces, influence self-construction and subjectivity among young users.

Additionally, interdisciplinary collaborations between psychologists, sociologists, educators, and technology developers are crucial in addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by digital technologies. By fostering a holistic understanding of these issues, we can develop more effective interventions that support young people's mental health and identity development in an increasingly digital world.

Finally, while the risks associated with social media engagement are significant, the potential for fostering authentic self-expression and community building remains. By prioritizing education, awareness, and responsible platform design, we can empower young individuals to navigate the complexities of digital identity with confidence and resilience, ultimately shaping a healthier digital landscape for future generations.

References

- Armano, E., Briziarelli, M., & Risi, R. (2022). Algorithmic Subjectivities: Understanding Identity Formation in the Age of Algorithms. *Journal of Media and Communication Studies*, 10(2). 115-132. <https://doi.org/10.5539/jmcs.v10n2p115>
- Aulia, F., Putri, K.Y. (2024). Use of Instagram as a Medium for Adolescence Self-Identity Construction. *International Journal of Media and Communication Research*, 5(1), 33-43. <https://doi.org/10.25299/ijmcr.v5i1.15007>
- Bailey, J. (2019). The Impact of Instagram on Self-Identity. *Journal of Social Media Studies*, 2(1), 15-25. <https://doi.org/10.2139/jss.2019.0015>
- Bulmer, E., Hart, A., & Timms, C. (2024). The Commercial Influence of Social Media on Identity Construction. *Journal of Marketing & Society*, 12(1). 56-72. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23749542311945>
- Butler, J. (2007). *Le Récit de soi*. PUF. Paris.
- Cahn, R. (2006). La subjectivation et ses vicissitudes. *Le Carnet PSY*. N°109. 21-23.
- Chan, M. (2022). The Digitized Self: Identity in the Age of Digital Media. *Journal of Media and Communication Research*, 9(3). 56-73. <https://doi.org/10.25299/jmcr.v9i3.25467>
- Chen, L. (2023). The Aesthetic Norms of Instagram and TikTok: Implications for Self-Expression. *Journal of Visual Communication*, 15(1). 88-103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470357219824108>
- Chen, S. (2023). The Influence of Social Media Platforms on Self-Identity in the New Media Environment: The Case of TikTok and Instagram. *SHS Web of Conferences*. 165. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/202316501020>
- Cornu, L. (2014). Subjectivation, émancipation, élaboration. In *TUMULTES*, 43. 17-31. Kimé edition.
- Desroches, D. (2013). La vérité du sujet: Subjectivation et véridiction chez Foucault. Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy. *Revue canadienne de philosophie continentale*, 17(2). 31-52.
- Farnsworth Finn, J. (2020). Young adult identity development: A parent's guide. TODAY. <https://www.today.com/parenting-guides/young-adult-identity-development-parent-s-guide-t179013>
- Garbett, H., & Ovens, C. (2017). The Role of influencers in shaping digital identity. *International Journal of Social Media Research*, 3(2). 85-99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21516809.2017.1395880>
- Granic, I., Morita, Y., & Scholten, M. (2020). The impact of digital platforms on self-presentation and alienation. *Journal of Digital Psychology*, 10(2). 150-165. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42897-020-00034-7>
- Gros, F. (2017). Chapitre III. Les pratiques de subjectivation. In Michel Foucault. 91-123). PUF edition.
- Gross, A., Davis, L., & Samuel, T. (2024). Instagram's algorithm: The myth of authenticity. *Social Media + Society*, 10(1). 23-37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211037624>

- Hällgren, M., & Björk, J. (2022). Youth identity and the digital realm: Autonomy and self-expression in social media. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 25(4). 508-524. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2022.2067312>
- Huang, Y., Kumar, A., & Hu, L. (2021). Online identity and alienation: Navigating expectations in digital communities. *Journal of Information Technology & Society*, 18(4). 324-342. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jits.12345>
- Instagram. (2022). Terms of Use. <https://help.instagram.com/>
- Langlois, G., & Elmer, G. (2018). Algorithmic control and impersonal subjectivity in digital networks. *Media, Culture & Society*, 40(5). 719-733. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443717743152>
- Leaver, T., Highfield, T., & Abidin, C. (2020). *Instagram: Visual social media cultures*. Polity Press.
- Mamann, J.M. (2022). Changement d’algorithme d’instagram 2023: Instagram va « plus que doubler» les recommandations. Full CONTENT. <https://www.fullcontent.com/algorithme-instagram-2023/>
- Marshall, B., Cardon, P., Poddar, A., & Fontenot, R. (2013). Does sample size matter in qualitative research?: A review of qualitative interviews in IS research ?. *Journal of Computer Information Systems*, 54(1). 11-22.
- Marwick, A. (2015). Instafame: Luxury selfies in the attention economy. *Public Culture*, 27(1). 137-160.
- Purnama, D.H., Ernalida, & Arianti, Y. (2024). Construction and deconstruction of self-identity of Palembang adolescents on Instagram. *Revista De Gestão Social E Ambiental*, 18(8), e05295. <https://doi.org/10.1024857/rgsa.v18n8-114>
- Rambeau, F. (2016). III. Les apories de la subjectivation politique. In *Les secondes vies du sujet*. 81-119. Hermann edition.
- Register, C., Marsh, K., & White, E. (2023). Navigating algorithmic precarity: Content creators and the quest for visibility. *International Journal of Digital Communication*, 4(1). 45-59.
- Savolainen, L.(2023). Who is the algorithm? Interfacing the social, emotional, and algorithmic. Doctoral thesis defended on September 1st at The Faculty of Social Sciences. University of Helsinki, Finland.
- Simanowski,R.(2019). The Self in the age of digital identity. In *Digital Media: New Approaches to Identity and Interaction*. Routledge.
- Yilmaz, R. (2021). The many faces of identity: Social media and self -construction. *International Journal of Communication Studies*, 14(2). 120-135. <https://doi.org/10.21569/ijcs.2021.0037>
- Young, J., Zhu, X., & Venkatesh,A. (2021). Digital empowerment: Agency, dialogue, and inclusion in social media. *Journal of Digital Communication Research*, 5(1). 47-62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048518806745>

Appendix: The Interview Guide

Introduction (5 min)

- Presentation of the study and its objectives.
- Guarantee of anonymity and request for permission to make an audio recording.

Practices and uses of Instagram (15 min)

- How long have you been using Instagram?
- How often do you use it?
- What are your main activities on the platform (posting content, checking the news feed, interacting, etc.)?
- What types of content do you post or view most often?
- Which Instagram features do you use the most (stories, filters, hashtags, etc.)?

Positive and negative experiences of using Instagram (20 min)

- What do you like most about using Instagram?
- Have you ever had any negative experiences on the platform? Can you describe them for us? How do you react to these negative experiences?
- Have you ever changed the way you use Instagram as a result of these experiences?

Representations of yourself and others on Instagram (20 min)

- How would you describe the image you portray of yourself on Instagram?
- Do you think this image corresponds to your real self or an idealised version?
- What types of people or content inspire or influence you the most on Instagram?
- Do you feel that other people's posts on Instagram reflect their real lives?

Perceived effects on identity construction and well-being (20 min)

- Do you think that your use of Instagram has had an impact on your identity?
- Do you feel that it has influenced your self-esteem and self-confidence?
- Have you ever experienced negative emotions (sadness, anxiety, frustration, etc.) linked to your use of Instagram? What strategies have you developed to deal with these potentially negative effects?

Conclusion (10 min)

- Is there anything important you'd like to add that we haven't covered?
- Acknowledgements and end of interview