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EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN THE PRACTICUM FOR EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTION ON DIGITAL IDENTITY AND ADOLESCENT SELF-PERCEPTION: MULTIPLE CASE STUDY IN ECUADORIAN INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Digital identity and adolescent self-perception have become central dimensions of youth development in educational contexts shaped by the intensive use of social media. Within this framework, the present study aimed to analyze how experiential learning activities developed during the teaching practicum contribute to educational intervention on digital identity and adolescent self-perception in Ecuadorian institutions. The study adopted a qualitative approach with a multiple case study design, involving adolescents and pre-service teachers from three educational institutions. Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and reflective journals, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The results show that experiential interventions foster critical awareness of social comparison mediated by social media, with differentiated effects according to gender and sociocultural context, and promote a resignification of self-perception and self-esteem. In addition, a positive impact was identified among adolescents belonging to vulnerable groups, as well as in the pedagogical development of pre-service teachers. It is concluded that the teaching practicum constitutes a strategic space for educational intervention aimed at promoting conscious digital identity construction and adolescent socio-emotional well-being.

KEYWORDS: Digital Identity; Adolescent Self-Perception; Teaching Practicum; Educational Intervention; Socio-Emotional Education.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, adolescence has undergone a substantive transformation in its modes of socialization and identity construction, shifting from predominantly face-to-face environments (family and school) toward digitally mediated settings shaped by social networks. These platforms operate not only as channels of communication but also as symbolic spaces for experimentation, representation, and validation of the self, where individual and collective identity narratives are configured (Guo & Cheung, 2023; Valkenburg et al., 2022). Within this framework, digital identity emerges as a central component of adolescent development, closely linked to processes of self-perception, self-esteem, and social belonging.

In the Ecuadorian context, this reality acquires particular complexity due to the coexistence of cultural tensions, socioeducational inequalities, and the rapid expansion of access to digital technologies. The intensive use of social networks such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and WhatsApp has significantly influenced the ways in which adolescents construct and negotiate their personal and cultural identities, exposing them to idealized models, globalized social norms, and dynamics of external validation that directly shape their self-perception. Nevertheless, beyond merely describing these effects, it becomes imperative to analyze how such dynamics may be pedagogically addressed within the educational sphere, particularly through situated and reflective learning experiences.

In this regard, the research problem is reframed as the need to understand how identity dynamics and self-perception mediated by social networks can be educationally intervened through experiential practices developed within the teaching practicum. Although relevant research has examined the influence of social networks on adolescent identity (such as Pérez's (2024) study on social media as an identity mirror, Soh et al.'s (2024) research on personal identity development in technological contexts, and Conte et al.'s (2024) systematic review on the impact of TikTok on adolescent mental health), a gap persists in studies that articulate these findings with contextualized educational intervention proposals, particularly from the perspective of initial teacher education and within real school settings.

Accordingly, the principal objective of this study is to analyze, from a qualitative perspective, how experiential learning practices developed during the practicum contribute to educational interventions addressing digital identity and adolescent self-

perception in Ecuadorian institutions, through a multiple case study design. Specifically, the study pursues the following objectives: (1) to identify how experiential educational practices foster adolescents' critical reflection on social media use and social comparison; (2) to analyze the effects of such interventions on students' self-perception and self-esteem, considering gender differences and sociocultural context; and (3) to recognize the potential of the practicum as a formative space for designing inclusive educational strategies that promote a conscious digital identity, particularly among adolescents belonging to vulnerable or minority groups, such as LGBTQ+ youth, who may find in digital environments spaces for expression and emotional support (Montag et al., 2024; Noon et al., 2021).

The justification for this study is grounded in the growing relevance of digital identity and adolescent self-perception as key dimensions of socioemotional well-being and holistic development. In Ecuador, the sustained increase in digital access among young people presents both pedagogical opportunities and psychosocial risks. Various studies have shown that adolescent girls, in particular, face greater pressures related to body image and external validation on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, which may negatively affect their psychological well-being (García, 2024). Likewise, exposure to harmful content has been associated with risk behaviors such as eating disorders or self-harm, demonstrating that digital influence may transcend the symbolic realm and produce clinically significant consequences (Avci et al., 2024; Peters et al., 2024). In this scenario, schools and teacher education acquire a strategic role in developing preventive and formative educational interventions grounded in critical digital literacy.

Nevertheless, this study presents certain limitations that must be considered. First, the qualitative approach and multiple case study design, while enabling deep and contextualized understanding, limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, heterogeneity in digital access and socioeconomic conditions between urban and rural institutions may influence the experiences analyzed. Additionally, self-perception constitutes a subjective and sensitive construct; thus, its exploration through interviews, observations, and reflective narratives may be affected by social desirability bias. Finally, the scarcity of prior research specifically focused on educational interventions addressing digital identity in the Ecuadorian context necessitates reliance on Latin American and international references, whose transfer must be undertaken with cultural caution.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study is grounded in social comparison theory, which explains how adolescents evaluate their own worth based on external referents, a process intensified in digital environments characterized by visible metrics of social recognition. It also integrates contemporary approaches to digital identity, media-mediated cultural identity, and youth subjectivity, which allow for an understanding of how adolescents construct digital narratives of the self in continuous dialogue with platforms and with their sociocultural context (Conte et al., 2024). These frameworks are articulated with pedagogical perspectives that conceive the practicum as a privileged space for critical reflection, situated intervention, and experiential learning.

In sum, this research seeks to contribute to the understanding of digital identity and adolescent self-perception from an educational and intervention-oriented perspective, providing empirical evidence on the value of the practicum as a formative context for designing experiential learning practices that promote a critical, conscious, and culturally situated use of social networks among Ecuadorian adolescents.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. *Methodological Approach and Research Design*

The present study was conducted within a qualitative framework, employing a multiple case study design aimed at achieving an in-depth understanding of the experiential practices implemented during the teaching practicum as educational interventions addressing digital identity and adolescent self-perception in Ecuadorian educational institutions. This approach is appropriate when the research interest focuses on analyzing formative processes, meanings, and situated educational dynamics, rather than on measuring causal relationships between variables (Hernández et al., 2014).

The study adopts an interpretive and formative orientation, as it examines authentic educational interventions designed and implemented by pre-service teachers during their practicum with the aim of fostering adolescents' critical reflection on social media use, social comparison, and the construction of digital identity. The multiple case study design enables the comparison of experiences developed across different institutional contexts, thereby strengthening both the understanding of the phenomenon and the transferability of the findings (Yin, 2018).

2.2. *Context And Participants*

The study was conducted in three Ecuadorian educational institutions located in urban and peri-urban contexts in the cities of Quito, Guayaquil, and Cuenca. These institutions were purposively selected based on their willingness to participate in educational intervention experiences linked to the teaching practicum.

Participants were organized at two levels:

- **Adolescents:** A total of 48 students aged between 13 and 17 years participated across the analyzed cases. Efforts were made to include students of different genders as well as adolescents who self-identify as belonging to LGBTQ+ communities, in order to address the diversity of identity and self-perception experiences.
- **Pre-service teachers:** Twelve university students in the practicum phase of teacher education programs participated, designing, implementing, and reflecting on the experiential intervention practices.

Inclusion criteria for adolescents were: enrollment in lower or upper secondary education, regular access to social networks, and signed informed consent from parents or legal guardians. Exclusion criteria included students with severe communication difficulties that prevented participation in group reflective activities, as well as those who did not complete the intervention process.

2.3. *Data Collection Techniques and Instruments*

Data collection was conducted through qualitative techniques consistent with the interpretive orientation of the study:

- **Participant observation:** Pre-service teachers systematically recorded adolescents' interactions, attitudes, and responses during intervention sessions using previously structured observation guides.
- **Semi-structured interviews:** Conducted with a sample of adolescents at the conclusion of the experiential practices in order to explore perceptions related to digital identity, self-perception, self-esteem, and social media use.
- **Focus groups:** Conducted with pre-service teachers to gather pedagogical reflections on the design, implementation, and perceived effects of the interventions carried out during the practicum.
- **Reflective journals:** Pre-service teachers produced weekly reflective journals

documenting learning processes, challenges, and transformations observed both in adolescents and in their own professional development.

2.4. Procedure

The study was implemented in four phases:

Phase 1: Practicum and Intervention Planning. Experiential educational practices focused on digital identity, self-perception, and critical social media use were designed and integrated into the practicum plan. Activities included reflective dynamics, analysis of digital content, guided debates, and identity self-exploration exercises.

Phase 2: Implementation of Experiential Practices. Interventions were conducted over an eight-week period through weekly sessions lasting 60 to 90 minutes, facilitated by pre-service teachers under the supervision of academic tutors and institutional teachers.

Phase 3: Qualitative Data Collection. Observation, interviews, focus groups, and reflective journals were implemented during and after the intervention, ensuring triangulation of sources and perspectives.

Phase 4: Systematization and Analysis. Data were transcribed and organized for subsequent qualitative analysis, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality.

The study adhered to ethical principles of educational research, including informed consent, respect for privacy, voluntary participation, and exclusive use of data for academic purposes.

2.5. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following an inductive-deductive process. In the initial stage, open coding was conducted to identify emergent categories related to digital identity, self-perception, social comparison, self-esteem, and educational experience. Subsequently, axial coding was performed to establish relationships among categories and to compare them across the different

cases analyzed.

Triangulation of techniques, participants, and contexts enhanced the credibility and consistency of the analysis. Additionally, strategies of research reflexivity were incorporated, particularly through practicum journals, to acknowledge the influence of the researcher-teacher role in the interpretation of the data.

3. RESULTS

The presentation of results is organized in accordance with the specific objectives of the study and the multiple case study design. The findings emerge from the thematic analysis of participant observations, semi-structured interviews with adolescents, focus groups with pre-service teachers, and practicum reflective journals, allowing for an in-depth understanding of the educational and identity-related processes examined.

3.1. General Characterization of the Analyzed Cases

The analyzed cases correspond to three Ecuadorian educational institutions located in urban and peri-urban contexts. In each institution, experiential educational intervention practices were implemented, focusing on digital identity, self-perception, and critical use of social media, facilitated by pre-service teachers during their practicum.

Across cases, adolescents were found to maintain an active and diversified digital presence, with particular emphasis on visual and audiovisual platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. These platforms were used not only for recreational purposes but also as spaces for self-expression, social comparison, and the search for recognition. WhatsApp, in contrast, was primarily perceived as a functional communication tool with peers and family members, carrying a lower degree of symbolic identity significance.

Table 1: General Characterization of the Analyzed Cases.

Case	Institutional Context	Educational Level	No. of Adolescents	Predominant Platforms	Focus of the Intervention
Case 1	Urban	Lower secondary	16	Instagram, TikTok	Self-perception and body image
Case 2	Urban-peri-urban	Upper secondary	18	TikTok, WhatsApp	Digital identity and social comparison
Case 3	Peri-urban	Lower secondary	14	Instagram, WhatsApp	Identity, diversity, and inclusion

3.2. Specific Objective 1: Identifying How Experiential Practices Foster Reflection on Social Comparison and Self-Perception

Findings indicate that experiential practices implemented during the practicum facilitated

processes of critical awareness regarding social comparison mediated by social networks. Through reflective activities, analysis of digital profiles, and guided debates, adolescents reported recognizing that much of the content they consume reflects idealized and unrealistic representations.

Narratives gathered through interviews and observations revealed that, prior to the interventions, participants tended to compare their physical appearance, lifestyle, and popularity with digital figures or highly visible peers on social networks.

Following the educational activities, a progressive shift toward a more critical interpretation of such content was observed, including recognition of filters, editing practices, and selective self-presentation strategies.

Table 2: Emergent Categories Related to Social Comparison and Self-Perception.

Main Category	Subcategories	Frequent Qualitative Evidence
Digital social comparison	Physical comparison	References to idealized bodies and aesthetics
	Social comparison	Popularity, followers, likes
Self-perception	Negative self-evaluation	Prior personal dissatisfaction
	Critical reinterpretation	Questioning digital standards
Digital awareness	Recognition of editing	Identification of filters and curation

3.3. *Specific Objective 2: Analyzing The Effects of Interventions on Self-Perception and Self-Esteem Considering Gender and Sociocultural Context*

Comparative analysis across cases revealed relevant differences in how experiential practices affected self-perception and self-esteem, particularly according to gender and institutional context. Among adolescent girls, interventions generated safe spaces for verbalizing pressures related to body

image, social acceptance, and public exposure on social networks.

Adolescent boys, in contrast, tended to focus their reflections on the perceived need to project strength, success, or digital popularity, acknowledging that these expectations also generate identity-related tensions. Regarding sociocultural context, urban environments exhibited greater intensity of comparative pressure, whereas peri-urban contexts demonstrated stronger references to community and family values.

Table 3: Perceived Effects of the Intervention by Gender and Context.

Dimension	Adolescent Girls	Adolescent Boys	Contextual Differences
Self-perception	High sensitivity to body image	Focus on social recognition	Greater pressure in urban contexts
Self-esteem	Tendency toward self-demand	Difficulty expressing vulnerability	Greater reflection in peri-urban contexts
Intervention impact	Increased emotional verbalization	Progressive openness	Differences in intensity, not direction

3.4. *Specific Objective 3: Recognizing The Potential of the Practicum to Promote Conscious Digital Identity Among Adolescents from Vulnerable Groups*

One of the most significant findings relates to the positive impact of experiential practices on adolescents belonging to minority groups, particularly those who self-identify as LGBTQ+. In

these cases, participants described digital environments as ambivalent spaces – simultaneously involving risk and offering support and recognition.

The interventions contributed to legitimizing these experiences and promoted strategies of digital self-care, conscious selection of virtual communities, and the construction of a digital identity aligned with personal well-being.

Table 4: Educational Potential of the Practicum for Vulnerable Groups.

Dimension	Contributions of Experiential Practices
Inclusion	Creation of safe spaces for expression
Digital identity	Validation of personal narratives
Socioemotional well-being	Reflection on digital self-care
Teacher education	Development of inclusive competencies

Overall, the results demonstrate that experiential practices developed during the practicum constitute a relevant educational strategy for intervening in adolescent digital identity and self-perception. Although social networks continue to exert significant influence on identity processes, educational interventions enable the reinterpretation

of such influence, fostering a critical, reflective, and inclusive perspective.

4. DISCUSSION

The interpretive analysis of the findings indicates that digital identity and adolescent self-perception are not configured solely as direct effects of social

media use, but rather as complex processes mediated by educational experiences, sociocultural contexts, and relational dynamics. In this regard, the study's results confirm that social networks function as symbolic arenas of identity construction, yet their impact can be re-signified through experiential educational interventions developed within the framework of the teaching practicum. This perspective is consistent with Avci et al. (2025), who argue that identity development in adolescence must be analyzed by considering both the centrality of digital environments and the educational mechanisms that mediate this relationship.

One of the study's central contributions is the demonstration that social comparison, far from operating as a homogeneous mechanism, manifests in differentiated ways according to gender, institutional context, and prior educational experience. Noon et al. (2021) emphasize that comparisons on visual platforms such as Instagram acquire distinct meanings depending on developmental stage and type of interaction. The results discussed here extend this proposition by showing that experiential practices enable adolescents to critically identify these comparisons, question implicit standards, and reinterpret their self-perception. This reinforces the notion that social comparison is not an inevitably harmful phenomenon but one that can be pedagogically addressed.

With regard to self-esteem, the findings partially confirm García's (2024) assertion that exposure to idealized body representations affects adolescent girls more intensely. However, from a qualitative and intervention-oriented perspective, the present study offers an important nuance: when safe educational spaces for reflection, emotional expression, and critical analysis of digital content are established, improvements are observed in the ways adolescent girls interpret such pressures. This evidence aligns with the arguments of Guo and Cheung (2023), who emphasize that adolescent subjective well-being depends not only on the content consumed but also on the nature of interaction and contextual support.

The role of TikTok emerges as a particularly significant element in adolescents' identity-related experiences. In line with the findings documented by Conte et al. (2025), short-form video environments intensify processes of social validation, exposure, and comparison due to their logic of virality and immediacy. The study's results demonstrate that these dynamics not only influence self-perception but also become pedagogically relevant content

when addressed within the practicum. Guided reflection on the platform's functioning enabled adolescents to understand mechanisms of visibility and recognition, thereby reducing the uncritical internalization of presented models.

A particularly relevant finding concerns the role of social networks as spaces of identity affirmation and emotional support for adolescents belonging to minority groups. Consistent with Pérez (2024), who describes social networks as a "digital mirror" through which young people negotiate identity, the study shows that LGBTQ+ adolescents find in digital environments opportunities for expression and belonging that are not always available in face-to-face school contexts. However, educational intervention enabled a critical examination of these spaces, promoting a conscious digital identity oriented toward self-care and the critical selection of virtual communities.

From the perspective of problematic social media use, the findings engage with Montag et al. (2024), who warn of risks associated with intensity of use and dependence on digital feedback. Although the study does not identify clinical pathologies, it does reveal indicators of emotional vulnerability among adolescents with high levels of digital exposure. This finding reinforces the need to conceptualize social media use as a continuum ranging from healthy practices to forms of use that require preventive educational intervention, rather than punitive or restrictive responses.

Furthermore, the mechanisms of audience influence described by Peters et al. (2021) acquire particular relevance in the study's findings. The perception of being observed, evaluated, and validated by an audience—real or imagined—emerged as a key element in the construction of adolescent self-concept. Nevertheless, experiential practices developed during the practicum enabled this awareness of audience to be transformed into an opportunity for reflective self-exploration, reducing emotional overexposure and fostering a more balanced relationship with digital visibility.

The cultural dimension, as emphasized by Soh et al. (2024), proves essential for interpreting the findings. The experience of Ecuadorian adolescents demonstrates that digital identity is constructed within a framework where global references and local cultural practices converge. Educational interventions facilitated recognition of this cultural hybridity, helping adolescents integrate elements of their traditional identity with contemporary digital expressions without implying a rupture with their sociocultural context.

Finally, in line with Valkenburg *et al.* (2022), the results confirm that the impact of social networks on adolescent identity and self-perception is heterogeneous and contextually conditioned. The principal contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that such heterogeneity can be addressed within the educational sphere through experiential practices integrated into the practicum, positioning teacher education as a strategic axis for promoting socioemotional well-being and a critical, conscious digital identity. From this perspective, the study provides contextualized evidence from Ecuador, contributing to the enrichment of an international body of literature in which Latin American contexts remain underrepresented.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The present study made it possible to understand, from a qualitative and intervention-oriented perspective, how experiential practices developed during the teaching practicum influence the construction of digital identity and self-perception among adolescents in Ecuadorian educational institutions. The findings demonstrate that social networks constitute central arenas in youth identity processes; however, their influence is neither deterministic nor homogeneous, but rather profoundly mediated by educational, sociocultural, and relational factors.

First, it is concluded that social comparison mediated by social networks emerges as a recurrent mechanism in adolescent self-perception, particularly on visual platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Nevertheless, the experiential educational practices implemented within the practicum framework fostered the development of critical awareness regarding these processes, enabling adolescents to recognize the constructed and selective nature of digital content. This awareness contributed to the re-signification of personal validation criteria, reducing exclusive dependence on digital approval.

Second, the results indicate that the impact of social networks on self-perception and self-esteem presents significant differences according to gender and sociocultural context. Adolescent girls demonstrated greater sensitivity to pressures related to body image and online visibility, whereas adolescent boys exhibited tensions associated with expectations of recognition and social success. Urban contexts were also characterized by greater intensity

of social comparison. However, across all cases, educational interventions created spaces for dialogue, reflection, and emotional expression that contributed to the strengthening of a more balanced and conscious self-perception.

A particularly relevant finding concerns the role of social networks as ambivalent spaces for adolescents belonging to minority groups, especially LGTBQ+ youth. While these environments may involve risks related to exposure and social judgment, they also function as spaces of support, recognition, and identity exploration. Experiential practices developed during the practicum enabled the legitimization of these experiences and promoted strategies of digital self-care, strengthening the construction of a digital identity consistent with personal well-being and respect for diversity.

From a formative perspective, it is concluded that the teaching practicum constitutes a privileged context for the design and implementation of educational interventions addressing digital identity and adolescent self-perception. The active participation of pre-service teachers fostered the development of pedagogical competencies related to critical digital education, attention to diversity, and socioemotional intervention. This formative process not only impacted adolescents but also contributed to the reflective professional development of future teachers.

Overall, the study confirms that social networks should not be approached exclusively through normative or restrictive perspectives, but rather as potential educational spaces requiring intentional pedagogical guidance. The integration of experiential practices within the school context enables the transformation of risks associated with digital use into formative opportunities oriented toward strengthening identity, positive self-perception, and adolescent socioemotional well-being.

Finally, the study provides contextualized empirical evidence on educational intervention in digital identity within the practicum framework, contributing to a field of research that remains emergent in the Ecuadorian and Latin American context. Although the findings are not statistically generalizable, they offer relevant insights for the design of educational programs, initial teacher education, and the formulation of educational policies responsive to the contemporary challenges of adolescence in digital environments.

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