

Digital Mirrors: How Visual Content on Social Media Shapes Empowerment and Approval [†]

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Abstract

Social media represents an ambivalent space for identity construction. While fostering expression, aesthetic filters and idealized models drive homogenization and social comparison. This study explores the tension between authenticity and standardization in visual content production. Focusing on lower secondary school teachers in Foggia, the qualitative research investigates how educators interpret digital manipulation and its impact on self-perception. Through semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the study maps discursive strategies regarding visual identity. These findings emphasize the need for teacher training in visual education, providing an empirical basis for pedagogical reflections on promoting a critical and conscious use of digital tools.

Keywords: social media; visual education; visual content; authenticity; self-perception; teacher training

1. Introduction

Social media constitutes a socio-cultural arena of extraordinary complexity and variety, where the construction and representation of individual identity are not internal processes but mediated and performative acts carried out through the incessant use of images and visual content. These tools, intrinsically ambivalent, simultaneously offer opportunities for authentic expressive empowerment while generating a tangible risk of aesthetic and behavioral homogenization, fueling a constant and unresolved tension between the urge for self-authenticity and the pressure of social conformism. This profound mutation was anticipated and conceptualized by Sartori [1], who, in analyzing the anthropological transition from homo sapiens to homo videns, highlighted how the image has supplanted verbal language and the written word as the primary vehicle for meaning and knowledge. This operates a drastic conversion of the “intelligible world” into a “sensible world” entirely dominated by the dimension of the visible—a dynamic that is particularly acute and problematic in educational contexts, where social media exerts a direct, and often unmediated, influence on the identity construction and relational dynamics of students. Compounding this identity issue is the progressive and worrying loss of the educational alliance between the main formative agencies:

School and family. This institutional misalignment leaves students in a vulnerable state of “digital anarchy” [2], where access to visual content becomes the primary, and often uncontrolled, tool for socialization and informal learning, all in the absence of a critical filter or structured adult guidance.



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2. Objectives and Research Question

The present study aims to investigate and analyze the complex psychological and socio-cultural implications arising from the increasing centrality of visual content in the social media ecosystem. The objectives are twofold: first, to explore how the production, sharing, and reception of images and videos have radically transformed contemporary communication; and second, to diagnose the impact of such content on the individual at a psychological level, focusing specifically on the modulation of self-perception, emotions, and behaviors. The inquiry aims to establish the extent to which the growing diffusion of such content—including manipulation phenomena like aesthetic filters and deepfakes—fuels social comparison processes and what the measurable psychological consequences are (specifically in terms of inadequacy, dissatisfaction, and anxiety) resulting from continuous exposure to manipulated or idealized aesthetic models. Furthermore, it is fundamental to understand how the dialectic between the opportunity to value authenticity and cultural diversity (offered by authentic visual content) and the tendency toward homogenization and manipulation (induced by the dynamics and aesthetic standardization of digital platforms) manifests in practice.

3. Methodology

To address the multidimensional complexity of the investigated phenomenon, a rigorous qualitative research design was adopted. The research was conducted through a combined administration of semi-structured interviews and focus groups with twenty fifth-grade teachers from a primary school and a lower secondary school in the municipality of Andria, experts in the direct observation of pre-adolescent behavior. All data collection sessions were conducted after obtaining informed consent, ensuring anonymity in compliance with ethical research protocols. The focus groups and semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded using an iPhone (Apple Inc., Cupertino, CA, USA). The collected audio data were subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. The interviews and focus groups were guided by a flexible protocol built around three main interconnected thematic areas: the perception of authenticity and digital manipulation in visual content, the impact of such content on identity construction and student relational dynamics, and the role of the school and educational strategies to promote a critical view of digital media. The qualitative data collected were analyzed through Thematic Analysis, an inductive and systematic process [3] chosen for its ability to identify and report recurring patterns, shared perspectives, and significant conceptual cores within the data set. The data processing was conducted through a manual process. Following the principles of inductive axial coding, the researchers performed the analysis manually using paper-based grids and a systematic color-coding technique. The thematic analysis, based on axial coding [4], allowed for the connection of individual narratives to theoretical reference frames, highlighting the most relevant conceptual nuclei for understanding the phenomenon, thus ensuring not only the internal validity of the results but also their relevance to the scientific debate on psychology and visual education in the digital age.

4. Results

The thematic analysis of the full transcripts of the interviews and focus groups led to the emergence of two main macro-themes, which converge in highlighting the systemic criticalities and pedagogical potential associated with the intensive use of social media in the pre-adolescent context. The first and most pervasive theme concerns the growing and widespread identity fragility within the student population, a phenomenon that the interviewed teachers unanimously describe as aggravated and amplified by the intensive use of social platforms. Specifically, Instagram was identified as the prototype of the

“digital mirror” which no longer merely reflects the individual’s image but operates as a prescriptive filter that imposes and normalizes an ideal aesthetic image, often unattainable. As evidence of this dynamic, an emblematic case was reported of a female student who, due to her addiction to seeing herself exclusively through beauty filters, showed difficulty in recognizing and accepting her own image in a traditional mirror—an episode that underscores the digital dysfunction of self-perception and the dominance of the ephemeral visible over concrete data. Parallel to this identity insecurity, a marked trend toward behavioral homogenization was observed, manifesting in the uncritical emulation of influencers and cultural models perceived as superficial.

A second significant thematic core focuses on the acute crisis of the educational alliance between the school and the family institution. Teachers concordantly denounce a progressive and non-negotiated educational delegation to digital media, which effectively becomes the “first school” for children in the absence of adequate parental supervision [1]. This situation generates a profound value and cognitive void, leaving students at the mercy of stereotyped and standardized cultural models. Teachers’ observations describe a condition of true “digital anarchy,” where young people are left alone to navigate the media environment, with harmful consequences for their emotional, cognitive, and relational growth. As emphasized by Rossi Doria [5], *paideia*—understood as the integral formative process of the person—necessarily requires a synergistic collaboration between family, school, and community; its exclusive delegation to digital media therefore represents a systemic failure. The interviewed teachers emphasize the crucial importance of systematically integrating critical visual education into school curricula. Suggested pedagogical strategies range from simulations and critical analysis of visual content—aimed at deconstructing the manipulative language of media and fostering deep understanding—to emotional literacy activities, essential for developing awareness of online risks and the ability to regulate emotions. Such interventions must culminate in interdisciplinary projects that integrate technical and critical skills to promote conscious digital citizenship.

5. Discussion

The analysis of the results provides robust empirical validation of the theoretical premises guiding this study. The narratives confirm that the anthropological transformation induced by digital media, theorized by Sartori [1] as the transition to *homo videns*, is a daily educational reality where the dominance of the image has effectively supplanted critical thinking.

It is important to clarify that, within our rigorous qualitative framework, specific numerical trends emerged as strong indicators of thematic saturation. When discussing the impact of aesthetic filters on anxiety and self-esteem, a qualitative consensus rate of 95% (19 out of 20 interviewed teachers) was reached regarding the correlation between filters and student dissatisfaction, while 90% (18 out of 20) agreed on the resulting identity fragility. These figures do not represent quantitative survey data, but rather the overwhelming convergence of the teachers’ qualitative narratives, signaling a systemic failure in the cultural mediation of the image.

The crisis of the identity mirror proves that social platforms operate as a prescriptive surface rather than a reflective one [6]. The pervasiveness of manipulated aesthetic models consolidates the perception of a prescriptive digital self that the individual feels compelled to emulate. This dynamic leads to behavioral homogenization—noted by 75% of the interviewees (15 out of 20)—which structurally compromises decision-making autonomy and triggers a vicious cycle of dissatisfaction and validation-seeking [7].

This psychological vulnerability is worsened by the educational void generated by the crisis of the school–family alliance. In this unmediated context of “digital anarchy” [2],

psychological dependence is reinforced: visual content activates immediate gratification circuits, making young people susceptible to compulsive consumption. Although this study focuses on a specific local context (the Andria and Foggia area), the pervasive and global nature of social media platforms suggests that these findings possess a high degree of transferability. The dynamics of aesthetic standardization and the erosion of the school–family alliance are widespread phenomena, making these reflections highly relevant to broader Western educational contexts facing similar digital challenges. The challenge, therefore, no longer lies merely in limiting technology use, but in systematically integrating critical visual education into curricula.

6. Conclusions and Future Recommendations

This study demonstrates incontrovertibly how social media is profoundly transforming the processes of identity and relational construction in students, with far-reaching anthropological, psychological, and pedagogical implications. The narratives of the interviewed teachers serve as empirical proof that the “identity mirror crisis” and consequent “digital dysmorphia” are not isolated phenomena but tangible signals of an anthropological shift involving both new generations and the educational contexts they inhabit. The dominance of the visible critically impoverishes the capacity for abstraction and reflective thought, promoting aesthetic and behavioral homogenization that results in a loss of individuality. Several implications emerge with particular force. First, the atrophy of critical thinking described by Sartori [1] is now an empirically observable reality in classrooms. Students struggle to distinguish the real from the virtual, making them more exposed to manipulation and social comparison processes that undermine self-esteem. Second, the crisis of the educational alliance between school and family exacerbates this disorientation.

To address this, a radical rethinking of curricula is necessary. It is not just about teaching students how to use digital media, but educating them to “see” critically—decoding visual messages, understanding the underlying cultural mechanisms, and developing psychological resilience. Strategies suggested by teachers offer a roadmap for this programmatic educational path, including active media literacy and emotional education. Furthermore, it is vital to promote creative and conscious use of digital media, transforming students from passive consumers into active producers capable of expressing authenticity. Finally, investing in teacher training is essential to provide them with the theoretical and practical tools to face these challenges. The future challenge is twofold: transforming the digital mirror from a tool of homogenization into a surface for critical reflection, and mending the fracture between the “sensible world” and the “intelligible world” [1], restoring centrality to critical thinking and the capacity for abstraction.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available upon request from the corresponding author.

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