

Digital Alienation and Identity Crisis in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Digital technology has become an integral part of young people's lives, transforming communication, social relationships, self-presentation, and identity formation. However, increased digital connectivity does not necessarily guarantee meaningful social connection and may instead generate loneliness, emotional isolation, and digital alienation. These tensions are particularly significant during adolescence, a developmental period characterized by identity exploration and the negotiation of social belonging. Contemporary Young Adult (YA) fiction provides an important literary space for representing these challenges and examining how digital culture shapes young people's experiences of selfhood and relationships. This study aims to analyze the representation of digital alienation, manifestations of identity crisis, the relationship between digital alienation and identity formation, literary strategies used to represent these phenomena, and their broader social and ideological meanings. The study employs a qualitative literary research design using close reading, thematic analysis, and textual interpretation of selected contemporary YA novels. The analysis is informed by theories of alienation, identity development, digital identity, and YA literary studies. The findings indicate recurring patterns of emotional isolation despite digital connectivity, fragmentation between online and offline identities, dependence on social validation, identity uncertainty, and tension between performed and authentic selves. Digital technology is represented ambivalently as both a means of connection and a potential source of alienation. The study concludes that contemporary YA fiction critically represents the psychological and social consequences of digital culture while providing a literary space for examining identity, belonging, authenticity, and alienation among digitally mediated youth.

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1. Introduction

The rapid development of digital technology has significantly transformed young people's lives, particularly the ways they communicate, build relationships, present themselves, and construct their identities. Smartphones, social media, online communities, and digital communication have become important parts of contemporary youth culture (Buckingham, 2007). Although digital environments provide opportunities for connection, self-expression, and social interaction, they can also create psychological and social challenges. One important consequence is digital alienation, referring to feelings of isolation, loneliness, disconnection, or emotional estrangement despite being continuously connected through digital technologies. This phenomenon illustrates a contemporary paradox in which increased technological connectivity does not always result in meaningful interpersonal relationships.

Digital alienation is closely connected to identity crisis, especially during adolescence and emerging adulthood. These developmental periods involve an important process of

discovering personal values, social roles, self-concept, and belonging. In digital environments, identity formation becomes increasingly complex because young people often construct and manage different versions of themselves across online and offline spaces. Social media encourages individuals to curate their appearance, achievements, relationships, and lifestyles, potentially creating pressure to conform to social expectations and obtain external validation (Gorea, 2021). The resulting gap between an individual's perceived authentic self and digitally performed identity may contribute to insecurity, self-doubt, emotional fragmentation, and identity confusion.

Research on digital alienation, adolescent identity, social media, and Young Adult (YA) fiction has developed considerably over the last decade. One important foundation is provided by Yang et al. (2018), who examined identity processing and social media-related experiences among young people. Their work, later incorporated into broader systematic evidence, indicates that diffuse-avoidant identity processing is associated with lower identity clarity and a more fragile sense of self. This finding is important for the present research because it demonstrates that identity uncertainty can be associated with dependence on social approval and digitally mediated social interaction. Rather than treating social media simply as a communication tool, this line of research suggests that digital environments can become spaces in which young people negotiate their sense of self.

Similarly, Senekal et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review of social media and adolescent psychosocial development. Their review identified a complex relationship between social media and adolescent development, including identity, self-esteem, self-image, and well-being. The study found that social media may facilitate identity development and social interaction, but it can also intensify risks associated with social comparison, cyberbullying, problematic use, and anxiety. This research is highly relevant because it supports the argument that digital environments have contradictory effects: they can provide opportunities for identity exploration while simultaneously producing psychological pressures that may contribute to alienation and identity instability.

The relationship between social media and adolescent well-being was also examined by Shankleman, Hammond, and Jones (2021) through a systematic review and thematic meta-synthesis of 19 qualitative studies. Their findings demonstrate that adolescents' experiences of social media and well-being are complex and cannot be reduced to either positive or negative effects. This perspective is particularly useful for the present study because digital alienation should not be conceptualized simply as the result of excessive technology use. Instead, alienation may emerge from the quality of digital interaction, perceived social expectations, interpersonal relationships, and the ways young people interpret their online experiences.

Another relevant contribution comes from Towner, Grint, Levy, Blakemore, and Tomova (2022), who systematically reviewed adolescent online and offline self-disclosure. Their study focused on whether digital interactions can satisfy adolescents' social needs and examined differences between online and offline self-disclosure. The research is significant for understanding the distinction between digital and physical relationships. For the present literary study, this distinction provides a useful conceptual basis for analyzing characters who communicate extensively online but nevertheless experience emotional distance, loneliness, or difficulty developing authentic interpersonal relationships.

The most directly relevant recent contribution is the systematic review by Avci, Baams, and Kretschmer (2024/2025) on social media use and adolescent identity development. The review synthesized 32 studies involving 19,658 adolescents and examined identity exploration, identity commitment, self-concept clarity, and identity distress. Its findings indicate that how adolescents use social media may matter more than the amount of time they spend online. Active participation was associated with identity exploration, authenticity in

online self-presentation was associated with greater self-concept clarity, while social comparison was associated with identity exploration and identity distress. This study is especially valuable for the present research because it demonstrates that online self-presentation and social comparison are directly connected to important dimensions of identity development. Nevertheless, its empirical focus is on real adolescents rather than literary representations, leaving an opportunity to investigate how these processes are narratively constructed in YA fiction.

These issues are increasingly reflected in contemporary Young Adult (YA) fiction, a literary genre that frequently explores adolescence, personal development, relationships, social belonging, and identity formation. Contemporary YA narratives often incorporate smartphones, social media, online friendships, virtual communities, and digital communication as important elements of characters' lives. Technology is therefore not merely a background feature but can become a significant factor influencing characters' emotions, relationships, self-perception, and development (McQuillen, 2003). Through fictional characters, YA literature provides a valuable space for examining the tensions between online and offline identities and the emotional consequences of living within digitally mediated social environments.

Literature is particularly useful for examining these issues because literary narratives can reveal characters' internal thoughts, emotions, motivations, and conflicts. Through characterization, narrative perspective, dialogue, symbolism, imagery, and setting, fictional texts can represent how digital environments influence identity and social relationships. Consequently, analyzing digital technology in YA fiction should move beyond identifying the presence of technological devices or social media. Greater attention should be given to how digital environments shape characters' experiences of belonging, isolation, self-presentation, and identity development.

The research problem addressed in this study concerns the relationship between digital alienation and identity crisis in contemporary YA fiction (Flanagan, 2014). Specifically, the study examines how digital alienation is represented, how it contributes to characters' identity crises, what conflicts emerge between online and offline identities, and what broader social and ideological meanings are communicated through these representations. Previous research has examined social media and youth identity, loneliness in digital communication, adolescent identity formation, and representations of technology in contemporary fiction. However, these issues are frequently investigated separately. There remains a research gap in examining digital alienation and identity crisis as interconnected literary phenomena, particularly through close analysis of characterization, narrative perspective, symbolism, dialogue, and representations of online and offline identities.

Therefore, this study aims to identify forms of digital alienation in contemporary YA fiction, analyze representations of identity crisis, examine the relationship between digital alienation and identity formation, identify the literary strategies used to represent these experiences, and interpret their broader social and ideological implications. The study applies an integrated theoretical framework consisting of Identity Theory, Alienation Theory, Digital Identity Theory, and Young Adult Literary Theory, supported by narratological concepts such as characterization, focalization, narrative voice, symbolism, and setting. This combination provides a comprehensive basis for understanding how contemporary YA fiction represents the complex relationship between digital culture, emotional isolation, and the development of young people's identities.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative interpretive literary analysis to examine the representation of digital alienation and identity crisis in selected contemporary Young Adult

(YA) fiction. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study focuses on interpreting meanings, experiences, character development, and literary representations rather than measuring variables statistically (Bailey & Tilley, 2002). The analysis emphasizes how digital technology, social media, and digitally mediated relationships influence characters' identities, emotional conditions, social relationships, and perceptions of belonging. Rather than treating the selected novels as sources of quantitative data, the study approaches them as cultural and literary texts that represent contemporary experiences of growing up in a digitally connected society.

The research uses qualitative textual analysis based on close reading and interpretive analysis. The primary purpose is to identify and interpret literary representations of digital alienation and identity crisis and to examine the relationship between the two phenomena. The analysis considers both explicit and implicit representations of digital experiences, including characters' use of social media, online communication, digital self-presentation, experiences of exclusion, emotional isolation, and conflicts between online and offline identities. The study also examines how literary techniques construct these experiences and communicate their broader social meanings.

The primary data consist of selected contemporary YA novels that substantially represent digital technology, social media, and issues of identity and belonging among young characters. The novels are selected purposively according to several criteria (Šauperl, 2013). First, the texts must be categorized as Young Adult fiction and published within the defined contemporary period of the study. Second, they must feature adolescent or young adult protagonists whose experiences are significantly influenced by digital technology or social media. Third, the narratives must contain substantial representations of identity formation, social belonging, isolation, self-perception, or conflicts between online and offline identities. Finally, the selected texts must provide sufficient textual evidence for examining digital alienation and identity crisis through characterization, dialogue, narrative description, symbolism, and other literary elements. The titles, authors, publication years, and selection rationale of each novel are documented to establish the scope and transparency of the research corpus.

The data are textual excerpts selected from the novels that are relevant to the research objectives (Wickens, 2011). These include dialogue, narrative descriptions, characterization, internal monologues, social media interactions, text messages, descriptions of online identities, and scenes depicting loneliness, exclusion, or emotional disconnection. Particular attention is given to passages illustrating conflicts between characters' online and offline selves, social pressure to obtain digital validation, and attempts to construct or reconstruct personal identity. Symbolic representations of technology, digital spaces, smartphones, social media platforms, and virtual communication are also examined when they contribute to the representation of alienation or identity crisis.

Data collection is conducted through systematic close reading of the selected novels (Rauscher, 2014). Each text is read repeatedly to develop an understanding of its narrative structure, characters, major themes, and representations of digital culture. During subsequent readings, relevant passages are identified, documented, and organized according to thematic categories. The coding process focuses on digital alienation, online identity, offline identity, identity conflict, social pressure, belonging, emotional consequences, and resistance. Digital alienation includes representations of loneliness, disconnection, and isolation despite technological connectivity. Online identity refers to digital personas, self-presentation, and virtual identities, while offline identity concerns characters perceived or authentic selves. Identity conflict encompasses contradictions between online and offline identities. Social pressure includes the pursuit of popularity, peer expectations, and the need for online validation. Belonging concerns acceptance, rejection, and participation in social communities.

Emotional consequences include anxiety, insecurity, confusion, loneliness, and identity uncertainty, whereas resistance refers to characters' attempts to reject imposed identities and reclaim a more authentic sense of self.

The collected data are analyzed through a systematic interpretive sequence: textual evidence, coding, thematic categorization, literary interpretation, theoretical interpretation. First, relevant textual evidence is identified and coded according to the established categories. Second, recurring patterns and relationships among the codes are grouped into broader themes. Third, these themes are interpreted in relation to the literary techniques through which they are constructed, including characterization, narrative voice, focalization, dialogue, symbolism, imagery, setting, and contrasts between digital and physical spaces. Finally, the findings are interpreted using the theoretical perspectives of digital alienation, identity development, digital identity, and Young Adult literary studies. The analysis therefore moves beyond summarizing the selected novels by explaining how literary techniques construct representations of digital alienation and identity crisis and what these representations suggest about contemporary youth, digital culture, belonging, and the search for authentic identity.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Representation of Digital Alienation

One prominent representation of digital alienation is excessive digital interaction. Characters are frequently surrounded by smartphones, social media notifications, online conversations, and digital content, making technology an almost constant presence in their daily lives. Continuous engagement with digital devices can reduce opportunities for meaningful face-to-face interaction and encourage characters to substitute physical relationships with virtual communication. Although characters may communicate with numerous people online, these interactions do not always satisfy their emotional needs. The narratives therefore distinguish between being technologically connected and being emotionally connected. Digital communication can provide immediate interaction, but it may fail to provide the intimacy, empathy, and emotional security associated with meaningful human relationships.

Social media dependence further intensifies this form of alienation (Faucher, 2018). Young characters may rely on social media to obtain recognition, reassurance, or confirmation of their social status. Likes, comments, followers, and online responses can become measures through which characters evaluate their personal worth and social acceptance. When expected responses are absent or negative, characters may experience insecurity, disappointment, and loneliness. This representation suggests that digital platforms can transform social relationships into forms of measurable visibility, encouraging characters to seek external validation rather than developing a stable sense of self.

Another important pattern is the representation of superficial online relationships. Digital platforms enable characters to maintain large networks of acquaintances, yet these relationships may remain limited to brief messages, reactions, or curated interactions. The presence of many online contacts does not necessarily indicate the existence of genuine emotional intimacy (Thompson, 2008). Characters can therefore appear socially active while privately experiencing loneliness. This contrast is significant because it demonstrates that alienation is not necessarily caused by the absence of communication but by the absence of meaningful connection within that communication.

The fear of social exclusion is also central to the representation of digital alienation. Characters may feel pressured to remain continuously connected because withdrawing from online spaces could mean missing conversations, social events, or information shared among peers. This anxiety encourages persistent participation in digital environments even when such participation causes emotional exhaustion. The narratives thus present digital belonging

as conditional and unstable: characters may feel that they must constantly perform their presence in order to remain socially relevant. Consequently, digital connectivity can paradoxically become a source of pressure rather than genuine belonging.

Digital surveillance and social comparison further contribute to alienation. Characters are often aware that their activities, appearances, relationships, and opinions can be observed and evaluated by others (Eder et al., 2010). This awareness encourages self-monitoring and carefully controlled self-presentation. At the same time, exposure to idealized representations of other people's lives creates opportunities for continuous comparison. Characters may perceive themselves as less attractive, successful, popular, or socially accepted than their peers. Such comparisons can intensify feelings of inadequacy and reinforce the belief that their real lives do not correspond to the idealized identities displayed online.

The analysis also demonstrates that digital alienation is closely associated with the absence of meaningful interpersonal relationships. Characters may have frequent online conversations while lacking trusted individuals with whom they can openly express their fears, insecurities, and personal struggles. Digital communication therefore becomes insufficient when characters require emotional understanding and authentic interpersonal support. This absence of meaningful relationships can contribute to psychological isolation and prepare the conditions for the identity conflicts examined in subsequent sections of the study.

3.2 Fragmentation of Online and Offline Identity

The analysis further demonstrates that digital environments contribute to the fragmentation of young characters' identities by creating a distinction between their online and offline selves. One significant manifestation of this fragmentation is the construction of curated online identities. Characters may selectively present particular aspects of their lives through photographs, posts, comments, profiles, or other forms of digital communication. Positive experiences and desirable characteristics are emphasized, whereas failure, sadness, insecurity, and personal difficulties are often excluded. Through this selective presentation, characters create an online persona that may appear more confident, attractive, successful, or socially connected than their actual circumstances. The digital identity therefore becomes a carefully constructed representation rather than a complete reflection of the individual's personality.

The narratives also reveal the existence of hidden aspects of personality (Arciero & Bondolfi, 2011). Characters who appear confident and socially successful online may privately experience loneliness, anxiety, insecurity, or uncertainty. Conversely, characters who are marginalized or socially withdrawn in physical environments may construct more expressive or confident identities in digital spaces. This contrast demonstrates that online platforms can provide opportunities for experimentation with alternative identities. However, the ability to maintain different identities may also create psychological tension when characters struggle to reconcile their various selves. The gap between what they reveal and what they conceal becomes an important source of internal conflict.

Another recurring issue is the pressure to appear successful and happy. Digital culture encourages characters to display achievements, attractive lifestyles, friendships, and positive emotions. This pressure is particularly significant among young characters because social acceptance is frequently associated with visibility and perceived popularity. Characters may therefore feel compelled to present an idealized version of their lives even when their actual experiences are characterized by loneliness or personal difficulties. The performance of happiness becomes a social expectation, making it increasingly difficult for characters to acknowledge vulnerability or seek genuine emotional support.

This produces a clear discrepancy between appearance and reality. What audiences see online does not necessarily correspond to what characters experience offline. A character

may receive positive attention because of an apparently successful digital identity while simultaneously feeling emotionally isolated (Isbister, 2016). The contrast between digital representation and personal reality exposes the limitations of online self-presentation. It also illustrates how social media can conceal emotional problems rather than resolve them. The more successful the online persona appears, the more difficult it may become for the character to reveal the struggles that exist behind that image.

The construction of these identities can therefore be understood as a form of identity performance. Characters do not simply express who they are; they actively perform identities according to the expectations of their digital audiences. Their language, appearance, opinions, relationships, and activities may be strategically adjusted to gain acceptance or avoid rejection. Digital identity consequently becomes relational and performative, shaped by anticipated reactions from others. The desire for recognition can lead characters to prioritize how they are perceived over how they actually understand themselves.

Ultimately, the fragmentation between online and offline identities produces a difficulty in determining which identity is authentic. Characters may initially regard their online personas as carefully constructed performances, but repeated performance can gradually influence their actual self-perception. They may begin to question whether the confident person represented online is false or whether it reflects a part of themselves that cannot be expressed offline. This uncertainty creates an important dimension of identity crisis because characters are forced to negotiate competing versions of themselves without a clear sense of which one represents their authentic identity.

Thus, contemporary YA fiction portrays digital identity as both an opportunity and a source of conflict. Online environments allow young people to explore alternative forms of self-expression and experiment with different identities, but they can also encourage performance, concealment, comparison, and fragmentation. The contrast between curated online identities and complex offline realities demonstrates that digital connectivity can complicate rather than simplify identity formation. This fragmentation provides an important foundation for understanding the broader identity crisis experienced by young characters, particularly when the pursuit of social acceptance conflicts with the need for authenticity and meaningful self-understanding.

3.3 Identity Crisis Among Young Characters

The analysis indicates that identity crisis is one of the central psychological experiences experienced by young characters in contemporary Young Adult (YA) fiction. This crisis emerges when characters struggle to understand who they are, how they should be perceived by others, and what kind of identity they want to develop (Costello, 2009). Within digitally mediated environments, these questions become increasingly complicated because young characters are exposed to multiple social expectations and opportunities to construct different versions of themselves. Their identity crisis is therefore represented not simply as an individual psychological problem but as a continuing negotiation between personal desires, social relationships, and external expectations.

A major manifestation of identity crisis is uncertainty about the self. Young characters frequently question their personalities, values, abilities, appearance, and social position. They may be unsure whether their behavior reflects their genuine preferences or whether it has been shaped by the expectations of friends, family, peers, and online communities. This uncertainty can be represented through internal monologues, self-questioning, hesitation, and narrative descriptions of emotional confusion. From an identity-development perspective, such uncertainty reflects the difficulty of establishing a coherent sense of self during adolescence, a developmental period in which individuals actively explore possible identities before achieving greater identity commitment.

Insecurity further intensifies this process. Characters may compare themselves with peers and perceive themselves as inadequate in terms of appearance, popularity, achievements, relationships, or social status. Digital environments can amplify these insecurities because young people are continuously exposed to idealized representations of others. In literary narratives, insecurity may be communicated through characterization, dialogue, internal reflection, and contrasts between what characters believe about themselves and how others perceive them. These representations demonstrate that identity is influenced not only by internal self-perception but also by the social environment in which identity is constructed.

Another significant characteristic is dependence on external validation. Characters may rely heavily on approval from friends, romantic partners, peers, or online audiences to determine their self-worth (Chua & Chang, 2016). Positive comments, attention, popularity, and social acceptance can temporarily strengthen their confidence, whereas rejection or negative responses can produce feelings of inadequacy. This dependence indicates that characters have not yet developed a stable internal basis for evaluating themselves. Within identity theory, the search for recognition can be understood as part of the broader process through which individuals negotiate their social identity and seek confirmation that their developing sense of self is acceptable to significant others.

The characters' identity crises are also reflected in confusion about social roles. Young characters often occupy multiple roles simultaneously, such as student, friend, child, romantic partner, social media user, or member of a particular peer group. Expectations associated with these roles may conflict with one another (Turner & Taking, 2013). A character may be expected to behave confidently among friends while remaining obedient within the family, or to present a successful identity online while privately struggling with emotional difficulties. Such contradictions create uncertainty about which behaviors are appropriate and which identity should be prioritized. YA fiction represents these conflicts as part of the broader transition from dependence toward greater personal autonomy.

A further dimension of identity crisis is the rejection of one's authentic self. Some characters consciously hide their interests, opinions, vulnerabilities, or personal characteristics because they fear judgment or exclusion. They may adopt behaviors that do not correspond to their genuine values in order to gain social acceptance. This rejection is particularly significant when characters become increasingly dependent on constructed online identities. The fictional narrative may reveal the difference between what characters say publicly and what they think privately, thereby exposing the emotional cost of suppressing their authentic identities.

The strongest form of identity conflict emerges through the tension between individual identity and social expectations. Characters may want to define themselves according to their own values, yet simultaneously feel pressured to conform to expectations established by peers, family, social media communities, or broader cultural standards. This conflict can result in anxiety, isolation, frustration, and emotional instability. Literary techniques such as contrasting characterization, internal monologue, dialogue, symbolism, and shifts between online and offline settings can make this conflict visible to readers. The narrative consequently presents identity formation as a social process rather than an entirely individual choice.

These findings can be connected to Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, particularly the stage of identity versus role confusion. From this perspective, adolescence involves the development of a coherent identity through exploration of personal values, social roles, relationships, and future possibilities (Kroger, 2006). Failure to reconcile these different dimensions may produce role confusion and uncertainty. The experiences of young characters in contemporary YA fiction reflect this process, but digital environments add a contemporary dimension by multiplying the spaces in which identity must be negotiated. Characters are not

only constructing identities within their physical communities but also managing identities before online audiences.

Therefore, identity crisis in contemporary YA fiction can be understood as the result of a complex interaction between self-exploration, social validation, digital self-presentation, and social expectations. The characters' uncertainty and insecurity demonstrate the difficulties of developing a coherent identity in a highly connected environment. Their dependence on external validation and rejection of authentic selves further reveal how digital and social pressures can interfere with identity development. By representing these struggles through literary techniques, contemporary YA fiction portrays identity formation as an ongoing search for authenticity and belonging, while also demonstrating how digital alienation can intensify the developmental challenges associated with becoming an independent self.

3.4 Digital Technology and Social Belonging

The analysis further reveals that digital technology plays a significant role in shaping young characters' desire for social belonging. One prominent representation is online popularity. Characters may associate popularity with visibility and recognition within digital communities. Having many followers or receiving substantial attention can be interpreted as evidence of social success, while limited engagement may create feelings of inadequacy or invisibility. This dynamic transforms social belonging into something that can be publicly observed and continuously evaluated (Chayko, 2008). Through characterization and internal reflection, YA narratives can demonstrate how characters become increasingly concerned with maintaining a desirable digital image. Popularity therefore functions not only as a social condition but also as a psychological pressure that influences characters' behavior and identity.

The significance of likes and followers further illustrates how digital technology can quantify social acceptance. Online responses may become symbolic indicators of whether a character is valued by peers. Characters may repeatedly check notifications, monitor reactions, or modify their online behavior according to the responses they receive. When positive reactions are obtained, characters may experience temporary confidence and acceptance; when reactions are absent or negative, they may experience rejection, insecurity, or disappointment. The representation of these behaviors suggests that digital platforms can encourage young people to depend on external indicators when evaluating their self-worth and social belonging.

Peer acceptance is also increasingly mediated through digital communication. Friendships may be established, maintained, or judged through group chats, social media interactions, and online communities. Being included in a digital conversation can symbolize membership, whereas being ignored, removed, or excluded can be experienced as a form of social rejection. In YA fiction, such situations can reveal how traditional adolescent concerns about friendship and acceptance have been extended into digital spaces. The boundaries between physical and virtual social life become increasingly blurred, meaning that exclusion online can have significant emotional consequences in characters' offline lives.

Another important issue is cyberbullying, which demonstrates the darker dimension of technology-mediated belonging. Online environments can provide spaces for harassment, humiliation, rumor dissemination, and public judgment. Unlike traditional interpersonal conflict, cyberbullying can potentially reach a wider audience and remain visible through digital content. Characters experiencing online harassment may feel powerless because the source of the hostility can follow them beyond physical spaces. Literary representations of cyberbullying therefore emphasize how digital environments can transform peer conflict into persistent forms of psychological and social alienation.

The fear of missing out (FOMO) further strengthens characters' dependence on digital communities (Tandon et al., 2021). Characters may feel compelled to remain constantly

connected because they fear missing important conversations, social events, friendships, or opportunities for recognition. This fear encourages continuous monitoring of digital platforms even when online participation produces stress or exhaustion. The narratives consequently reveal a paradox: characters remain connected because they want to belong, but their constant engagement can increase anxiety and emotional dependence. Digital participation becomes almost obligatory because disconnection is perceived as a potential threat to social status and belonging.

Exclusion from digital communities represents another significant form of social alienation. Being removed from a group chat, ignored on social media, excluded from online activities, or denied access to a particular digital community can produce feelings similar to physical social rejection. For young characters, such experiences may challenge their sense of identity because digital communities can become important sources of friendship and recognition. The loss of digital membership can therefore represent more than the loss of communication; it can threaten the character's perceived social identity and sense of belonging (Diamandaki, 2003).

Finally, the analysis demonstrates a strong dependence on online validation. Characters may increasingly rely on comments, likes, followers, messages, and other forms of digital recognition to confirm that they are accepted and valued. This dependence can make their emotional state highly responsive to changes in online attention. When validation is received, characters may feel temporarily secure; when it disappears, they may question their value and social position. Such representations connect digital technology with the identity crisis discussed previously, because a character's understanding of self becomes increasingly dependent on how others respond to their digital persona.

3.5 Literary Strategies for Representing Digital Alienation

Because this study focuses on Young Adult (YA) fiction, digital alienation must be examined not only as a social or psychological phenomenon but also as a literary construction. Contemporary YA authors employ various narrative and stylistic strategies to communicate the complex relationship between digital technology, emotional isolation, identity, and social belonging. The representation of digital alienation is therefore created through characterization, narrative perspective, internal monologue, dialogue, symbolism, imagery, spatial contrasts, and recurring technological motifs. These literary strategies allow readers to understand not only what characters experience in digital environments but also how those experiences affect their inner lives and relationships.

Characterization is one of the most important strategies for representing digital alienation (Nygren & Gidlund, 2016). Young characters may be portrayed as highly active online while simultaneously experiencing loneliness, insecurity, or difficulty establishing meaningful relationships offline. Their habits, emotional responses, interpersonal behavior, and dependence on digital communication reveal the psychological consequences of their technological environment. For example, a character who constantly checks social media may initially appear socially connected, but characterization can gradually reveal that this behavior is motivated by anxiety, fear of rejection, or a need for validation. Such characterization exposes the difference between external digital activity and internal emotional experience.

First-person narration can provide particularly powerful access to digital alienation because it allows readers to experience the character's psychological world directly (Bell, 2016). When characters narrate their own experiences, readers can observe the contradiction between their public online identity and private emotional reality. A character may describe receiving numerous online interactions while simultaneously expressing feelings of loneliness or invisibility. The first-person perspective therefore creates intimacy between the character and reader and demonstrates that digital connection cannot necessarily resolve emotional isolation.

Closely related to first-person narration is the use of internal monologue. Internal monologues reveal thoughts and emotions that characters may conceal from friends, family members, or online audiences. Through this technique, authors can expose insecurity behind apparently confident digital identities. Characters may privately question whether they are liked, whether their online persona is authentic, or whether their relationships are genuine. Internal monologue thus provides evidence of identity fragmentation and demonstrates how external digital performance can differ from internal self-perception.

Dialogue also contributes to the representation of digital alienation. Conversations between characters can reveal conflicts surrounding social media, online popularity, digital expectations, and interpersonal relationships (Graham, 2019). Dialogue may also expose differences between what characters communicate publicly and what they actually believe. In some narratives, digital conversations such as text messages, group chats, or online comments may be presented alongside face-to-face dialogue, allowing the reader to compare the emotional quality of different forms of communication. This contrast can demonstrate that technological efficiency does not necessarily correspond to emotional intimacy.

Another significant strategy is symbolism. Technological objects can acquire meanings that extend beyond their practical functions. A smartphone, for example, can symbolize both connection and isolation. It provides access to friends, information, and social communities, yet it can simultaneously represent emotional dependence, surveillance, distraction, or separation from physical surroundings. Similarly, a social media profile may symbolize a constructed identity, while a notification may represent the character's dependence on external recognition. Through symbolism, ordinary technological objects become representations of broader psychological and social conflicts.

Imagery further strengthens these representations by creating sensory and emotional associations with digital life (Pera & Viglia, 2016). Authors may use imagery involving screens, notifications, artificial light, scrolling feeds, crowded online spaces, or silent physical environments to contrast digital activity with emotional emptiness. For example, an image of a character surrounded by the light of a screen in an otherwise isolated room can visually communicate the paradox of being digitally connected while physically alone. Such imagery enables abstract concepts such as alienation and loneliness to become concrete narrative experiences.

The contrast between digital and physical spaces is another important literary strategy. Digital environments may be represented as crowded, fast-moving, and constantly active, whereas physical environments may appear silent, empty, or emotionally distant. Alternatively, online spaces may initially provide characters with a sense of belonging while physical spaces expose their vulnerability. By moving characters between these spaces, authors can highlight the differences between virtual participation and embodied social relationships. The spatial contrast consequently becomes a representation of the characters' fragmented experiences of belonging and identity.

Narrative perspective also influences how digital alienation is understood (Nygren & Gidlund, 2016). A limited perspective may restrict readers' knowledge to a character's subjective interpretation of online interactions, emphasizing uncertainty and anxiety. Multiple perspectives, in contrast, can reveal that different characters interpret the same digital event differently. Changes in perspective can therefore demonstrate how digital communication creates misunderstandings, assumptions, and competing perceptions of identity. Narrative perspective becomes particularly significant when the apparent online image of a character differs from what readers learn through their private experiences.

Finally, recurring technological motifs can establish digital alienation as a continuous theme throughout a narrative. Repeated references to smartphones, screens, notifications, social media feeds, messages, photographs, or online profiles can symbolize the persistent

presence of technology in characters' lives. When these motifs recur during moments of loneliness, conflict, anxiety, or identity uncertainty, they establish a connection between technological environments and psychological states. The repetition can also demonstrate how difficult it is for characters to separate themselves from digital expectations.

Taken together, these literary strategies demonstrate that digital alienation in contemporary YA fiction is constructed through more than the simple inclusion of technology in the narrative. Characterization reveals behavioral and psychological consequences; first-person narration and internal monologue expose hidden emotional conflicts; dialogue reveals interpersonal tensions; symbolism and imagery give technological objects deeper meanings; spatial contrasts distinguish virtual connection from physical isolation; narrative perspective shapes readers' understanding of digital experiences; and recurring technological motifs reinforce the persistence of digital culture. Through these techniques, contemporary YA fiction transforms digital alienation from a technological issue into a complex literary representation of loneliness, identity fragmentation, social pressure, and the struggle for meaningful human connection.

3.6 Relationship Between Digital Alienation and Identity Crisis

The relationship between digital alienation and identity crisis represents one of the central findings of this study. The analysis suggests that these two phenomena are closely interconnected rather than existing as separate psychological and social conditions. In contemporary Young Adult (YA) fiction, digital environments frequently influence how young characters understand themselves, interact with others, and evaluate their social position. The relationship can be interpreted through the following sequence: Digital Pressure, Alienation, Identity Fragmentation, Identity Crisis, Search for Authentic Self (Patrick-Weber, 2014). This sequence illustrates how technological environments can gradually transform social pressure into psychological uncertainty and, ultimately, motivate characters to reconsider their identities.

The first stage, digital pressure, emerges from the expectations associated with constant connectivity and online visibility. Characters may feel pressured to maintain an attractive digital presence, respond quickly to messages, remain active on social media, obtain positive feedback, and demonstrate an apparently successful life. The expectation to continuously participate in digital spaces can create emotional pressure because characters become increasingly concerned with how they are perceived by others. Online popularity, social comparison, and fear of exclusion further intensify this pressure, making digital participation appear necessary for maintaining social acceptance.

Digital pressure can subsequently produce alienation. Although characters may have numerous online connections, their relationships can remain superficial or primarily dependent on digital interaction (Gardner & Davis, 2013). Characters may communicate continuously without experiencing genuine emotional intimacy. In some narratives, the more time characters spend seeking online recognition, the more disconnected they become from themselves and the people around them. This creates the central paradox identified in the study: technological connectivity can coexist with emotional isolation. Digital alienation therefore emerges not necessarily because characters lack access to communication, but because digital interaction fails to satisfy their deeper needs for recognition, intimacy, and belonging.

The experience of alienation then contributes to identity fragmentation. Characters construct and maintain different versions of themselves according to the expectations of online and offline environments. Their digital personas may emphasize confidence, popularity, attractiveness, or happiness, while their private experiences may involve insecurity, loneliness, anxiety, and uncertainty. The continuous performance of an idealized identity creates a distance between the self presented to others and the self experienced

internally (Dittmar, 2007). As this distance increases, characters may find it increasingly difficult to determine which version of themselves is authentic.

Identity fragmentation can develop into an identity crisis when characters are unable to reconcile these competing versions of self. They may question their values, personalities, relationships, and social roles. Dependence on external validation can further weaken their sense of internal identity because self-worth becomes dependent on how others respond to their digital persona. From the perspective of Erikson's concept of identity versus role confusion, this condition reflects difficulty establishing a coherent identity while navigating conflicting social expectations. Digital environments intensify this developmental challenge by creating additional spaces in which young people must perform and negotiate identity.

However, the relationship does not necessarily end in psychological crisis. The analysis suggests that identity crisis can also initiate a search for the authentic self. When characters recognize the limitations of their constructed identities, they may begin questioning the expectations imposed by peers, social media, and other social environments. Some characters may withdraw from digital performance, seek genuine interpersonal relationships, acknowledge their vulnerabilities, or redefine their values independently of online approval. The search for authenticity therefore becomes a potential response to digital alienation and identity fragmentation.

Importantly, the selected narratives do not necessarily present technology as the primary cause of alienation (Kellner, 2006). In many cases, technology functions more appropriately as an amplifier of existing social problems. Loneliness, insecurity, peer pressure, social exclusion, and the desire for recognition may already exist before characters become deeply involved in digital environments. Social media and digital communication can intensify these conditions by increasing their visibility, speed, and persistence. For example, ordinary peer comparison can become continuous social comparison when characters have constant access to carefully curated representations of other people's lives.

At the same time, technology can function as a neutral medium shaped by human behavior. Digital platforms themselves do not inevitably produce alienation or identity crisis. Their effects depend on how characters use them and how social relationships are structured within digital environments. Online communication can support friendship, self-expression, identity exploration, and emotional connection when used in meaningful ways. This interpretation prevents the analysis from adopting a simplistic technological-determinist position in which technology is automatically considered harmful.

Indeed, contemporary YA fiction may also portray digital spaces as environments that facilitate identity exploration and connection. Characters can experiment with aspects of their personality online, find communities that share their interests, communicate with people who understand their experiences, and discover forms of self-expression unavailable in their immediate physical environments. For marginalized or socially isolated characters, digital communities may provide valuable opportunities for belonging. Therefore, the same technological environment that contributes to alienation can also provide resources for overcoming it.

The relationship between digital alienation and identity crisis can consequently be understood as dynamic and contradictory rather than linear and deterministic. Digital technology can create pressure, intensify alienation, and contribute to identity fragmentation, but it can also provide spaces for exploration, connection, and self-discovery. The decisive issue is the relationship between technology, individual behavior, social expectations, and the quality of interpersonal relationships. Contemporary YA fiction therefore presents digital culture as a complex environment in which young people negotiate competing demands for visibility, belonging, authenticity, and autonomy.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that contemporary Young Adult (YA) fiction represents digital alienation as a complex experience in which technological connectivity can coexist with loneliness, social disconnection, and emotional isolation. Digital technology provides opportunities for communication and social participation, but excessive dependence on online interaction, social comparison, and external validation can weaken meaningful interpersonal connections. The findings further demonstrate that digital alienation is closely related to identity crisis, particularly through the tension between the online self and offline self and between personal identity and socially expected identity. Characters frequently struggle to reconcile their curated digital personas with their private experiences, resulting in insecurity, identity fragmentation, and uncertainty about authenticity. From a literary perspective, YA fiction does not present technology merely as a background element. Through characterization, narrative perspective, internal monologue, dialogue, symbolism, imagery, and representations of digital communication, authors construct complex portrayals of identity formation in digital culture. These literary representations provide broader insight into how young people negotiate authenticity, belonging, self-presentation, and identity within increasingly mediated social environments. However, this study is limited by its selection of a limited number of novels, dependence on textual interpretation, focus on particular cultural contexts, and absence of empirical data from actual young readers. Future research could therefore compare YA fiction across different countries, cultures, genres, and generations to identify broader patterns in the literary representation of digital alienation and identity crisis.

5. References

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