

Media Engagement and Identity Formation Among Minority Youth



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KEYWORDS

• Identity • Race • Ethnicity • Internet • Racism • Discrimination • Social media

KEY POINTS

- There are significant differences in how media is used by youth of different ethnic and racial groups.
- Media and social media help inform the creation of a social identity for youth.
- Youth members of different ethnic groups have varying attitudes toward racism, familiarity with members of other groups, and understanding of racially charged events portrayed in the media.
- Child mental health professionals should become familiar with issues of race on and off screen and be willing to engage with their patients and families about such matters.

INTRODUCTION

Youth in the United States currently spend an unprecedented amount of time engaged with media of all kinds: television and movies, streaming services, social media, video games, and listening to music. According to a 2015 study by Common Sense Media, 13 to 18 year olds spend an average of 8.5 hours per day of electronic media use for entertainment, excluding time spent on schoolwork, and tweens (those 8–12 years old) spend an average of 6 hours per day on entertainment media.¹ Entertainment media includes watching TV, movies, and online videos; playing games on various devices; using the Internet; and listening to music, often with more than one form of media at a time. It can be difficult to precisely define media engagement, because devices are often portable, ubiquitous, and used in short bursts throughout the day or left on in the background.² This level of media exposure provides a near-constant barrage of messages about peer and family relationships, gender roles, expected and

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acceptable behaviors, social mobility, stereotypes of various sorts, and social values. Individual media usage varies, and media use patterns between racial groups differ significantly. Clinicians who work with youth should understand how they engage with media, including differences between ethnic groups, and how to maximize positive potential of media use for youth and minimize negative consequences.

The rise of the Internet and social media in our culture has led to both greater connectedness and greater fragmentation. Greater ability to find and connect with peers who share a common interest, identity, or viewpoint allows for feelings of solidarity and community. These relationships may enhance perspectives created from experiences in the nondigital world (ie, interactions with friends, family, and the larger community) or provide a valuable alternative perspective that is otherwise lacking. The common restriction of one's Internet experiences to narrow pursuits and ideas may heighten the significance of online relationships, both positive and negative. For youth who identify as a minority, due to ethnicity, race, gender identity, or sexual preference, online experiences may carry greater weight, as a venue to explore their identity within a mainstream culture that may not have varied representations of their culture or experience. For youth who do not identify as a minority, the meaning attached to exposure to minority youth presentations online may similarly carry more weight, especially for those without exposure to those peers in their daily lives. For example, someone who spends all their time playing *Grand Theft Auto*, with no real-world contact with African Americans, may be more susceptible to certain stereotypes about African Americans involving criminal behavior, greed, and dysfunctional families. Such a person who also watches "Black-ish" and "Scandal" would have exposure to different media representations and may develop a more nuanced understanding of African Americans and be less susceptible to stereotypes.

This article presents data summarizing patterns of media use by youth, with an emphasis on specific ethnic and racial populations, predominantly European Americans, African Americans, and Hispanic Americans, because these groups are most largely represented in available US data. The authors then discuss identity formation and social identity theory as they relate to online influences, benefits, and risks of online engagement specific to minority populations, and how child mental health professionals may use this information to better treat patients and their families. The relationship between online and offline realities should be kept in mind, paying particular attention to issues of online racism, cyber aggression, ethnic and racial identity, and risky online behaviors.

Nearly all modern-day children interact online, so that the question becomes not if they will do so, but when and how. According to the Pew Research Center, 92% of adolescents connect to the Internet daily and 24% of them are online "almost constantly."³ An increasing proportion of adolescents routinely communicate with peers via digital communication: texting (88%), instant messaging (79%), social media (72%), and video chat (59%).³ More than 20 million youth across the globe use Facebook, 7.5 million of whom are under the "required" age of 13.⁴ Adolescents are both passive and active participants in the online world, sometimes perusing peer contributions without comment, other times remarking on that content by texting, tweeting, and posting. Users co-create reality online, meaning they are constantly forming and being formed by the reality in which they engage, and being reinforced by that reality, for better and worse. For example, an individual consumed by watching their peers' Facebook feed, mentally documenting all the events to which he or she was uninvited, may feel the world is passing him or her by without concern. If that person engages with a WhatsApp group of friends to provide mutual support, converse, and share daily experiences, he or she may feel more connected and understood. Parents

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