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Narrative Immersion and Identity Construction in Adolescents' Short Video Use: The Moderating Role of Digital Narrative Processing

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how narrative immersion in short-form videos relates to adolescents' identity construction (personal identity clarity, social identity commitment, identity exploration) and the moderating role of digital narrative processing (critical evaluation, empathy, elaboration). A cross-sectional survey of 1,542 adolescents (Mage=15.87, 53.2% females) across five countries found narrative immersion positively correlated with identity exploration and social identity commitment, but negatively with personal identity clarity. Digital narrative processing moderated these links: critical evaluation weakened the negative association with personal identity clarity; empathy strengthened the positive link with social identity commitment; elaboration enhanced the positive correlation with identity exploration. These findings shed light on the psychological mechanisms of short videos' impact on adolescent identity development, offering guidance for rational short video engagement and healthy identity construction.

Keywords: Short-form videos; Adolescents; Narrative immersion; Identity construction; Digital narrative processing; Media psychology

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1. Introduction

In the contemporary digital media landscape, short-form videos (e.g., TikTok, Douyin, Instagram Reels) have rapidly become a ubiquitous and influential media form, particularly among adolescent populations (Common Sense Media, 2022; Orben & Przybylski, 2023). Characterized by brevity (typically 15–60 seconds), high visual appeal, and algorithm-driven personalized content delivery, short videos uniquely capture adolescents' attention and dominate their daily media consumption (Jiang et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2023). Unlike traditional media, short videos present fragmented yet vivid narratives that often revolve around lifestyle, values, and social norms, making them a significant context for adolescents' socialization and psychological development (Valkenburg et al., 2021; Tanaka et al., 2023).

Adolescence is a critical developmental stage marked by intense identity construction, a process involving the exploration of personal values, social roles, and interpersonal relationships (Erikson, 1968; Meeus, 2021). During this period, media experiences play a pivotal role in shaping identity development by providing diverse role models, value frameworks, and social comparison standards (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013; Carter et al., 2022). Short videos, with their immersive narrative features and widespread accessibility, have emerged as a key agent in this process. Narrative immersion—defined as the degree to which individuals become deeply engaged with the storylines, characters, and emotional contexts of media content—has been identified as a core psychological experience in short video consumption (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2021; Patel et al., 2023). However, the nature of the relationship between narrative immersion in short video use and adolescent identity construction remains unclear, with existing research yielding inconsistent findings.

Some studies suggest that immersive engagement with media narratives can facilitate identity exploration by exposing adolescents to diverse perspectives and life experiences (Valkenburg et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2023). For instance, short videos featuring stories

of cultural diversity or career exploration may inspire adolescents to reflect on their own social roles and life choices, thereby promoting social identity commitment and identity exploration (Tanaka et al., 2023; Mendez et al., 2024). In contrast, other research indicates that excessive narrative immersion in short videos may lead to identity confusion. The fragmented and often idealized narratives in short videos can overwhelm adolescents' cognitive processing capacities, making it difficult for them to integrate these diverse experiences into a coherent personal identity (Jiang et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2023). This inconsistency highlights the need for a more nuanced examination of the relationship between narrative immersion and identity construction, particularly by considering potential moderating variables.

Digital narrative processing—encompassing the cognitive and emotional strategies individuals use to interpret and engage with digital media narratives—has been proposed as a key factor that may moderate the impact of media immersion on psychological outcomes (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2021; Carter et al., 2022). Three core dimensions of digital narrative processing are particularly relevant: critical narrative evaluation (the ability to critically assess the authenticity, bias, and intent of media narratives), narrative empathy (the emotional resonance with characters and storylines in media content), and narrative elaboration (the extent to which individuals reflect on and connect media narratives to their own lives) (Patel et al., 2023; Mendez et al., 2024). Adolescents with different levels of these processing abilities may experience narrative immersion differently, leading to varying effects on identity construction. For example, adolescents who engage in critical narrative evaluation may be less likely to be overwhelmed by fragmented short video narratives, thereby mitigating potential negative impacts on personal identity clarity. In contrast, those with high narrative empathy may be more deeply influenced by the social values portrayed in short videos, strengthening the link between immersion and social identity commitment.

Despite the potential importance of digital

narrative processing, existing research on adolescent short video use and identity construction has largely overlooked its moderating role. Moreover, most studies have focused on a single dimension of identity (e.g., personal identity) or a single aspect of short video use (e.g., frequency of use), failing to capture the complex interplay between narrative immersion (a key experiential dimension of short video use) and multiple facets of identity construction (personal identity clarity, social identity commitment, identity exploration) (Orben & Przybylski, 2023; Zhang et al., 2023). Additionally, previous research has often relied on samples from a single cultural context, limiting the generalizability of findings given the cross-cultural popularity of short video platforms (Tanaka et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2023).

To address these gaps, the present study adopts a cross-sectional survey design with a large, culturally diverse sample of adolescents from five countries (the United States, Japan, India, Chile, and Pakistan) to explore the relationship between narrative immersion in short video use and three key dimensions of identity construction (personal identity clarity, social identity commitment, identity exploration). Furthermore, the study examines the moderating role of three dimensions of digital narrative processing (critical narrative evaluation, narrative empathy, narrative elaboration). The specific research objectives are: (1) To investigate the bivariate relationships between narrative immersion and the three dimensions of identity construction; (2) To test the direct effects of narrative immersion on each identity dimension, controlling for relevant covariates; (3) To examine the moderating effects of each dimension of digital narrative processing on the relationships between narrative immersion and identity construction; (4) To explore potential cross-cultural variations in these relationships (exploratory objective).

This study makes several theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it enriches the literature on media psychology and adolescent development by systematically examining the role of narrative immersion—an understudied experiential dimension of short video use—in identity construction. By

investigating the moderating role of digital narrative processing, it also clarifies the boundary conditions of the relationship between short video immersion and identity outcomes, advancing our understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying media effects on adolescents. Methodologically, the use of a large, cross-cultural sample enhances the generalizability of the findings, addressing a key limitation of previous single-culture studies. Practically, the findings provide actionable insights for parents, educators, and policymakers to guide adolescents' healthy engagement with short videos, foster critical digital narrative processing skills, and promote positive identity development.

The structure of this paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews relevant literature and develops the research hypotheses; Section 3 details the research methodology, including participants, measures, data collection procedures, and data analysis strategies; Section 4 presents the results of the study, including descriptive statistics, correlation analyses, regression analyses for direct and moderating effects, and exploratory cross-cultural analyses; Section 5 discusses the main findings, their theoretical and practical implications, the study's limitations, and directions for future research; Section 6 concludes with a summary of the key contributions and conclusions.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses

2.1 Narrative Immersion in Short Video Use

Narrative immersion is a core construct in media psychology, referring to a state of deep engagement with media narratives characterized by attentional focus, emotional involvement, and a temporary suspension of disbelief (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2021; Carter et al., 2022). Unlike general media engagement (e.g., frequency of use), narrative immersion reflects the quality of the media experience, capturing how deeply individuals are absorbed in the storylines and characters presented in media content (Valkenburg et al., 2021; Patel et al., 2023). Short videos, with their concise, visually compelling, and emotionally charged

narratives, are uniquely suited to inducing narrative immersion. The rapid sequence of scenes, rhythmic editing, and personalized content delivery (driven by algorithms) create a „flow“ state that encourages continuous engagement and deep emotional investment (Jiang et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2023).

Several factors specific to short videos contribute to their immersive potential. First, the brevity of short videos reduces cognitive load, allowing adolescents to quickly grasp and engage with narratives without feeling overwhelmed (Orben & Przybylski, 2023; Tanaka et al., 2023). Second, the visual and auditory richness of short videos (e.g., high-definition imagery, catchy music, sound effects) stimulates multiple sensory modalities, enhancing emotional resonance and attentional focus (Mendez et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2023). Third, algorithmic recommendation systems ensure that adolescents are continuously exposed to content aligned with their interests, increasing the relevance of the narratives and reinforcing immersive engagement (Van Dijck et al., 2021; Jiang et al., 2022). Together, these features make short videos a powerful medium for inducing narrative immersion, which in turn shapes adolescents' psychological responses and behavioral outcomes.

2.2 Identity Construction in Adolescence

Identity construction is a central developmental task of adolescence, defined as the process by which individuals form a coherent and stable sense of self, including their personal values, social roles, and relationships with others (Erikson, 1968; Meeus, 2021). Building on Erikson's work, contemporary identity research has distinguished between three key dimensions of identity construction: personal identity clarity, social identity commitment, and identity exploration (Crocetti et al., 2022; Schwartz et al., 2023). Personal identity clarity refers to the degree to which individuals have a clear, consistent, and confident understanding of their own personality, values, and goals (Campbell et al., 2021; Crocetti et al., 2022). Social identity commitment reflects the emotional investment and sense of belonging to social

groups (e.g., cultural, peer, or community groups) (Tajfel & Turner, 2020; Schwartz et al., 2023). Identity exploration involves actively seeking information about different roles, values, and lifestyles to form a sense of self (Meeus, 2021; Crocetti et al., 2022).

Adolescence is a critical period for identity construction because of the confluence of biological, cognitive, and social changes (Erikson, 1968; Meeus, 2021). During this stage, adolescents' cognitive abilities (e.g., abstract thinking, self-reflection) expand, allowing them to engage in more complex identity exploration. Simultaneously, social interactions become increasingly diverse, exposing adolescents to a wide range of role models and value systems (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013; Carter et al., 2022). Digital media, and short videos in particular, have become a key context for these processes, as they provide adolescents with access to diverse narratives about identity, belonging, and lifestyle (Orben & Przybylski, 2023; Zhang et al., 2023). The way adolescents engage with these narratives (e.g., through narrative immersion) can significantly shape their identity development.

2.3 Narrative Immersion and Identity Construction

The relationship between narrative immersion in short video use and adolescent identity construction is complex, with potential positive and negative effects depending on the dimension of identity considered. Below, we develop hypotheses for each identity dimension.

For personal identity clarity, we hypothesize a negative relationship with narrative immersion. Personal identity clarity requires the integration of consistent experiences and values into a coherent self-concept (Campbell et al., 2021; Crocetti et al., 2022). Short video narratives are often fragmented, diverse, and sometimes contradictory, as algorithms prioritize engagement over coherence (Van Dijck et al., 2021; Jiang et al., 2022). Deep narrative immersion in these fragmented narratives may overwhelm adolescents' cognitive capacity to integrate information, leading to confusion about their own values and goals.

Additionally, short videos often present idealized and unrealistic portrayals of lifestyles and identities (e.g., „perfect“ body images, luxurious lifestyles), which can create discrepancies between adolescents‘ real selves and the idealized selves portrayed in media (Primack et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2023). This discrepancy may further undermine personal identity clarity. Thus:

H1: Narrative immersion in short video use is negatively associated with adolescents‘ personal identity clarity.

For social identity commitment, we hypothesize a positive relationship with narrative immersion. Social identity commitment is rooted in a sense of belonging to social groups, and media narratives can strengthen this sense by highlighting shared values, norms, and experiences (Tajfel & Turner, 2020; Schwartz et al., 2023). Short videos often feature narratives centered on specific social groups (e.g., cultural communities, hobby groups, peer groups), and narrative immersion can enhance emotional resonance with these groups. When adolescents immerse themselves in narratives that reflect their own social groups, they may experience increased feelings of belonging and commitment (Tanaka et al., 2023; Mendez et al., 2024). Even for narratives about new social groups, immersion can foster understanding and identification, leading to new social identity commitments. Thus:

H2: Narrative immersion in short video use is positively associated with adolescents‘ social identity commitment.

For identity exploration, we hypothesize a positive relationship with narrative immersion. Identity exploration involves seeking out diverse information about roles and values (Meeus, 2021; Crocetti et al., 2022). Short videos provide a vast array of narratives about different lifestyles, careers, values, and cultures, exposing adolescents to perspectives they may not encounter in their offline lives (Valkenburg et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2023). Narrative immersion enhances the depth of engagement with these narratives, allowing adolescents to vividly experience and reflect on different identity possibilities. This immersive engagement can inspire adolescents to actively explore

new roles and values, fostering identity exploration. Thus:

H3: Narrative immersion in short video use is positively associated with adolescents‘ identity exploration.

2.4 The Moderating Role of Digital Narrative Processing

Digital narrative processing refers to the cognitive and emotional strategies individuals use to interpret, evaluate, and engage with digital media narratives (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2021; Patel et al., 2023). As noted earlier, three dimensions are particularly relevant: critical narrative evaluation, narrative empathy, and narrative elaboration. We hypothesize that each of these dimensions moderates the relationship between narrative immersion and identity construction in distinct ways.

Critical narrative evaluation involves the ability to critically assess the authenticity, bias, and intent of media narratives (Carter et al., 2022; Mendez et al., 2024). Adolescents with high critical narrative evaluation skills are more likely to recognize the fragmented and idealized nature of short video narratives, rather than accepting them as realistic representations of reality. This critical awareness can mitigate the negative impact of narrative immersion on personal identity clarity by helping adolescents avoid confusion from contradictory narratives and reduce the discrepancy between idealized media portrayals and their real selves (Primack et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2023). For social identity commitment and identity exploration, critical narrative evaluation may help adolescents make more informed and authentic commitments to social groups and explore identity possibilities in a more focused way, rather than being passively influenced by immersive narratives. Thus, we hypothesize that critical narrative evaluation weakens the negative relationship between narrative immersion and personal identity clarity, and strengthens the positive relationships between narrative immersion and social identity commitment/identity exploration:

H4a: Critical narrative evaluation moderates the

relationship between narrative immersion and personal identity clarity, such that the negative association is weaker for adolescents with higher critical narrative evaluation.

H4b: Critical narrative evaluation moderates the relationship between narrative immersion and social identity commitment, such that the positive association is stronger for adolescents with higher critical narrative evaluation.

H4c: Critical narrative evaluation moderates the relationship between narrative immersion and identity exploration, such that the positive association is stronger for adolescents with higher critical narrative evaluation.

Narrative empathy refers to the emotional resonance with characters and storylines in media content, including feelings of compassion, understanding, and identification (Valkenburg et al., 2021; Patel et al., 2023). Adolescents with high narrative empathy are more likely to emotionally connect with the characters and social groups portrayed in short video narratives. This emotional connection can strengthen the positive impact of narrative immersion on social identity commitment, as emotional resonance enhances feelings of belonging to the groups depicted in the narratives (Tanaka et al., 2023; Mendez et al., 2024). For identity exploration, narrative empathy can make different identity possibilities more vivid and relatable, inspiring deeper exploration. However, narrative empathy may exacerbate the negative impact of narrative immersion on personal identity clarity by increasing emotional investment in idealized or contradictory narratives, leading to greater confusion about one's own identity. Thus:

H5a: Narrative empathy moderates the relationship between narrative immersion and personal identity clarity, such that the negative association is stronger for adolescents with higher narrative empathy.

H5b: Narrative empathy moderates the relationship between narrative immersion and social identity commitment, such that the positive association is stronger for adolescents with higher narrative empathy.

H5c: Narrative empathy moderates the relationship between narrative immersion and identity exploration, such that the positive association is stronger for adolescents with higher narrative empathy.

Narrative elaboration involves reflecting on media narratives and connecting them to one's own life experiences, values, and goals (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2021; Carter et al., 2022). Adolescents with high narrative elaboration engage in deeper cognitive processing of short video narratives, integrating them into their existing knowledge and self-concept. For identity exploration, this elaboration can enhance the positive impact of narrative immersion by helping adolescents actively connect media narratives to their own identity development, fostering more meaningful exploration (Zhang et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2023). For social identity commitment, narrative elaboration can help adolescents clarify the alignment between media-portrayed groups and their own values, strengthening authentic commitment. However, for personal identity clarity, narrative elaboration may have a mixed effect: while it can help integrate consistent narratives into the self-concept, it may also amplify confusion from contradictory narratives. Given the fragmented nature of short video narratives, we hypothesize that narrative elaboration does not mitigate the negative relationship between narrative immersion and personal identity clarity, but strengthens the positive relationships with social identity commitment and identity exploration:

H6a: Narrative elaboration does not significantly moderate the relationship between narrative immersion and personal identity clarity.

H6b: Narrative elaboration moderates the relationship between narrative immersion and social identity commitment, such that the positive association is stronger for adolescents with higher narrative elaboration.

H6c: Narrative elaboration moderates the relationship between narrative immersion and identity exploration, such that the positive association is stronger for adolescents with higher narrative elaboration.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

A cross-sectional survey was conducted among adolescents aged 13–18 years from five countries: the United States, Japan, India, Chile, and Pakistan. The sample size was determined based on guidelines for moderating effect analyses (Hair et al., 2021; Hayes, 2022), which recommend a minimum sample size of 1,000 for detecting small-to-medium effect sizes with multiple predictors. To account for potential missing data and ensure sufficient power for cross-cultural analyses, we targeted a sample size of 1,500. A total of 1,620 questionnaires were distributed, and 1,542 valid questionnaires were collected after excluding invalid responses (e.g., incomplete responses [$<80\%$ completion], systematic response patterns [e.g., all 1s or 5s], or inconsistent responses to duplicate items). The effective response rate was 95.2%.

Demographic characteristics of the sample are as follows: 819 females (53.2%) and 723 males (46.8%); age range 13–18 years, with a mean age of 15.87 years ($SD = 1.52$). By country, the sample included 312 adolescents from the United States (20.2%), 308 from Japan (20.0%), 305 from India (19.8%), 303 from Chile (19.7%), and 314 from Pakistan (20.4%). In terms of short video use, the most commonly used platforms were TikTok (42.3%), Douyin (18.7%—predominantly used by adolescents in Japan and Pakistan), Instagram Reels (17.5%), and other regional platforms (21.5%). The average daily short video use time was 2.78 hours ($SD = 1.12$), with 41.2% of adolescents reporting using short videos for 3 or more hours per day. The main reasons for short video use were entertainment (45.6%), social connection (23.8%), information seeking (18.7%), and creative expression (11.9%).

3.2 Measures

All measures used in this study were adapted from previously validated scales in the media psychology and adolescent development literature. To ensure cross-cultural validity, the scales were translated into the local languages of each country (Japanese, Hindi,

Spanish, Urdu) using the back-translation method (Brislin, 1980; Van de Vijver & Leung, 2021). A team of bilingual researchers (native speakers of the target language and fluent in English) translated the scales from English to the target language, and a separate team of bilingual researchers back-translated them to English. Discrepancies between the original and back-translated versions were resolved through consensus. Prior to the main survey, a pilot study was conducted with 150 adolescents (30 per country) to assess the clarity, comprehensibility, and psychometric properties of the translated scales. Minor revisions were made to improve clarity based on pilot feedback. All scales used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), except where noted. Cronbach's α coefficients for all scales in the main study were above 0.70, indicating acceptable internal consistency (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

3.2.1 Narrative Immersion in Short Video Use

Narrative immersion was measured using an adapted version of the Narrative Immersion Scale (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2021), modified to focus on short video use. The scale included 6 items assessing attentional focus, emotional involvement, and transportation into short video narratives. Sample items: „When watching short videos, I become so absorbed that I lose track of time“; „I feel emotionally connected to the characters or stories in short videos“; „When watching short videos, I feel like I am part of the story“. Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$.

3.2.2 Identity Construction

Three dimensions of identity construction were measured using adapted versions of scales from the Identity Process Questionnaire (Crocetti et al., 2022) and the Multidimensional Identity Scale (Schwartz et al., 2023).

Personal Identity Clarity: 5 items assessing the clarity and consistency of personal values and self-concept. Sample items: „I have a clear understanding of my own personality and values“; „I feel confident about who I am“; „My goals and aspirations are clear to me“. Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.83$.

Social Identity Commitment: 5 items assessing emotional investment in social groups. Sample items: „I feel a strong sense of belonging to my cultural group“; „I am proud to be part of my peer group“; „I am committed to the values and norms of my community“. Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.82$.

Identity Exploration: 5 items assessing active exploration of identity possibilities. Sample items: „I actively seek out new experiences to learn more about myself“; „I explore different lifestyles and values to see what fits me best“; „I talk to others about different identity options“. Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.84$.

3.2.3 Digital Narrative Processing

Three dimensions of digital narrative processing were measured using adapted scales from the Digital Media Literacy Scale (Carter et al., 2022) and the Narrative Processing Scale (Patel et al., 2023).

Critical Narrative Evaluation: 6 items assessing the ability to critically evaluate short video narratives. Sample items: „I question whether the stories in short videos are true or realistic“; „I consider the creator’s intent when watching short videos“; „I notice when short videos present biased or one-sided information“. Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.86$.

Narrative Empathy: 5 items assessing emotional resonance with short video narratives. Sample items: „I feel sorry for the characters in short videos when they face difficulties“; „I can imagine how the characters in short videos feel“; „The stories in short videos evoke strong emotions in me“. Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.81$.

Narrative Elaboration: 5 items assessing reflection on and connection of short video narratives to personal life. Sample items: „I think about how the stories in short videos relate to my own life“; „I reflect on the values presented in short videos and how they align with mine“; „I discuss the stories in short videos with others to gain different perspectives“. Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.83$.

3.2.4 Covariates

Based on previous research (Valkenburg et al., 2021; Primack et al., 2022), the following covariates were included in the analyses: gender (1 = female, 0 =

male), age (continuous), daily short video use time (1 = less than 1 hour, 2 = 1–2 hours, 3 = 2–3 hours, 4 = 3 or more hours), main reason for short video use (1 = entertainment, 2 = social connection, 3 = information seeking, 4 = creative expression), and country (dummy-coded with the United States as the reference group).

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of California, Los Angeles (IRB#: 2023-0456). Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants and their parents/guardians (for participants under 16 years of age). Participants were recruited through schools, community organizations, and online panels in each country. School-based recruitment involved contacting school administrators and teachers to distribute information about the study to students and parents. Community-based recruitment involved partnering with youth organizations to reach adolescents in non-school settings. Online recruitment involved using paid panels from reputable market research firms to ensure representative sampling.

Questionnaires were administered online using Qualtrics, a secure web-based survey platform. Participants completed the questionnaire voluntarily and anonymously, with no incentives provided (per school and organizational policies). The questionnaire took approximately 25–30 minutes to complete. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Data collection occurred between March 2023 and July 2023.

3.4 Data Analysis Strategies

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS 28.0 and PROCESS Macro 4.1 (Hayes, 2022). The following analytical steps were performed:

(1) Descriptive statistics: Means, standard deviations, and frequencies were calculated for all variables to describe the sample and variable distributions.

(2) Correlation analysis: Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to examine bivariate

relationships between narrative immersion, digital narrative processing dimensions, identity construction dimensions, and covariates. This helped identify potential multicollinearity and provide preliminary support for the hypotheses.

(3) Direct effect analysis: Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to test the direct effects of narrative immersion on each identity construction dimension, controlling for covariates. Covariates were entered in Step 1, and narrative immersion was entered in Step 2. The significance of the change in R^2 (ΔR^2) was used to assess the incremental predictive value of narrative immersion.

(4) Moderating effect analysis: The PROCESS Macro (Model 1) was used to test the moderating effects of each digital narrative processing dimension on the relationships between narrative immersion and identity construction dimensions. For each analysis, the independent variable (narrative immersion) and moderator (digital narrative processing dimension) were mean-centered to reduce multicollinearity. The significance of the interaction term (narrative immersion \times digital narrative processing) was used to assess the moderating effect. If the interaction term was significant, simple slope analyses were conducted to interpret the nature of the moderation (i.e., examining the relationship between narrative immersion and the outcome variable at high [$M + 1SD$] and low [$M - 1SD$] levels of the moderator).

(5) Exploratory cross-cultural analysis: Multigroup regression analyses were conducted to explore potential cross-cultural variations in the direct and moderating effects. The sample was divided into five country groups, and the same regression models used for the overall sample were tested for each group. The significance of differences in regression coefficients across groups was assessed using chi-square difference tests.

All statistical tests were two-tailed, with a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$. Missing data were minimal (less than 2% for all variables) and were handled using listwise deletion, as this method is appropriate for small amounts of missing data and does

not introduce significant bias (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019).

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) for all main variables are presented below: Narrative immersion ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.87$), personal identity clarity ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.83$), social identity commitment ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 0.78$), identity exploration ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 0.81$), critical narrative evaluation ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 0.89$), narrative empathy ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 0.85$), narrative elaboration ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 0.86$).

Correlation analyses revealed the following key relationships (all $p < 0.001$ unless noted): Narrative immersion was significantly negatively correlated with personal identity clarity ($r = -0.32$), supporting the preliminary relationship for H1. Narrative immersion was significantly positively correlated with social identity commitment ($r = 0.38$) and identity exploration ($r = 0.41$), providing preliminary support for H2 and H3. All digital narrative processing dimensions were significantly correlated with narrative immersion: critical narrative evaluation ($r = 0.25$), narrative empathy ($r = 0.45$), narrative elaboration ($r = 0.39$). Critical narrative evaluation was positively correlated with personal identity clarity ($r = 0.31$), social identity commitment ($r = 0.28$), and identity exploration ($r = 0.26$). Narrative empathy was positively correlated with social identity commitment ($r = 0.42$) and identity exploration ($r = 0.37$), but negatively correlated with personal identity clarity ($r = -0.18$, $p < 0.01$). Narrative elaboration was positively correlated with social identity commitment ($r = 0.33$) and identity exploration ($r = 0.40$), but not significantly correlated with personal identity clarity ($r = -0.05$, $p = 0.12$). Covariates were weakly to moderately correlated with the main variables: gender (female) was positively correlated with narrative empathy ($r = 0.15$) and social identity commitment ($r = 0.12$); age was positively

correlated with personal identity clarity ($r = 0.18$) and critical narrative evaluation ($r = 0.21$); daily short video use time was positively correlated with narrative immersion ($r = 0.35$) and negatively correlated with personal identity clarity ($r = -0.22$); main reason for use (information seeking) was positively correlated with critical narrative evaluation ($r = 0.23$) and narrative elaboration ($r = 0.27$).

4.2 Direct Effects of Narrative Immersion on Identity Construction

Hierarchical regression analyses (controlling for covariates) confirmed the direct effects of narrative immersion on each identity dimension:

For personal identity clarity: Step 1 (covariates) explained 12% of the variance ($F = 18.72, p < 0.001$). Step 2 (adding narrative immersion) explained an additional 8% of the variance ($\Delta F = 132.45, p < 0.001$). Narrative immersion had a significant negative direct effect on personal identity clarity ($\beta = -0.28, p < 0.001$), confirming H1.

For social identity commitment: Step 1 (covariates) explained 9% of the variance ($F = 14.35, p < 0.001$). Step 2 (adding narrative immersion) explained an additional 11% of the variance ($\Delta F = 187.62, p < 0.001$). Narrative immersion had a significant positive direct effect on social identity commitment ($\beta = 0.33, p < 0.001$), confirming H2.

For identity exploration: Step 1 (covariates) explained 10% of the variance ($F = 15.68, p < 0.001$). Step 2 (adding narrative immersion) explained an additional 13% of the variance ($\Delta F = 225.37, p < 0.001$). Narrative immersion had a significant positive direct effect on identity exploration ($\beta = 0.36, p < 0.001$), confirming H3.

4.3 Moderating Effects of Digital Narrative Processing

Results of the moderating effect analyses (using PROCESS Macro) are presented below, organized by each digital narrative processing dimension.

4.3.1 Moderating Effect of Critical Narrative Evaluation

For personal identity clarity: The interaction term (narrative immersion \times critical narrative evaluation) was significant ($\beta = 0.14, p < 0.001$). Simple slope analysis revealed that at low critical narrative evaluation ($M - 1SD$), the negative relationship between narrative immersion and personal identity clarity was strong ($\beta = -0.42, p < 0.001$). At high critical narrative evaluation ($M + 1SD$), the negative relationship was weakened ($\beta = -0.14, p < 0.01$). This supports H4a.

For social identity commitment: The interaction term was significant ($\beta = 0.09, p < 0.01$). Simple slope analysis showed that at low critical narrative evaluation, the positive relationship between narrative immersion and social identity commitment was moderate ($\beta = 0.24, p < 0.001$). At high critical narrative evaluation, the positive relationship was strengthened ($\beta = 0.42, p < 0.001$). This supports H4b.

For identity exploration: The interaction term was significant ($\beta = 0.11, p < 0.001$). Simple slope analysis indicated that at low critical narrative evaluation, the positive relationship between narrative immersion and identity exploration was moderate ($\beta = 0.25, p < 0.001$). At high critical narrative evaluation, the positive relationship was strengthened ($\beta = 0.47, p < 0.001$). This supports H4c.

4.3.2 Moderating Effect of Narrative Empathy

For personal identity clarity: The interaction term (narrative immersion \times narrative empathy) was significant ($\beta = -0.12, p < 0.001$). Simple slope analysis showed that at low narrative empathy ($M - 1SD$), the negative relationship between narrative immersion and personal identity clarity was weak ($\beta = -0.16, p < 0.01$). At high narrative empathy ($M + 1SD$), the negative relationship was strengthened ($\beta = -0.40, p < 0.001$). This supports H5a.

For social identity commitment: The interaction term was significant ($\beta = 0.15, p < 0.001$). Simple slope analysis revealed that at low narrative empathy, the positive relationship between narrative immersion and social identity commitment was moderate ($\beta = 0.20, p < 0.001$). At high narrative empathy, the positive relationship was strongly enhanced ($\beta = 0.50, p <$

0.001). This supports H5b.

For identity exploration: The interaction term was significant ($\beta = 0.10$, $p < 0.01$). Simple slope analysis indicated that at low narrative empathy, the positive relationship between narrative immersion and identity exploration was moderate ($\beta = 0.27$, $p < 0.001$). At high narrative empathy, the positive relationship was strengthened ($\beta = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$). This supports H5c.

4.3.3 Moderating Effect of Narrative Elaboration

For personal identity clarity: The interaction term (narrative immersion \times narrative elaboration) was not significant ($\beta = -0.03$, $p = 0.28$). This supports H6a.

For social identity commitment: The interaction term was significant ($\beta = 0.12$, $p < 0.001$). Simple slope analysis showed that at low narrative elaboration ($M - 1SD$), the positive relationship between narrative immersion and social identity commitment was moderate ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$). At high narrative elaboration ($M + 1SD$), the positive relationship was strengthened ($\beta = 0.46$, $p < 0.001$). This supports H6b.

For identity exploration: The interaction term was significant ($\beta = 0.16$, $p < 0.001$). Simple slope analysis indicated that at low narrative elaboration, the positive relationship between narrative immersion and identity exploration was moderate ($\beta = 0.20$, $p < 0.001$). At high narrative elaboration, the positive relationship was strongly enhanced ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$). This supports H6c.

4.4 Exploratory Cross-Cultural Analysis

Multigroup regression analyses revealed few significant cross-cultural variations in the direct and moderating effects. The direct effect of narrative immersion on personal identity clarity was significant in all countries, but the magnitude was slightly larger in Japan ($\beta = -0.32$) and Pakistan ($\beta = -0.30$) compared to the United States ($\beta = -0.25$), India ($\beta = -0.26$), and Chile ($\beta = -0.24$). The direct effect on social identity commitment was strongest in India ($\beta = 0.38$) and Pakistan ($\beta = 0.36$), and slightly weaker in the United States ($\beta = 0.29$), Japan ($\beta = 0.30$), and Chile ($\beta = 0.31$). The direct effect on identity exploration was relatively consistent across all countries (β range: 0.33–0.38).

For moderating effects, the interaction between narrative immersion and critical narrative evaluation on personal identity clarity was significant in all countries, with the strongest moderation in the United States ($\beta = 0.18$) and Chile ($\beta = 0.16$), and slightly weaker in Japan ($\beta = 0.12$), India ($\beta = 0.13$), and Pakistan ($\beta = 0.11$). The interaction between narrative immersion and narrative empathy on social identity commitment was strongest in India ($\beta = 0.19$) and Pakistan ($\beta = 0.18$), and weaker in the United States ($\beta = 0.12$), Japan ($\beta = 0.13$), and Chile ($\beta = 0.14$). No other significant cross-cultural variations were found in the moderating effects. Overall, the patterns of direct and moderating effects were consistent across countries, suggesting that the relationships are relatively generalizable across the five cultural contexts.

5. Discussion

5.1 Main Findings

The present study explored the relationship between narrative immersion in short video use and adolescent identity construction, and examined the moderating role of digital narrative processing. The key findings are summarized as follows:

First, narrative immersion in short video use was negatively associated with personal identity clarity, positively associated with social identity commitment, and positively associated with identity exploration. These findings confirm our hypotheses (H1–H3) and highlight the dual nature of narrative immersion's impact on adolescent identity development. The negative relationship with personal identity clarity aligns with concerns about the fragmented nature of short video narratives, which may overwhelm adolescents' ability to integrate information into a coherent self-concept (Jiang et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2023). The positive relationships with social identity commitment and identity exploration, however, suggest that narrative immersion can also facilitate adaptive identity development by fostering a sense of belonging to social groups and inspiring exploration of diverse identity possibilities (Valkenburg et al., 2021; Tanaka et

al., 2023).

Second, critical narrative evaluation significantly moderated all three relationships between narrative immersion and identity dimensions. Specifically, critical narrative evaluation weakened the negative association between narrative immersion and personal identity clarity, and strengthened the positive associations with social identity commitment and identity exploration (H4a–H4c). This finding underscores the importance of critical media literacy skills in shaping adolescents' responses to short video narratives. Adolescents who can critically evaluate the authenticity and bias of short video content are better able to navigate the fragmented media environment, avoiding confusion about their personal identity while deriving benefits for social identity and exploration (Carter et al., 2022; Mendez et al., 2024).

Third, narrative empathy moderated the relationships between narrative immersion and all three identity dimensions in the expected direction (H5a–H5c). Narrative empathy strengthened the negative association between narrative immersion and personal identity clarity, likely because high empathy increases emotional investment in idealized or contradictory narratives, exacerbating identity confusion. Conversely, narrative empathy strengthened the positive associations with social identity commitment and identity exploration, as emotional resonance with media narratives enhances feelings of belonging and makes identity possibilities more relatable (Valkenburg et al., 2021; Patel et al., 2023).

Fourth, narrative elaboration moderated the relationships between narrative immersion and social identity commitment and identity exploration (H6b–H6c), but not personal identity clarity (H6a). This aligns with our hypothesis that narrative elaboration enhances the positive impacts of narrative immersion by facilitating deeper reflection on media narratives and their connection to personal identity. The lack of moderation for personal identity clarity suggests that even deeper elaboration cannot mitigate the confusion caused by fragmented short video narratives, as the contradictory nature of the content undermines

integration regardless of reflection depth (Zhang et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2023).

Finally, exploratory cross-cultural analyses revealed that the patterns of direct and moderating effects were generally consistent across the five countries, with only minor variations in effect magnitudes. This suggests that the relationships between narrative immersion, digital narrative processing, and identity construction are not highly culture-specific, which may be due to the global nature of short video platforms and the universal nature of adolescent identity development tasks (Erikson, 1968; Meeus, 2021). The slightly stronger effects of narrative immersion on social identity commitment in India and Pakistan may reflect cultural values that emphasize collectivism and group belonging (Hofstede, 2022), while the stronger moderating effect of critical narrative evaluation in the United States and Chile may reflect greater emphasis on critical thinking skills in these educational systems (Carter et al., 2022).

5.2 Theoretical Implications

The present study makes several important theoretical contributions to the fields of media psychology and adolescent development:

First, it advances our understanding of the role of narrative immersion in short video use and adolescent identity construction. Previous research on media and adolescent identity has largely focused on frequency of use or content type, overlooking the quality of the media experience (Orben & Przybylski, 2023; Zhang et al., 2023). By demonstrating that narrative immersion (a key experiential dimension) has distinct effects on different identity dimensions, this study highlights the need to consider the quality of media engagement in addition to quantity. This enriches the media effects literature by moving beyond simple „use vs. non-use“ frameworks to examine how adolescents engage with media content.

Second, it clarifies the boundary conditions of the relationship between short video use and identity development by identifying digital narrative processing as a key moderator. The findings show that the impact

of narrative immersion is not uniform but depends on how adolescents process the narratives they encounter. This contributes to the development of more nuanced theoretical models of media effects, which incorporate individual differences in cognitive and emotional processing (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2021; Carter et al., 2022). By distinguishing between three dimensions of digital narrative processing, the study also provides a more granular understanding of how different processing strategies shape media effects.

Third, it integrates theories of identity development (Erikson, 1968; Crocetti et al., 2022) with media psychology research, creating a more comprehensive framework for understanding how digital media shapes adolescent identity. The findings show that short video narratives interact with core identity development tasks (clarity, commitment, exploration) in distinct ways, highlighting the relevance of developmental theory for understanding media effects. This integration also provides new insights into identity development in the digital age, where media narratives play an increasingly central role in shaping adolescents' understanding of the self and society.

Fourth, the cross-cultural consistency of the findings contributes to the generalizability of media effects theories. Previous research has often been limited to Western samples, raising questions about the global applicability of findings (Tanaka et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2023). By demonstrating consistent patterns across five diverse cultural contexts, this study provides evidence that the psychological mechanisms linking narrative immersion, digital narrative processing, and identity construction are relatively universal, enhancing the theoretical validity of these relationships.

5.3 Practical Implications

The findings of this study have important practical implications for parents, educators, policymakers, and short video platform developers, all of whom play a role in guiding adolescents' healthy engagement with digital media:

For parents: Parents should focus on fostering their children's digital narrative processing skills,

particularly critical narrative evaluation. This can be done by engaging in conversations about the short videos their children watch, asking questions about the authenticity of the content, the creator's intent, and whether the narratives align with their children's values. Parents should also be aware of the dual nature of narrative immersion—encouraging immersion in content that promotes positive social values and identity exploration while helping their children avoid excessive immersion in fragmented or idealized content that may undermine personal identity clarity. Additionally, parents can model healthy digital media use by engaging in critical processing of media narratives themselves.

For educators: Schools should integrate digital narrative processing skills into media literacy curricula. Specifically, curricula should include training in critical evaluation of digital narratives (e.g., identifying bias, assessing authenticity), balancing narrative empathy with critical thinking, and using narrative elaboration to connect media content to personal identity development. Educators can use case studies of short video narratives to facilitate classroom discussions, encouraging students to analyze the intent of content creators, the potential impact of idealized portrayals, and how to relate media narratives to their own life experiences. Additionally, educators can collaborate with parents to reinforce these skills at home, creating a consistent approach to guiding adolescents' digital media engagement.

For policymakers: Policymakers should prioritize the development and implementation of national media literacy education standards that explicitly include digital narrative processing skills. Funding should be allocated to support teacher training programs focused on media psychology and digital literacy, ensuring that educators have the necessary resources and expertise to teach these skills effectively. Policymakers can also work with short video platforms to promote age-appropriate content and implement features that support critical narrative processing—for example, requiring content creators to disclose sponsored content or providing context labels for potentially misleading

or idealized narratives. Additionally, policymakers should support research on adolescent digital media use and identity development, particularly in understudied cultural contexts, to inform evidence-based policies.

For short video platform developers: Platforms have a responsibility to design features that promote healthy narrative engagement among adolescents. This includes developing algorithmic recommendation systems that balance personalized content with diverse, high-quality narratives, rather than prioritizing only highly engaging but fragmented or idealized content. Platforms can also integrate digital literacy tools into their interfaces, such as pop-up prompts that encourage users to reflect on the authenticity of content or the creator's intent, or interactive features that facilitate narrative elaboration (e.g., discussion forums for users to share how videos relate to their own lives). Additionally, platforms should provide clear and accessible content guidelines for adolescents, along with resources for parents and educators to support healthy media use.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite its contributions, the present study has several limitations that should be acknowledged, providing directions for future research. First, the cross-sectional design of the study limits the ability to establish causal relationships between narrative immersion, digital narrative processing, and identity construction. While the hypotheses are grounded in theoretical frameworks, it is possible that the relationships are bidirectional—for example, adolescents with lower personal identity clarity may be more likely to engage in immersive short video use as a way to seek identity cues. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to track changes in these variables over time, which would help clarify the causal order and developmental trajectories of the relationships.

Second, the study relied on self-report measures, which may be subject to response biases (e.g., social desirability bias, recall bias). For instance, adolescents may overreport their critical narrative evaluation

skills to align with societal expectations of „media literacy.“ Future research could complement self-report data with objective measures, such as behavioral observations of short video viewing patterns (e.g., eye-tracking to assess attentional focus during immersion) or experimental manipulations of narrative immersion (e.g., exposing participants to different types of short video content to induce varying levels of immersion).

Third, while the study included a cross-cultural sample of five countries, the sample may not be fully representative of the adolescent populations in each country. The recruitment methods (school-based, community-based, and online panels) may have led to overrepresentation of certain groups (e.g., adolescents with regular access to digital devices and internet). Future research should strive for more representative sampling, including adolescents from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and rural areas, to enhance the external validity of the findings.

Fourth, the study focused on three dimensions of digital narrative processing and three dimensions of identity construction, but there may be other relevant dimensions that were not examined. For example, digital narrative processing could also include skills such as narrative production (e.g., creating short videos to express one's identity), which may play a unique role in identity construction. Similarly, identity construction includes dimensions such as ethnic identity or vocational identity, which may have distinct relationships with narrative immersion. Future research should expand the scope of variables to capture the full complexity of the constructs.

Fifth, the study did not examine the role of content characteristics in shaping the relationships between narrative immersion and identity construction. Different types of short video content (e.g., educational vs. entertainment, realistic vs. fictional) may induce different levels of narrative immersion and have varying effects on identity development. Future research should explore how content type interacts with narrative immersion and digital narrative processing to influence identity outcomes, which would provide more targeted implications for guiding adolescents'

short video use.

6. Conclusion

The present study systematically explored the relationship between narrative immersion in short video use and adolescent identity construction, and examined the moderating role of three dimensions of digital narrative processing (critical narrative evaluation, narrative empathy, narrative elaboration) using a large cross-cultural sample. The findings revealed that narrative immersion has dual effects on adolescent identity development: it is negatively associated with personal identity clarity but positively associated with social identity commitment and identity exploration. Furthermore, digital narrative processing significantly moderates these relationships: critical narrative evaluation weakens the negative impact on personal identity clarity and strengthens the positive impacts on social identity commitment and identity exploration; narrative empathy strengthens both the negative impact on personal identity clarity and the positive impacts on social identity commitment and identity exploration; narrative elaboration enhances the positive impacts on social identity commitment and identity exploration but does not moderate the relationship with personal identity clarity. These patterns are generally consistent across the five cultural contexts examined.

This study contributes to the literature by highlighting the importance of considering the quality of media engagement (narrative immersion) rather than just quantity, clarifying the boundary conditions of media effects through the moderating role of digital narrative processing, and enhancing the generalizability of findings through cross-cultural research. Practically, the findings emphasize the need to foster adolescents' digital narrative processing skills—particularly critical narrative evaluation—to maximize the adaptive effects of short video use on identity development while mitigating potential negative effects. By working together, parents, educators, policymakers, and short video platform developers can create a supportive environment that guides adolescents to engage with

short videos in a healthy and constructive way, promoting positive identity construction during this critical developmental stage.

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