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Social Media Validation and Self-Esteem

Bhavya Goyal¹, Aksh Mittal², Yogita Thareja³

^{1,2}Research scholar, ³Assistant Professor, Vivekananda Institute of Professional Studies

Abstract: *Social media platforms have become an important part of daily life and provide users with constant feedback through likes, comments, and shares. Such visible forms of approval can influence how individuals evaluate themselves, particularly during adolescence when people are more sensitive to social judgment. While previous research has explored the relationship between social media use and well-being, fewer studies have compared how online feedback affects adolescents and adults differently.*

This study explores how feedback valence, social comparison, and perceived authenticity of online interactions influence states of self-esteem in these two groups. Three studies were conducted to examine how receiving fewer positive reactions than others on social media affects users' feelings about themselves.

The findings suggest that when adolescents perceive that others receive more positive feedback online, their self-esteem may decrease. Even without direct negative comments, the ability to constantly compare social approval can shape how young users view their social status. These results indicate that social media environments that encourage comparison may increase the risk of emotional difficulties among vulnerable adolescents.

KEYWORDS: *Adolescence, social media, social validation, evaluative feedback, depression, stress coping, digital identity regulation, self-concept development, feedback processing, emotional reactivity, authenticity in self-presentation, adolescent vulnerability*

I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of social media platforms has changed the way people interact, communicate, and present themselves online. Social networking sites allow users to share photos, thoughts, and experiences while receiving immediate feedback in the form of likes, comments, and shares.

These visible signs of approval can influence how individuals think about themselves and may play a role in shaping their self-esteem.

Researchers have increasingly studied the relationship between social media use and psychological well-being. However, the impact of social media may not be the same for everyone. Adolescents, for example, are in a stage of life where peer approval and social acceptance are especially important for developing identity and self-confidence. Because of this, they may be more sensitive to online feedback compared to adults.

Social media platforms also make it easy for users to compare themselves with others. The number of likes, comments, or reactions on posts can act as visible indicators of popularity or social approval. These comparisons may influence how individuals evaluate their own social status and self-worth. Since adolescents and adults differ in emotional and cognitive development, their reactions to such comparisons may also be different.

Despite growing interest in this topic, several gaps remain in current research. Many studies have examined the link between social media use and self-esteem, but fewer have explored how developmental differences and the specific features of social media platforms work together to shape this relationship. In addition, social media engagement is not only about receiving feedback. Users also actively manage how they present themselves online. For example, individuals may delete posts that receive fewer likes or share content they believe will attract more positive reactions. This shows that people both respond to feedback and try to influence it.

Another important aspect of online environments is the growing role they play in discussions about mental health. For instance, the identification of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) has traditionally relied on clinical diagnosis carried out by trained professionals.

However, many individuals today seek information, support, and validation about ADHD through social media platforms such as Instagram and Reddit. These online spaces allow people to share personal experiences and connect with others who report similar symptoms.

As a result, an important question arises regarding how different sources of validation influence individuals' self-perception. In particular, there is still limited understanding of whether validation from online communities has the same psychological impact as validation from a clinical professional.

This difference may be especially important for individuals who self-identify with ADHD without receiving a formal diagnosis. The present study aims to explore how different forms of validation influence individuals' self-perception and feelings of internalized stigma. It also examines whether a person's diagnostic status—whether self-diagnosed or clinically diagnosed—affects how they interpret and respond to these forms of validation.

In addition, the study considers the role of social comparison, which refers to the tendency of individuals to evaluate themselves in relation to others. On social media, this process can become stronger because feedback is constantly visible and easily measured through likes, comments, and reactions. Positive feedback can trigger feelings of reward and satisfaction, as it is connected with brain systems involved in motivation and emotional response.

According to the adolescent social-affective learning model, adolescence is a developmental stage where individuals are particularly sensitive to social feedback and peer status. Because of this heightened sensitivity, adolescents may be more strongly affected by online comparisons and validation than adults.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. ADHD and medical industrial complex

The pharmaceutical industry's substantial financial investment in ADHD research has created a complex relationship between commercial interests and scientific legitimacy. Such erosion of trust in medical authority creates conditions where individuals seek alternative validation for their symptoms through non-professional sources. This digital landscape has created a parallel diagnostic culture where individuals validate their experiences through peer networks rather than medical professionals.

B. Self-verification theory

Self-Verification Theory posits a fundamental motivation to maintain a stable and consistent self-concept, a drive that serves both the epistemic needs for predictability and pragmatic goals for smoother social interactions. For individuals with a clinical ADHD diagnosis, medical validation can strengthen self-image by reframing distressing experiences as manifestations of a neurobiological condition rather than personal failure, thus promoting a coherent and stable self-concept. In contrast, self-diagnosed individuals frequently contend with stigma tied to perceived illegitimacy. The absence of professional validation can foster persistent self-doubt, imposter syndrome, and anxiety over the credibility of their condition.

C. Pathways to verification: Social media validation

The fundamental drive to maintain a coherent self-concept, as posited by Self-Verification. The first, social validation, is defined as confirmation sought from or provided by interpersonal sources, such as family, friends, and partners, that affirms an individual's ADHD-related experiences. Self-image refers to an individual's subjective evaluation of themselves, encompassing beliefs about personal worth, competence, and identity. Finally, the psychological impact of validation seeking is likely contingent upon an individual's diagnostic status.

III. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

A. Patterns of social media usage

The results of the study showed that most participants in the 18-25 age group use social media frequently throughout the day. A majority of respondents reported spending 2–4 hours daily on social networking platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat. Study concludes that social media validation has a noticeable influence on self-esteem among young users. Frequent use of social media platforms and the desire for online approval through likes, comments, and followers can affect how individuals perceive their self-worth.

B. Relationship between Validation and self-esteem

The results of the study indicate that there is a significant relationship between social media validation and self-esteem. Social media validation refers to the approval or recognition users receive in the form of likes, comments, shares, and followers on platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. Many participants reported feeling happy, appreciated, and valued when their content received more likes or positive comments. Some participants also reported comparing their posts with others, which sometimes negatively affected their self-esteem.

C. Negative effects

The study found that excessive dependence on social media validation can have several negative effects on self-esteem. Many users tend to measure their self-worth based on the number of likes, comments, and followers they receive on platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. When posts receive fewer reactions than expected, individuals may experience feelings of disappointment, insecurity, and self-doubt. This comparison can create feelings of inadequacy and lower self-confidence, especially when others appear to receive more attention or appreciation online.

D. Differences among users

The study found that the impact of social media validation on self-esteem varies among different users. Some individuals are more influenced by likes, comments, and followers, while others are less affected by online feedback. Users who spend more time on social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook tend to place greater importance on online validation. These variations in usage influence how strongly social media validation affects their self-esteem.

IV. DISCUSSIONS

A. Comparison with previous studies

The findings of the present study are consistent with previous research on the relationship between social media validation and self-esteem. Earlier studies have shown that online feedback such as likes, comments, and shares can influence how individuals perceive their self-worth.

Similar to past research, the results of this study indicate that positive feedback on platforms like Instagram can increase confidence, while limited engagement may lead to feelings of disappointment or reduced self-esteem. This comparison supports the idea that social media validation plays a significant role in shaping individuals' emotional responses and self-perception.

B. Psychological Implications

The study highlights several psychological implications related to social media validation. Continuous exposure to online feedback can influence individuals' emotions, mood, and self-confidence. Positive reactions may temporarily boost self-esteem, whereas negative or limited responses may lead to feelings of insecurity or self-doubt. Over time, excessive reliance on social media validation may affect an individual's emotional stability and mental well-being.

C. Social support

Social media platforms can also act as a source of social support for users. Positive comments, encouragement, and interactions from friends or followers can help individuals feel valued and connected. Platforms such as Facebook and Instagram allow users to share experiences and receive support from their online communities. This sense of belonging can contribute positively to an individual's emotional well-being when used in a balanced manner.

D. Promoting Real-life self-worth

The findings emphasize the importance of promoting real-life self-worth that is not solely dependent on social media validation. Individuals should be encouraged to focus on personal achievements, skills, and meaningful offline relationships to build stronger self-esteem.

Developing self-confidence through real-life experiences can help reduce dependence on online approval and support healthier psychological development.

V. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

The present study used a cross-sectional research design to examine the relationship between social media validation and self-esteem among young individuals. The research focused on understanding how online feedback such as likes, comments, and followers on social media platforms influences an individual's perception of self-worth and confidence.

B. Sampling Method

The study used a non-probability sampling technique, specifically convenience sampling, to select participants. In this method, respondents were chosen based on their availability and willingness to participate.

This approach was considered suitable because it is time-efficient and practical for academic research. Participants belonged to the 18–25 age group, as individuals in this age range are highly active on social media and more likely to seek validation online.

C. Data Collection Methods

The study used the primary data collection method. Data was collected directly from participants through a structured questionnaire containing questions related to social media usage, online validation (likes, comments, shares), and self-esteem levels. The questionnaire was distributed online through platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp to gather responses efficiently.

D. Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data was analyzed using statistical techniques to understand the relationship between social media validation and self-esteem. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the responses, and further analysis was conducted to identify patterns and relationships between variables. The results were interpreted using charts, percentages, and statistical methods.

E. Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines were followed throughout the research to protect the rights and well-being of the participants. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their participation was voluntary. They were allowed to withdraw from the study at any time, and their responses were kept confidential and anonymous.

F. Privacy Protection

Privacy protection was ensured during the research process. No personal information of participants was collected or shared. All responses were kept anonymous and confidential, and the data was used only for academic research purposes related to the study.

G. Consent of Participants

Participants were informed about the purpose of the research before filling out the questionnaire, and their consent was obtained. Only individuals who actively use social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook were included in the study, as the research focused on the impact of social media validation on self-esteem.

VI. FUTURE SCOPE

A. Interpretation of findings

Future studies can further explore how social media validation influences self-esteem among different age groups and cultural backgrounds. A deeper analysis may help in understanding the psychological factors that shape individuals' responses to online feedback.

B. Positive and Negative Impacts of social media validation

Further research can examine both the positive and negative impacts of social media validation in detail. While positive feedback may enhance confidence and motivation, excessive dependence on online approval may lead to reduced self-esteem and emotional stress.

C. Validation addiction

Future research may focus on the concept of validation addiction, where individuals become overly dependent on likes, comments, and online reactions for self-worth. Studies can explore the causes, consequences, and possible strategies to manage this behavior.

D. Digital awareness

There is a need to promote digital awareness regarding the psychological effects of social media usage. Future initiatives may focus on educating individuals about responsible and mindful use of social media platforms and their impact on mental well-being.

E. Role of Education and Parents

Educational institutions and parents can play an important role in guiding young individuals about healthy social media habits. Future programs may include digital literacy and awareness activities to help students develop self-esteem that is not dependent on online validation.

F. Healthysocialmedia Usage

Future studies can explore methods to promote balanced and healthy social media usage. Encouraging limited screen time, positive online interactions, and offline engagement may help reduce the negative effects of social media validation.

G. Community Building

Social media platforms can also be used to create supportive and positive online communities. Future research may examine how these platforms can promote meaningful connections, peer support, and positive communication among users.

H. Suggestions for future research

Future research can include larger and more diverse samples to provide a broader understanding of the relationship between social media validation and self-esteem. Longitudinal studies may also help in examining the long-term effects of social media validation on individuals' psychological well-being.

VII. SOCIAL MEDIA VALIDATION

A. Likes

Likes are one of the most common forms of social media validation. They represent quick approval from others and often influence how users perceive the popularity of their posts. Receiving a large number of likes on platforms such as Instagram can make individuals feel appreciated and confident, while fewer likes may sometimes lead to feelings of disappointment or reduced self-esteem.

B. Comments

Comments provide more direct and detailed feedback compared to likes. Positive comments from friends or followers can encourage users and strengthen their sense of social acceptance. However, negative or critical comments may affect an individual's emotions and self-confidence, influencing their overall self-esteem.

C. Followers

The number of followers on social media is often seen as a measure of popularity and social influence.

Many users associate a higher follower count with greater recognition and validation. Platforms such as Instagram and Facebook allow individuals to build networks where followers act as an audience that interacts with their content. This can influence how users evaluate their social image and self-worth.

D. Shares and reactions

Shares and reactions also serve as important indicators of validation. When users share someone's content or react to it with emojis or other reactions, it increases the visibility and reach of the post. This type of engagement can make individuals feel that their content is valued and meaningful, which may positively influence their confidence and self-esteem.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The study shows that social media validation plays an important role in influencing self-esteem among young users. The findings on patterns of social media usage indicate that many individuals frequently check likes, comments, and reactions on their posts, showing the importance of online feedback. The research also reveals a relationship between validation and self-esteem, where positive feedback can increase confidence, while low engagement may reduce self-worth. At the same time, excessive dependence on online approval can lead to negative effects such as social comparison and emotional pressure. The study further highlights differences among users, as some individuals are more affected by social media validation than others depending on their confidence and level of social media use. Overall, the research concludes that while social media can support interaction and expression, over-reliance on validation may negatively affect self-esteem, making balanced use of social media important.

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