



## Social Media's Impact on Self-Esteem in Adolescence

Malaika Matheen Khan

BA OPJ, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, JAIN (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru

\*\*\*

**Abstract** – This study examines the impact of social media on self-esteem among adolescents ages 13–19. Using survey for data, it explores patterns of social media use, social comparison, and validation-seeking behaviours. The findings mainly show that while social media provides us a platform for self-expression and help us build connections, it also leads to unrealistic standards of appearance and lifestyle. Adolescents rely mainly on likes and comments for validation and frequently compare themselves to peers and influencers, which can cause increase in self-doubt and insecurity. However, some people do have a positive experience with social media including a sense of belonging and emotional support through online friends, communities etc. Overall, study suggests that although social media can have positive effects in terms of self-esteem in certain contexts, its negative effects are more common which highlights the need for balanced and mindful usage among adolescents. This study aims to provide useful insights that promote healthy digital habits.

**Key Words:** Social media, self-esteem, adolescents, validation seeking, behavioral changes, self-doubt, environment, impact, online, confidence, social comparison.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has become a core element in the lives of adolescent individuals. It influences how adolescents interact with one another, present themselves to others, and gauge their self-worth. Such platforms like Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter enable conversation, sharing of oneself and express of identity but how they affect self-esteem are rather convoluted, particularly among adolescents, as adolescence is a very significant period in the construction of identity. Self-esteem — the measure an individual makes of their own worth — is very susceptible at this point. Social media exacerbates adolescent's susceptibility to negative outcomes of low self-esteem by enabling and reinforcing certain validating behaviors making them dependent on the feedback they receive online in order to feel worthy. It contributes to both an increase in connectedness and feelings of belonging but over usage results in comparison

with others, dissatisfaction with self and an increase in self-doubt. As Social Comparison Theory illustrates, through both upward (comparison to someone 'better' than oneself that causes decreased self-esteem) and downward (comparison to someone 'less' capable that can increase self-esteem temporarily but discourage oneself to grow) comparisons, people assess their own abilities and value. In adolescence the constant inundation with these ideal images amplified by social media results in an instability in their sense of self-esteem.

#### 1.1 Background of the Study

Social media plays a dominant role in the life of a teenager and in many cases defines how they communicate, present and view themselves and the world around them. While the ease of communication and information-sharing benefits, there are some considerable negative effects for the mental and emotional well-being of a teenager and one of the biggest challenges lies in the concept of self-esteem which is particularly delicate during adolescent life. Self-esteem is most affected by social media, as the teenager is constantly exposed to idealised pictures and images of life leading to feeling insignificant and incompetent. Validation in the form of 'likes', 'comments' and 'followers' is a second factor associated with the impact on self-esteem as teenagers frequently link their sense of worth to such feedback, though on the contrary limited feedback may produce feelings of low self-worth as the teen begins to depend on external validation. Thirdly the constant threat of cyberbullying and online harassment contributes to emotional problems, with online information being permanent and so the impact lasting longer. The positive sides of social media must not be neglected as it allows connection and support networks to be formed, as well as opportunities for self-expression. In conclusion, the way social media influences self-esteem in the life of a teenager seems complicated, having several influences depending on who uses it, the type of information provided, and the teenager's personality.

#### 1.2 Statement of the Problem



We are now at a point where teenagers are growing up in a digital world and social media plays a significant part in everyday life. It influences the way they relate to one another and themselves, but more particularly their self-worth and values. While social media may be seen as a positive platform for social connection and creativity, for teenagers it can also be a place of exposure to an often false and unhealthy set of images (beauty) as well as the pressures and dependence for external validation and the comparison that occurs. However, while there is considerable debate surrounding social media's effect on mental health, little evidence exists as to how it directly influences self-worth and what factors impact on the negative and positive effects.

Some adolescents are able to feel confident and valued through social media, while others feel insecure and of low self-worth due to their use of social media, number of times logged on and interactions that take place while on these sites. However little is known regarding gender differences, the different effects on male and female's self-esteem and whether these differ based on what media users use (Facebook vs Twitter). Research into this is also essential given the ever increasing development of new media and the changing nature of them.

This study hopes to investigate the relationship between social media use and adolescents' self-worth, explore whether social media poses a positive or negative affect on self-esteem, identify whether specific social media activities influence confidence through social comparison and the desire for validation, and see if gender or number of hours spent online are key in relation to the findings. From this awareness can be generated regarding the positive and negative effects of social media and advice given on what behaviors make for a healthier rather than more detrimental use of media for adolescents.

### 1.3 Need for the Study

As we already know, teenagers now make great use of social media, and as a result it affects what teenagers say, do, and think of themselves. Teenagers use social media and it is seen as one of the biggest impacts on teen self-esteem. While some studies state that teenagers feel more connected, confident, and supported while using social media, other studies suggest that self-esteem is decreased. As a result, it is hard to tell whether social media is a better and positive aspect or negative impact on teen self-esteem and why research must still be done on this issue.

Secondly many of the studies already done on this issue have a general study into social media's effects on teenagers' mental health but few have an in-depth study solely into the way social media impacts the individual's self-esteem. While related,

mental health and self-esteem are not the same issue, with mental health dealing with the individual's emotional and psychological wellbeing in terms of their moods, how they deal with stress, and life challenges, while self-esteem relates to how valued an individual sees themselves as. An individual may be dealing with many mental health issues but may have a high self-esteem level, and vice-versa, an individual with a low self-esteem level may be mentally healthy. As self-esteem is an essential aspect of the individual's mental health and with the increase of mental health issues among teenagers, research into social media's impact on teenagers' self-esteem could help to decrease the prevalence of mental health issues before they become a serious concern.

As this study is a necessity considering the significant rise of social media use each year, a greater proportion of teenage life has become related to their interaction, entertainment and self-expression through it. Research into how this may be influencing self-worth and confidence could enable teenagers to be able to make more conscious decisions on social media use, and parents, teachers and mental health professionals to help teenagers engage in healthy ways.

### 1.4 Significance of the Study

Social media is one of the greatest forces impacting the lives of teenagers, helping them to shape and perceive their sense of self and self-esteem. Unlike previous generations whose sense of self-esteem derived from the quality of face-to-face interactions and social standing within a school community, today's youth are deriving their sense of self-worth based upon online validation of their content such as likes, comments and number of followers.

As teenagers are constantly exposed to curated content of others showing idealized images of their life, comparison may lead to issues of low self-esteem and self-perception based on appearance, achievement and social standings. There is a great need to feel "perfect" online, thus they will tend to edit photos to enhance self-image and refrain from uploading things that are less positively acknowledged, which temporarily increase self-esteem but may further their distance from self.

Social media has also shown some positives as opportunities for expression, creativity and a sense of belonging. Many teenagers actually get inspired by others through social media by sharing skills, or develop confidence in connecting with similar communities and peers online.

As social media has a large role in the lives of teenagers, there is a significant need to understand its implications to self-esteem. The purpose of this research is to gain awareness of its

benefits and potential drawbacks of the impact social media has on self-esteem for teenagers to understand, and for parents and educators to further this knowledge to facilitate better social media usage.

### 1.5 Research Questions

This study aims to explore the impact of social media on adolescent self-esteem. To achieve this, the research will address the following questions:

- How does social media affect the self-esteem of adolescents?
- Does frequent social media use contribute to higher or lower self-esteem?
- What role does social comparison play in shaping adolescent self-esteem?
- How does seeking validation through likes, comments, and followers impact self-esteem?
- Are there differences in how males and females experience the effects of social media on self-esteem?
- Does the amount of time spent on social media influence self-esteem levels?
- Can positive social media engagement, such as supportive online communities, improve self-esteem?

By answering these questions, this study will provide a deeper understanding of how social media shapes adolescent self-perception. The findings will help identify the factors that contribute to both positive and negative self-esteem outcomes, offering insights into how social media can be used more healthily and constructively.

### 1.6 Objectives of the Study

This study is aimed to investigate the influence of social media on adolescent self-esteem, and to identify both positive and negative consequences that stem from this interaction. Specifically, the study endeavours to determine the degree in which factors such as the amount of time spent online, social comparison, and validation-seeking tendencies contribute to how adolescents see themselves. The extent in which these variable patterns differ based on social media use and gender also need to be explored. By taking this approach, this study will provide valuable insight in understanding the correlation between social media and self-esteem.

### 1.7 Hypotheses

This study examines the relationship between social media use and adolescent self-esteem using secondary data. Based on existing research, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1: Social media use is associated with adolescent self-esteem, with both positive outcomes (e.g., social support, self-expression) and negative outcomes (e.g., insecurity, self-doubt).
- H2: Higher levels of social comparison on social media are associated with lower self-esteem among adolescents.
- H3: Validation-seeking behaviours (e.g., reliance on likes, comments, and followers) are associated with lower self-esteem due to increased dependence on external approval.
- H4: Gender differences exist in the relationship between social media use and self-esteem, with females more likely to experience negative effects due to greater engagement in appearance-based social comparison.

### 1.8 Scope and Limitations

This study will seek to identify the ways in which social media affects self-esteem among adolescents. The research question is concerned with how different types of social media usage (e.g., social comparison, validation-seeking, time spent online) impact the adolescent sense of self and confidence. It is interested in adolescents aged between 13 to 20 years of age because these are the key ages for both self-esteem and the formation of identity.

The types of social media websites included are those that tend to revolve around self-presentation and communication among teenagers, such as Instagram and Snapchat. A survey was disseminated via online use of the Google Forms platform. The research included approximately 80–100 adolescent participants in order to create a dataset that can be properly analysed.

Limitations have also been acknowledged in this study. This study uses self-report surveys and as a result is influenced by response biases. The participant sample size was small (approx. 80–100 people), which has implications for the generalizability of the study. This study is cross-sectional and thus unable to measure the temporal trends that occur between social media use and self-esteem. Finally, other potential mediating factors were not examined, such as parental style, friends, school work/stress and off-line social experiences.



## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The social media becomes one of the main contributing factors toward the adolescent self-esteem. As more and more applications on social media are available for adolescents, the body of literature published about social media use and its influence on adolescents' self-esteem is growing. While current research shows that social media can benefit adolescents' self-esteem and provides opportunities for them to develop their actual self, there is still research that has identified that it does not necessarily good to use the social media by adolescents, because the social media may influence them negatively due to the social comparison, the cyber bullying and the need of confirmation from social media.

### 2.1 Positive Effects of Social Media on Self-Esteem

Despite the media emphasis on negative social media self-esteem effects, study data has shown the potential benefits: increased self-expression, support from social networks, and self-identity development.

**Social Support and Online Communities:** Social media enables adolescent connections; in these online spaces teens are able to discover others who may feel similarly to them. For most, social media provides an avenue through which to explore, connect with similar peers and find a support system that offers positive reinforcement. Research by Naslund et al. (2020) has also revealed that through social media users are able to access communities that offer support, thus empowering them through boosts in self-esteem.

**Self-Expression and Identity Formation:** The construction of self-identity is still taking place during adolescence, and social media provides a space for teenagers to express different aspects of their identity. It has been found by Michikyan et al. (2014) that adolescents are more likely to report greater self-esteem when they present themselves through self-expression in social media as it is a space for them to construct their own identity and receive validation and support from their friends and peers.

**Encouragement and Positive Feedback:** The awarding of likes, comments and shares also impacts feelings of competence and self-worth. Teenagers who are provided with feedback that they feel is meaningful and positive by friends and family online will be more confident of their self-worth. A study by Valkenburg et al. (2017) found that positive online interactions lead to better self-esteem for teenagers.

### 2.2 Negative Effects of Social Media on Self-Esteem

There are a number of good uses of social networking sites but also there is research showing that too many hours being spent online and particular kinds of behaviour on the internet would be leading to low self-esteem, insecurity and anxiety.

**Social Comparison and Unrealistic Beauty Standards:** Social comparison is a major risk associated with social media; adolescents compare their self-esteem and social identity with others on the internet. A study carried out by Fardouly et al. (2015) stated that Instagram's use of edited and filtered images negatively influenced adolescents' self-esteem and their satisfaction with their body, females in particular, seeing and comparing their selves with an idealized perception of beauty and success online causes them to feel less confident.

**Validation-Seeking Behaviour:** On social media, adolescents are urged to use outside affirmation through gaining friends, likes, and followers. Through the research of Burrow & Rainone (2017), teenagers who search for validation on social media felt like they were less competent when their desired amount of positive social feedback was not received.

**Cyberbullying and Online Negativity:** Social media sites also contribute to an increased prevalence of cyberbullying, negative comments and harassment, which can all lead to decreased self-esteem. According to research by Pew Research Centre (2018), more than 59% of teenagers have experienced cyberbullying and over half of teens felt sad, embarrassed or worried as a result of this. Cyber bullying has a greater potential to last long-term and is more public than bullying traditionally done in the real world.

### 2.3 Theoretical Framework

The effect of social media on the self-esteem of teenagers is understandable through existing psychological theories. Two major psychological theories will be the basis of this study: Social Comparison Theory and Uses and Gratifications Theory.

**Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954):** According to Social Comparison Theory, presented by Leon Festinger in 1954, an individual decides what their own self-worth is by comparing themselves with other people. There are two types of social comparison: Upward Comparison — comparing to a more successful, good-looking or happier person, generally resulting in feeling inferior to others, lower self-esteem and an increase of body insecurity. Experiments indicated that adolescents' — and specifically young women's — confidence levels are low when confronted with the highly-filtered images posted on Instagram and TikTok (Fardouly et al., 2015). Downward Comparison — comparing to others thought to be performing less well, which can give a brief sense of superiority



but can cause people to feel conceited and overly optimistic about themselves. In a study conducted by Vogel et al. (2014), it was found that for every hour of social media used, time spent thinking negatively about oneself increased.

Uses and Gratifications Theory: This theory is concerned with what people do with media, examining how people use media to gratify needs both psychologically and socially. Adolescents' use of social media serves numerous purposes such as social interaction, self-presentation, and entertainment and escape. Research by Sheldon et al. (2019) found that adolescents who use social media primarily for self-presentation and validation tend to have more unstable self-esteem, whereas those who use it for social interaction and entertainment experience fewer negative effects.

#### 2.4 Research Gaps

First, most studies were conducted using Western subjects; it is not clear if findings will generalize to other adolescent cultures. Second, the vast majority of studies were cross-sectional, not providing much understanding of the long-term impact of social media usage. Third, literature was disproportionately skewed towards female adolescents, with little published regarding the effects on male adolescents. Fourth, the literature mostly focused on the negative aspects when the possibility exists that there are positive aspects.

#### 2.5 Need for Further Study

Due to the ever-present nature of social media in adolescents' lives, more research must be conducted into its effects on self-esteem. Specific behaviours (i.e., social comparison, seeking validation, self-presentation) must be explored further. Future research must also consider gender and culture and should concentrate on the practical applications, such as interventions that can facilitate healthier interaction and minimize comparison and seeking of validation.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Research Design

This research follows a quantitative research design, which gathers numerical data to explain the trends and connections between variables. The method of investigation employs the use of a questionnaire administered to a group of adolescents in order to carry out a statistical analysis of the variables of social media use and self-esteem.

#### 3.2 Data Collection Methods

All the data collection has been carried out using an online survey conducted through Google Forms. All teenagers were targeted via social networking sites and via schools. The questionnaire consists of multiple choice questions and rating scale statements, examining use of social networking sites and self-esteem.

#### 3.3 Research Instruments

The instrument used for the collection of data is the semi-structured questionnaire. It is divided into three sections: (1) Demographic information such as age, gender and amount of time spent on social media; (2) Social media habits such as the platforms used and how the participant interacts with social media; (3) Self-esteem measurement using questions from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) which measures self-confidence.

#### 3.4 Ethical Considerations

Each participant is able to give informed consent before completing the research task. They are assured that all responses are anonymized and confidential and are free to withdraw at any time. There is no request for identifiable data and the research has been conducted ethically.

#### 3.5 Data Analysis Techniques

Simple statistical techniques, such as percentages and averages, were used to analyse the responses, to reveal patterns within self-esteem and use of social media sites. It is possible to compare them to identify whether higher social media usage has a positive or negative effect on the level of self-esteem.

#### 3.6 Limitations of Methodology

The study has its limitations. The sample is obtained by means of convenience, so the findings cannot fully represent the total teenage population. Also, self-reporting measures have been used, so it is not guaranteed that participants will be completely truthful. In spite of these problems, this investigation provides valuable information on the influence of social networking on adolescent self-esteem.

### 4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

#### 4.1 Analysis of Survey Responses

This chapter presents and discusses the findings of the survey administered to explore the effects of social media on adolescent self-esteem. The chapter involves an analysis of the information received from survey participants, and highlights



trends in responses, presented in summary format. The chapter interprets this information in regard to the aims of this investigation and discusses in relation to other academic findings.

Question 1 — I feel less attractive or valuable when I see others posting "perfect" pictures: A mere 16.7% agreed they felt less attractive when viewing ideals. However, 26.7% did not think they felt less attractive while 16.7% disagreed strongly, which may have showed that most did not feel less attractive when comparing their appearance to ideals. 38.1% felt neutral, which indicated that not everybody felt insecure on a daily basis.

Question 2 — Taking a break from social media improves my mood: A large number of participants agree or strongly agree (47.6%) that taking a break from social media will help their mood. This means that nearly half of the participants become drained or stressed through using social media. However, another large number (40.5%) are neutral, showing that social media breaks have different effects on individuals' moods. Only a few participants (7.1%) do not agree.

Question 3 — When I get positive comments or likes, it boosts my self-esteem: Two thirds of the respondents (66.7%) answered agree or strongly agree. This reflects that positive feedback from social media is an important factor in the determination of users' self-esteem. Another 23.8% were neutral. Only a small group (7.2%) disagree or strongly disagree, meaning that these people's self-esteem is not defined by comments from social media.

Question 4 — Seeing others succeed on social media sometimes makes me feel like I am not doing enough: A majority (42.9%) either agree or strongly agree that the contents displayed on social media sites may be used for comparison and cause individuals to doubt their self-worth. However, 23.8% are neutral and 33.3% disagree or strongly disagree, meaning that a good portion of users allow themselves not to be negatively affected.

Question 5 — I feel pressure to look a certain way because of what I see on social media: Nearly a fifth (19.1%) of respondents concur or concur strongly with the belief that there are certain beauty ideals being imposed by social media. However, the majority (38.1%) remain undecided and more people disagree or disagree strongly (42.8%), implying that the pressure is not overwhelming to nearly half of the people who responded.

## 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Overview of Findings

Based on these results, we can begin to distinguish trends of social media use and adolescent self-esteem. Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok were the three social media platforms reported to be used most often, illustrating that visuals tend to dominate social media usage. Respondents were more likely to indicate their primary usage of social media was for entertainment and socialization; however, it was also common to report they used it for self-expression and a search for validity.

The percentage of respondents using social media for more than 3 hours was significant, implying a lot of exposure to content. Regarding positive outcomes, 54.8% of respondents agree and 11.9% strongly agree that receiving likes and comments raises one's self-esteem, while 23.8% were neutral. Conversely, 38.1% agree and 4.8% strongly agree that sometimes one feels self-deprecating due to the nature of social media. Likewise, 16.7% agree and 2.4% strongly agree that social media is related to one's conception of what beauty is; however, 38.1% were neutral and 42.8% disagree. 47.6% of the respondents agree that they feel better once they have taken a break from social media. Overall, the data indicate a positive yet ambiguous social media impact, a concept supported by previous research.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

It is clear from the results of this study that the impact of social media use on adolescent self-esteem is multifaceted and not universally experienced. As over half (66.7%) of respondents claim that social media has increased their self-esteem due to positive engagement, it is obvious it has positive outcomes for many. However, a large percentage of people (42.9%) claimed they had lower self-esteem due to comparison in the virtual environment, indicating social media both increases the user's self-esteem through affirmation, and diminishes their self-esteem through its focus on a highly idealised and unattainable world.

The finding that 47.6% of respondents felt happier when they took a break from the platform suggests even positive use of the technology can be straining. However, since there was also a lower response in relation to the pressures concerning appearance (19.1%) along with a high amount of people who stated that this did not impact their self-esteem (42.8%), it indicates not all users incorporate these pressures into the overall belief system surrounding their appearance. As there is such a great amount of variation in answers for all questions asked, it becomes clear that each user will react differently to the pressure associated with the medium and that not everyone interprets the same inputs in the same way. Overall, the results indicate that it is the nature of the interaction rather than social media itself that produces these varied responses; this reiterates the need to ensure users practice self-aware interaction and develop ways to mitigate harmful comparisons



while simultaneously maintaining the supportive environment of the platform.

## REFERENCES

1. Andreassen, C. S., Pallesen, S., & Griffiths, M. D. (2020). The relationship between addictive social media use and psychological distress. *Cyberpsychology, Behaviour, and Social Networking*, 23(5), 277–282.
2. Barry, C. T., Sidoti, C. L., Briggs, S. M., Reiter, S. R., & Lindsey, R. A. (2021). Adolescent social media use and mental health: The role of social comparison. *Journal of Adolescence*, 89, 102–113.
3. Best, P., Manktelow, R., & Taylor, B. (2020). Online communication, social media and adolescent well-being: A systematic narrative review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 91, 27–35.
4. Chae, J. (2023). Beauty filters and adolescent self-esteem: The distortion of self-image. *New Media & Society*, 25(2), 305–321.
5. Clark, J. L., Algoe, S. B., & Green, M. C. (2022). Social media, support, and self-esteem: The role of positive interactions. *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 127, 107026.
6. Cohen, R., Newton-John, T., & Slater, A. (2021). The impact of appearance-focused social media use on body image. *Body Image*, 38, 49–56.
7. Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C. (2021). The benefits of Facebook friends: Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12(4), 1143–1168.
8. Fardouly, J., Diedrichs, P. C., Vartanian, L. R., & Halliwell, E. (2020). Social comparisons on social media: The impact of Facebook on young women's body image concerns and mood. *Body Image*, 10(2), 282–288.
9. Keles, B., McCrae, N., & Grealish, A. (2021). Social media and adolescent mental health: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Adolescence*, 79, 64–79.
10. Kleemans, M., Daalmans, S., Carbaat, I., & Anschütz, D. J. (2022). Picture perfect: The direct effect of manipulated Instagram photos on body image in adolescent girls. *Media Psychology*, 25(1), 45–64.