

The Association Between Social Media and Self-Esteem among Adolescents

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Abstract. This article examines how social media impacts adolescents' self-esteem. Critical factors such as social comparison, feedback from others, and introspection play a key role in shaping users' self-esteem during their time on these digital platforms. These factors include social comparison, feedback from others, and introspection, all of which greatly affect the self-esteem of users as they engage with diverse social media settings. Additionally, the article considers how cultural variations affect the link between social media and self-esteem. It points out that people from Eastern cultures, which tend to stress collectivism and social harmony, might be more vulnerable to the impacts of social media interactions on their self-esteem. The article offers a thorough examination of the complex relationship between social media and teenagers' self-esteem, taking into account various psychological factors and cultural differences. In doing so, it emphasizes the importance of self-esteem as a predictor of life satisfaction and highlights the necessity for more research in this field to better comprehend and tackle the challenges that teenagers encounter in the digital era.

Keywords: Social media, self-esteem, adolescents, social comparison.

1. Introduction

Social media has become an integral part of everyday life, especially for teenagers, whose emerging sense of self is often intertwined with their online presence. This is especially true for adolescents, a demographic group whose emerging identities frequently intertwine with their online personas. These young individuals are in a critical phase of self-discovery and self-construction, and their interactions on social media platforms can significantly influence their developing sense of self. Recent studies have shown that an overwhelming majority of teenagers in the United States are actively engaged with social media. In fact, as of the year 2024, an astonishing 93% of teens in the US are reported to be using social media [1]. This statistic underscores the profound impact that these digital platforms have on the lives of young people, shaping their social interactions, their perceptions of the world around them, and, ultimately, their self-esteem.

This article explores how the use of social media affects the self-esteem of adolescents. It aims to elucidate the various ways in which social media can shape the self-worth of young individuals. Central to this examination are key psychological processes, such as social comparison, social feedback, and self-reflection. Teenagers often find themselves comparing their lives, achievements, and appearances with those of their friends and influencers on social media, which can produce either positive or negative effects on their self-esteem [2].

Social feedback, including likes, comments, and shares, can act as a significant form of external validation that either enhances or undermines an adolescent's self-esteem. The instant and public nature of this feedback can lead to an increased sense of self-importance or, on the other hand, to feelings of inadequacy and diminished self-worth. Additionally, the culture surrounding social media, with its specific norms and values, significantly influences these interactions and their subsequent effects on self-esteem [3].

2. Method

This article's approach is grounded in a thorough review of the literature. It entailed scrutinizing and amalgamating current scholarly articles that concentrate on the correlation between social media

and teenagers' self-regard. The chosen research was inspected to pinpoint central themes, including social comparison, social feedback, self-contemplation, and cultural variances, and their influence on teenage psychological well-being. The literature review enabled a methodical scrutiny of social media's negative and positive impacts, drawing upon a range of viewpoints and outcomes. By incorporating insights from multiple academics, this synthesis provides a comprehensive comprehension of social media's influence on teenagers' self-esteem, laying the groundwork for the discussions featured in this article.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Social Comparison and Self-Esteem In Terms of Appearance

Social media's impact on self-esteem primarily stems from social comparison, as Krause et al. point out. When people engage with social networking sites (SNS) to compare themselves with peers, it frequently results in detrimental effects [4]. Especially vulnerable are adolescents, who are in a phase where peer validation and social comparison are significant. Social media often showcases idealized lives, making users feel insufficient by comparison. The ongoing exposure to carefully selected posts can skew an adolescent's view of reality, causing them to feel their life doesn't meet the standards set by others. Adolescents' self-esteem can also hinge on various factors depending on the situation. Some may find self-esteem in academic achievements, while others may lean more on peer validation or physical looks. In social media exchanges, where peer validation and physical appearance are prominent, these self-esteem factors are especially activated [5]. Thus, adolescents who build their self-esteem on peer validation or physical looks might be more prone to the effects of social media usage and the impact of social media experiences on self-esteem [6]. Moreover, the online environment changes the availability of self-assessment information. Unlike in-person interactions, social media offers countless opportunities for comparison, often with people outside one's immediate social group. This broadened scope can amplify the effect on self-esteem, as adolescents are exposed not just to peers but also to influencers and celebrities who promote unrealistic ideals of beauty, success, and happiness.

The study conducted by Steinsbekk et al. comprehensively analyzed how different social media activities affect the appearance and self-esteem of adolescents [7]. The longitudinal study, conducted in Norway, followed a community sample of children, from ages 10 to 14, to examine the effects of self-directed versus other-directed social media use on them. The qualitative findings highlight that teens who engage in other-oriented social media behaviors, such as liking and commenting on others' posts, are more likely to experience a decline in appearance self-esteem. Girls, in particular, are more likely than boys to use social media platforms for comparison, and the decline is particularly pronounced for them. In particular, interviews conducted with participants revealed that girls felt a heightened pressure to meet idealized beauty standards after viewing others' posts. Many expressed feelings of inadequacy and the need to present themselves in the best possible way, often striving for the positive social feedback that others appeared to receive. These sentiments illustrate how social media can exacerbate existing insecurities regarding physical appearance and amplify the effects of social comparison during a crucial developmental period.

Recent research further bolsters the notion that focusing on others through social media usage can detrimentally influence self-esteem based on appearance. Mascheroni et al., along with Yau and Reich, indicate that interacting with the idealized images and updates of others on social media can lead to a decrease in appearance-based self-esteem from childhood to adolescence [8, 9]. This is consistent with McLean et al.'s findings, which imply that these adverse effects persist over time and could adversely affect the development of appearance-based self-esteem during the critical identity formation phase [10]. This underscores the significance of differentiating between self-focused activities, such as posting personal photos, and other-focused activities, like liking and commenting on others' photos, when evaluating their impact on appearance-based self-esteem. In particular,

engaging with peers' photos through likes or comments may mimic passive social media engagement, which has been associated with a negative impact on self-esteem [4].

Similar to passive use, social comparison is crucial in understanding why focusing on others on social media can gradually erode self-esteem based on appearance [11, 12]. According to Festinger's theory of social comparison, people often compare themselves with others as a means of self-assessment, a tendency that is particularly strong during adolescence [12, 13]. Social media facilitates this comparison for teenagers, and not meeting key appearance benchmarks can lead to reduced self-esteem and dissatisfaction with one's body [14, 15]. In connection with self-discrepancy theory, when the standard for what is considered a normal appearance is set higher, the gap between one's ideal self and their actual self-perception may grow [16]. Consequently, future studies should investigate social comparison and its effect on self-assessment as a possible explanation for the relationship between other-focused social media use and appearance-based self-esteem, as identified in this article.

3.2. Social Feedback Processing

The research conducted by Burrow and Rainone indicated that individuals in laboratory environments expressed higher levels of self-esteem following the reception of likes on their photos [17]. Moreover, Valkenburg et al discovered that receiving encouraging feedback, like positive ratings on profiles, also had a beneficial impact on self-esteem [6]. Other research supports the notion that the nature and quality of feedback are crucial factors influencing users' self-esteem. For example, receiving birthday messages and positive feedback was found to enhance self-esteem [6, 18]. Additionally, perceived supportive remarks were shown to improve self-esteem, regardless of whether they originated from close friends or casual acquaintances [6, 19].

Nonetheless, it is crucial to recognize that although positive reinforcement can result in temporary boosts in self-esteem, the enduring impacts are not as reliable. For instance, Metzler and Scheithauer discovered that while showcasing oneself positively may initially raise self-esteem, it can ultimately result in diminished self-esteem over time [20]. It has been noted that individuals who actively pursue social feedback for reassurance tend to experience a decline in self-esteem over time [21]. This is particularly true for adolescents, who may be especially vulnerable to such feedback as they work on forming their identities and social positions. The immediate satisfaction gained from receiving numerous likes or comments can foster a feeling of acceptance and approval. However, this phenomenon is not without its challenges. Young individuals might grow overly reliant on social feedback to affirm their self-worth, which can become problematic if such feedback is either lacking or unfavorable. In severe instances, this can result in a continual search for validation through social media, ultimately leading to greater decreases in self-esteem when the anticipated feedback fails to come through.

3.3. Self-Reflective Processes and the Mixed Effects of Social Media

In contrast to social comparison and feedback processing, social media can also act as a platform for self-reflection. Krause et al. propose that when utilized thoughtfully, social media can offer opportunities for adolescents to express themselves, explore their identities, and receive constructive feedback from others [4]. This reflective use of social media can lead to personal growth and enhanced self-esteem as adolescents gain a deeper understanding of themselves and their values through online interactions.

However, it is crucial to recognize that social media's impact on self-esteem varies. Factors like personality, social backing, and initial self-esteem levels are key in deciding if social media will positively or negatively affect a teen's self-regard. This diversity implies that generalizations about social media's influence on self-esteem might miss the issue's intricacies.

3.4. Cultural Differences in the Link between Social Media and Self-Esteem

Another critical factor to take into account is how culture influences the connection between social media and self-esteem. Cingel et al.'s research indicates that social media's effect on self-esteem tends

to be more pronounced in Eastern, collectivist societies than in Western, individualist ones [22]. In collectivist cultures, where social harmony and group ties are greatly esteemed, social media might amplify the pressure to meet societal norms, thus worsening the adverse impacts of social comparison. Conversely, young people in individualist societies may concentrate more on self-expression and personal accomplishments, which could alleviate some of the negative outcomes of social comparison. This differentiation highlights the significance of factoring in cultural context when analyzing the impact of social media on self-esteem.

3.5. Social Media Addiction and Life Satisfaction

The time spent on social media affects self-esteem. Hawi and Samaha found that heavy social media use correlates with lower self-esteem and life satisfaction. Addicted adolescents may focus too much on their online image, ignoring real-life interactions that are important for self-worth [23]. Self-esteem mediates the link between social media addiction and life satisfaction, indicating that those with low self-esteem are prone to social media addiction, which further diminishes their self-worth and life satisfaction. This cycle underscores the need for interventions targeting both social media habits and self-esteem in adolescents.

3.6. Social Media as a Platform for Positive Psychological Interventions

Research indicates that encouraging adolescents to express gratitude on social media can reduce stress and improve life satisfaction. The study found that females experienced greater improvements in well-being than males, emphasizing the importance of customizing interventions for different demographics [24]. Gratitude-focused social media platforms could be an economical and scalable method to promote psychological well-being in adolescents, especially in under-resourced schools. These platforms foster positive interactions and a sense of psychological safety and belonging. The study's content analysis showed themes of trust and social belonging among participants, suggesting that gratitude-based interactions can create supportive communities that enhance well-being. Integrating gratitude-based programs into social media could help adolescents engage in more constructive and emotionally rewarding online interactions, highlighting the potential of social media to cultivate a positive community.

4. Conclusion

Social media addiction is a factor in adolescent self-esteem. Research shows social media can harm or help, depending on usage and user circumstances. Strategies to reduce negative impacts include limiting screen time and fostering critical awareness. Social media can also be used positively, for example, through gratitude interventions that improve well-being and reduce stress. Future research should explore factors like personality, social support, and culture that affect social media's impact. Quantitative analyses have been key in understanding these relationships, but combining them with qualitative insights will provide a deeper understanding. As social media evolves, strategies should be developed to encourage positive use among adolescents, leveraging aspects like gratitude and supportive communities to promote emotional support and personal growth.

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