

The Search for Self-Validation Among Teenagers on Social Media and Its Impact on Social Anxiety

 Cut Triana Putri¹, Sri Nurhayati Selian²

Universitas Muhammadiyah Aceh^{1, 2}

 cuttrianap@gmail.com

 seliansrinurhayati@gmail.com

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Abstract

The rapid development of information technology has brought significant changes to the way humans communicate and interact, especially among teenagers. This research aims to understand the experiences of teenagers in seeking self-validation thru social media and its impact on social anxiety. This research uses a phenomenological qualitative approach involving 3 adolescent and young adult subjects who actively use social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. Data were obtained thru in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation, then analyzed descriptively phenomenologically following Creswell's stages. The research results show that the three subjects have different motivations for using social media, but all are rooted in the need for recognition and social acceptance. Social validation in the form of "likes," positive comments, and the number of followers has been proven to affect the psychological condition of the subjects, where positive responses lead to feelings of self-confidence and self-satisfaction, while a lack of validation causes feelings such as anxiety, disappointment, and low self-esteem. Additionally, it was found that social media plays a dual role, capable of boosting self-confidence in online interactions, but can decrease comfort in face-to-face communication. This research emphasizes the importance of balancing external and internal validation so that teenagers can build a healthy self-identity in the digital era, and consequently, their self-confidence and self-satisfaction will also increase.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of information technology has brought significant changes to the way humans communicate and interact, especially among teenagers. Currently, social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and Facebook no longer merely serve as means of entertainment or communication; they have become part of the lifestyle and a symbol of the social identity of the younger generation. According to Mirza (1997), this phenomenon is clearly visible in daily life, where teenagers actively share various activities, showcase personal achievements, and upload photos and videos of themselves with the aim of receiving responses from other users in the form of likes, comments, or an increase in followers.

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Field facts show that many teenagers assess their self-esteem based on the level of validation they receive from the digital world. This form of validation usually manifests as social appreciation in the form of higher numbers of likes and followers, which in turn increases their self-confidence and self-satisfaction (Sahputra, Habibah, and Fitria, 2023). Conversely, when their posts do not receive the expected response, feelings of anxiety, lack of appreciation, and even the belief that they are "not good enough" arise. In many situations, this causes teenagers to get caught in the habit of comparing themselves to others, excessively editing their appearance, and even building a self-image that does not match reality in order to gain social acceptance on social media.

Furthermore, this phenomenon cannot be taken lightly, especially because it is related to the increasing anxiety among teenagers. The anxiety referred to here is not just a general feeling of worry, but includes social anxiety such as fear of negative evaluation, excessive concern about acceptance from peers, and a compulsive urge to seek validation thru responses on social media (e.g., the number of "likes" or comments) (Leary, Mark R., 1983). Several studies show that excessive use of social media, especially those oriented toward seeking validation, is closely related to increased social anxiety, low self-esteem, and a tendency to engage in unhealthy social comparisons, which can ultimately trigger self-image distortion and symptoms of depression (Vogel, Erin A. et al., 2014; Keles, Betul et al., 2020). The Komnas Perempuan report (2023) also indicates that the social pressure arising from interactions in the digital world is one of the factors contributing to the increasing mental health issues among adolescents in Indonesia. This condition is further exacerbated by low digital literacy, weak supervision from families and schools, and the limited safe spaces for teenagers to develop their self-esteem positively and healthily (Fitri, Nilma, & Ifdil, 2018).

The main reason why this issue is worth researching is that the phenomenon of seeking self-validation is closely related to fundamental aspects of adolescent psychosocial development. Adolescence is an important period when individuals begin to seek and form their identity, making the need for social acceptance very dominant. When the process of identity formation takes place more in the digital world than thru face-to-face interactions, new dynamics emerge in how teenagers understand and evaluate themselves, a pattern that differs from previous generations. Therefore, this research is highly relevant for understanding how contemporary Indonesian teenagers interpret their presence on social media and how these experiences influence their self-perception and self-worth (Rohmatillah et al., 2024).

Moreover, this topic is important to research because, although the relationship between social media use and adolescent mental health has been extensively studied, most research is still dominated by quantitative approaches that focus on the relationships or influences between variables, such as the intensity of social media use and levels of social anxiety (Keles et al., 2020; Vogel et al., 2014). Meanwhile, studies that explore the subjective experiences of adolescents in seeking self-validation on social media are still relatively limited, particularly in understanding how adolescents interpret social acceptance, the pressure to gain recognition, and the fear of negative judgment in the digital space. Some research indicates that adolescents tend to engage in social comparison and experience pressure to maintain a positive self-image on social media, which ultimately relates to increased social anxiety (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015; Valkenburg et al., 2017). In the context of Indonesia, which upholds the values of collectivism and social norms, this dynamic has the potential to become more complex due to the demands for social conformity and sensitivity toward it.

However, studies that specifically examine the subjective experiences of adolescents in the process of seeking self-validation and its relation to social anxiety in the context of Indonesian culture have not been extensively developed. Therefore, this research is important to fill that gap. Thru this research, it is expected to obtain a deeper and contextually relevant understanding of how adolescents face various forms of social pressure in the digital world, including the strategies they use to build and maintain self-validation, and how this affects their psychological development. The findings of this research are expected to make a tangible contribution to the development of educational approaches, psychological support programs, and the formulation of public policies that are more responsive and relevant to the challenges faced by the younger generation in the current era of social media.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a phenomenological qualitative approach aimed at deeply understanding the subjective experiences of adolescents in seeking self-validation on social media and how these experiences affect social anxiety (Khalefa & Selian, 2021). The phenomenological approach was chosen because it focuses on the effort to uncover the meaning of individuals' life experiences, where the researcher acts as the primary instrument interacting directly with participants thru interviews and observations. This research does not emphasize numerical measurement, but rather the interpretation and meaning of adolescents' experiences in their social and psychological contexts in the digital world. The subjects of the research are teenagers aged 15–21 who actively use social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, and show a tendency to seek self-validation, for example, by frequently checking the number of likes, comments, or followers. Participant criteria were established thru purposive sampling techniques, considering that participants truly have relevant experience with the research focus. To expand the findings, researchers can also use the snowball sampling technique, which involves adding participants based on recommendations from previous informants who have similar characteristics. The number of subjects is adjusted according to the principle of data saturation, which means data collection is stopped when no new information emerges.

Data were collected thru three main techniques, namely in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews are used to explore the experiences and subjective meanings of participants, while observations are conducted to observe the actual behavior of adolescents when using social media, including emotional expressions and reactions to responses from other users. Documentation such as screenshots of social media posts (with participants' permission), field notes, and interview recordings are used as supporting materials for the analysis. Data analysis was conducted descriptively phenomenologically by following stages, including data organization, identification of significant statements, formulation of main themes, and integration of textual and structural descriptions to find the essential meaning of the adolescents' experiences. To maintain data validity, this research applies the trustworthiness criteria from Lincoln and Guba (1985), which include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility is ensured thru data triangulation and member checks, while transferability is achieved by providing detailed contextual descriptions. Dependability is ensured thru the documentation of the research process (audit trail), and confirmability is achieved thru the researcher's self-reflection to avoid bias.

DISCUSSION

Results and discussion

This research was conducted in Banda Aceh, involving 3 research subjects who are teenagers and young adults actively using social media. The 3 subjects were chosen due to their intensity in using social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, and their tendency to seek self-validation thru online activities. Here are the details of each research subject:

Table 1. Research Subject Details

Subject	Age	Duration of Social Media Use	Reasons for Using Social Media
CP	18	3-5 Hours Per Day	Creating a Vlog
LM	20	4-6 Hours Per Day	Business and Entertainment Needs
MN	28	5-7 Hours Per Day	Work Needs

All three subjects demonstrated high levels of social media use, citing a variety of reasons ranging from entertainment and the pursuit of social recognition to work-related needs. National Geographic Indonesia (2018) explains in an article that a reasonable limit for social media use is half an hour to one hour per day. Based on this, the researcher decided to select these three respondents as the sample for this study.

Based on the results of interviews conducted with the three research subjects, it was found that the dynamics of seeking self-validation through social media and its impact on each individual's psychological condition were evident. The findings from these interviews suggest that social media serves not only as a means of communication and entertainment but also as a crucial medium in shaping self-image, self-confidence, and the emotional well-being of users.

The three subjects have different backgrounds and purposes for using social media, but generally stem from similar social needs, namely to gain recognition, connection, and a desire to be valued. This is reflected in CP's statement explaining that social media is used as a means of self-expression as well as building relationships with others. CP also views comments and "likes" as a form of appreciation for their efforts and creativity. This is reflected in CP's interview remarks, where they stated that

"likes and comments are like my currency—proof that my content is appreciated by others."

Unlike CP, LM has motivations that are more economically oriented; LM actively hosts live streams to attract viewers' attention while boosting product sales. This is evident from LM's interview, where they stated,

"I go live so more people will watch and buy; if lots of people watch, I'm really happy."

Meanwhile, MN views social media as a means of entertainment, self-development, a source of income, and a tool for personal growth. MN believes that positive feedback such as “likes” and comments serves as a stimulus to keep improving. This is reflected in MN’s statement from the interview:

“Likes and comments are motivation—like feedback to help me improve.”

In terms of the validation they seek, the subjects base their perceptions on the number of “likes” and positive comments, as well as an increase in the number of followers. All three view positive responses as indicators of success and a sign of their acceptance within the social media sphere. CP admits to feeling happy and motivated when their posts receive a lot of positive feedback. In line with CP, LM also feels the same way, where the high level of interaction from followers tends to encourage her to be more active and consistent in creating content. Meanwhile, MN believes that public appreciation serves as a boost to productivity and motivation to keep creating. Nevertheless, when they do not receive the expected responses, the subjects admit to experiencing feelings of anxiety, disappointment, or a temporary loss of motivation. CP explained that they often seek answers as to why their posts aren’t popular with the public, and sometimes even feel guilty about their shortcomings in creating engaging content. Unlike CP, LM admitted to feeling sad but continued to try to stay optimistic, as reflected in the interview results:

“If there are no likes, it’s sad, but I just stay positive.”

Meanwhile, MN tends to adopt a more rational stance; MN believes that not all content will always capture the public’s attention and views the process of seeking validation as a natural part of the digital world. Issues of social comparison and self-confidence also emerged in the narratives of the third two subjects—CP and LM—who admitted to comparing themselves with other social media users, particularly regarding popularity and follower counts. CP explained that

“sometimes I do feel envious—how come others have so many followers?—but I try to just focus on myself.”

LM expressed a similar sentiment, noting that they actually use social comparison to their advantage; LM realizes that every individual has unique strengths and characteristics that cannot be directly compared. Social media also influences the subjects’ social interaction patterns in the real world. CP and MN revealed that their activity on social media helps expand their social networks and boosts their confidence when interacting with others. However, this differs from LM, who feels more comfortable speaking in the virtual world than face-to-face with others. She said,

“I often get nervous when meeting people in person, because I usually just talk during live streams.”

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that the search for self-validation on social media is a complex and multifaceted psychological phenomenon, involving basic human needs for social acceptance, recognition, and the formation of self-identity. Based on interviews with three subjects, it is evident that their motivation for using social media extends beyond mere entertainment; it also serves as a medium for self-expression, seeking recognition, and gaining a sense of being valued by others. Although all three have different reasons and backgrounds, they all share a common need to be recognized and accepted within the digital social environment. The first subject, CP, uses social media as a platform for self-expression as well as a place to build social connections. He interprets “likes” and positive comments as symbols of success and recognition of his hard work. This statement reflects a psychological drive to gain social recognition, which is essentially part of the need for relatedness, as explained in the Self-Determination Theory by Brankaert et al. (2009), which states that humans naturally have a need to feel accepted and valued by their environment. Meanwhile, the second subject, LM, is more economically oriented. LM uses social media as a business promotion tool, but also as a source of emotional validation when gaining many viewers and positive interactions. As the number of viewers increases, so does their self-confidence, indicating a link between public attention and self-esteem. As for the third subject, MN views social media as a means of both entertainment and self-development. For MN, positive comments and the number of “likes” are not merely symbols of popularity but also forms of constructive feedback that motivate them to continue improving themselves.

These three experiences demonstrate that the need for validation on social media possesses strong social and psychological dimensions. Social validation through digital interactions provides a sense of being accepted and valued, which emotionally enhances feelings of worth and competence (Shovmayanti, 2024). However, reliance on this external feedback can lead to negative psychological effects when expectations are not met. This is evident when the subjects admitted to feeling disappointed, anxious, or demotivated when their posts did not receive the expected response. CP tended to engage in self-reflection by analyzing the causes of the lack of public response, while LM experienced sadness despite trying to remain optimistic. On the other hand, MN demonstrated a calmer and more rational reaction, indicating a more stable level of emotional maturity. These variations in response indicate differences in emotional coping mechanisms influenced by each individual’s personality, experiences, and value orientation (Dumas et al., 2017).

Psychologically, this phenomenon can be explained through Festinger’s social comparison theory (Atiqah et al., 2025). In the context of social media, individuals unconsciously compare themselves to others based on the number of followers, interactions, or digital appearance. This social comparison is also evident in the interviews, where CP and LM admitted to having felt envious of other users with more followers. However, they responded to these feelings in different ways. CP chose to focus on self-development, while LM used the comparison as motivation to improve their public speaking and performance skills. This phenomenon aligns with the findings of Andrade et al. (2023), who noted that social comparison in the virtual world can produce two types of effects: destructive when it leads to feelings of inferiority, and constructive when it drives self-improvement.

Meanwhile, subject MN took a different stance by stating that MN avoids social comparison. MN recognizes that every individual has their own strengths, and this helps them remain realistic in facing public expectations. This attitude demonstrates good self-regulation skills, which serve as a

buffer against digital social pressure. Within the framework of Self-Evaluation Maintenance theory, individuals who can maintain a balance between personal aspirations and social comparison tend to have more stable levels of emotional well-being (Ainiyah and Mudlofar, 2024).

Throughout the research process, the participants demonstrated a reflective shift in their views on social media. The in-depth interviews brought about a new awareness of the importance of balancing external and internal validation. CP began to realize that the measure of success should not depend solely on the number of “likes,” but rather on personal satisfaction and the quality of their work. LM began to understand the emotional impact of dependence on public feedback, while MN increasingly affirmed their stance on using social media as a means of self-development, not merely as a way to seek attention. This reflective process demonstrates that qualitative research not only gathers data but also provides space for participants to understand their experiences more deeply, as explained by Creswell and Poth (2016), who note that a narrative approach in research facilitates cognitive change and self-awareness through the storytelling process.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the search for self-validation on social media is a psychological phenomenon closely linked to basic human needs for social acceptance, recognition, and the formation of self-identity. Based on the interview results, the three research subjects had different motivations for using social media, yet all stemmed from the need to be acknowledged and valued by the digital social environment. Social validation obtained through the number of “likes,” positive comments, and an increase in the number of followers has a significant impact on the participants’ emotional state and self-confidence. Positive responses from other users create feelings of happiness, worthiness, and motivation, while a lack of public response leads to disappointment, anxiety, and self-doubt.

This phenomenon demonstrates that social media is not merely a tool for communication and entertainment but also functions as a space for self-image formation. When individuals rely on external validation as the primary measure of self-worth, emotional dependence arises that has the potential to affect psychological well-being. However, some participants also demonstrated adaptive capabilities, such as engaging in self-reflection, developing emotional regulation, and shifting their focus to the quality of their work rather than the number of likes received. This indicates a shift in awareness toward a balance between external and internal validation.

Furthermore, this study reveals the influence of social media on real-world social interactions. For some participants, social media plays a role in boosting self-confidence and expanding social networks. However, for others, the intensity of digital interactions actually reduces comfort in face-to-face communication. These findings reinforce the view that social media has a dual impact: it strengthens social connections while simultaneously potentially weakening the quality of face-to-face relationships.

This study has limitations regarding the relatively small number of participants and the restricted geographical context of the research, so the results cannot yet be generalized to the broader adolescent population. Additionally, data were obtained through subjective interviews that may be influenced by social biases and participants’ personal interpretations. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve a larger number of subjects with diverse social and cultural backgrounds, as well as to combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a more comprehensive picture

of the relationship between the search for self-validation, mental health, and adolescent social interactions in the digital age.

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