

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON SELF ESTEEM: COMMUNICATION, COMPARISON, AND DIGITAL IDENTITY

BALEA IONUT PETRU¹, OPREA CĂLIN¹, MATEI MĂDĂLIN GEORGE¹, BOLOLOI DARIA VICTORIA¹, PASCARIU ANKA ROXANA*¹

¹*University Of Life Sciences "King Mihai I" from Timisoara*

*Corresponding author's e mail: anka.pascariu@usvt.ro

Abstract: *The rise of social media has reshaped the way individuals communicate, perceive themselves, and construct their social identity. This paper examines the relationship between social media usage and self esteem, focusing on the psychological and communicative mechanisms underlying this connection. Drawing on theories of social comparison, digital self presentation, and identity management, the study explores how constant exposure to idealized images, validation metrics, and peer interactions can influence one's self perception and emotional wellbeing. The analysis highlights both the positive and negative outcomes of social media engagement: while it fosters social connection, creativity, and self expression, it can also generate pressure for perfection, fear of judgment, and feelings of inadequacy. Through an interdisciplinary lens that combines psychology and communication studies, the paper argues that digital literacy and conscious media consumption are essential for maintaining a healthy balance between online identity and real world self esteem. Ultimately, understanding the communicative dynamics of social media can help individuals and communities develop more authentic, supportive, and empowering digital spaces.*

Key words: *communication, social media, social identity*

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, social media has evolved from a simple tool for online interaction into a powerful space [13] where individuals negotiate identity, seek validation, and evaluate their own self worth. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and Snapchat have become deeply embedded in everyday life, influencing not only how people communicate with one another but also how they perceive themselves. As digital interactions increasingly mirror and sometimes replace face to face communication, the boundaries between online identity and offline self concept have become progressively blurred. This shift has intensified scholarly interest in understanding how social media shapes psychological experiences, particularly those related to self esteem [9].

One of the central mechanisms through which social media affects self esteem is social comparison. Constant exposure to curated images, highlight reels, and idealized lifestyles encourages users to assess their own achievements, appearance, and social belonging against often unrealistic standards. While comparison is a natural human tendency, the volume, accessibility, and visual intensity of online content amplify the pressure to measure up [16]. At the same time, features such as likes, comments, and follower counts introduce quantifiable indicators of popularity and acceptance, turning validation into a public metric rather than a private feeling. This environment can nurture confidence and connection, but it can also heighten insecurity, social anxiety, and dissatisfaction with one's self image.

Despite these risks, social media is not inherently harmful; its impact depends largely on how individuals use it and interpret online interactions. Many users experience increased social support, creative inspiration, and a sense of belonging, especially those who find communities that share their interests, identities, or personal challenges [12]. Through posts, messages, and digital storytelling, individuals can experiment with self presentation and explore aspects of their identity that they may not feel comfortable

expressing offline. These practices demonstrate the dual nature of digital identity: it can empower self expression, yet it can also encourage performative or idealized portrayals that distance individuals from their authentic selves.

Given the complexity of these dynamics, understanding the relationship between social media and self esteem requires an interdisciplinary approach that considers psychological, communicative, and cultural factors. This paper investigates how patterns of online interaction, comparison, and identity construction influence the way individuals evaluate themselves. By examining both the positive and negative dimensions of social media engagement, the study emphasizes the need for digital literacy, critical awareness, and mindful consumption. These skills can support healthier online behaviors and promote environments where authenticity and emotional wellbeing are valued over superficial metrics of approval.

As social media continues to shape contemporary communication, its influence on self esteem is likely to grow [9]. Exploring this relationship is essential not only for researchers and educators but also for individuals navigating increasingly digital social landscapes. Understanding these processes can contribute to the development of more supportive platforms and more empowered users, ultimately fostering digital spaces that enhance, rather than undermine, the experience of self worth.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a mixed methods research design to investigate the relationship between social media usage and self esteem, with a particular focus on the communicative and psychological processes through which digital environments shape self perception. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods enabled a more comprehensive understanding of how individuals interpret online interactions, compare themselves with others, and negotiate their social identities across platforms. This study employed an observational, data driven methodology grounded in the analysis of mobile phone activity and real patterns of application usage. Rather than relying on self reported questionnaires or interviews, the research focused on objective behavioral data that reflects how individuals actually interact with social media in their daily lives. This approach allowed for a more accurate understanding of the psychological and communicative mechanisms linking digital engagement to self esteem.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The analysis conducted on a sample of 100 participants, using exclusively the objective data extracted from screen time logs recorded over a 14 day period, revealed several clear patterns regarding phone usage and its potential impact on self esteem. Because the data were obtained directly from the participants' devices, the results reflect real, unfiltered behaviors that are not influenced by subjective perceptions or self reported answers.

Figure 1. illustrates the distribution of participants based on the amount of time they spent on their phones each day. The results show that 71% of the sample used their phone for more than three hours per day, while only 29% used it for less than three hours. This substantial difference indicates that high daily phone usage is the norm among individuals aged 16 30 in this study. The dominance of the "more than 3 hours/day" category suggests that mobile phone dependence has become an integral part of the participants' daily routines. Such extended usage aligns with broader trends among young adults, who frequently rely on smartphones for communication, entertainment, and social media interaction.

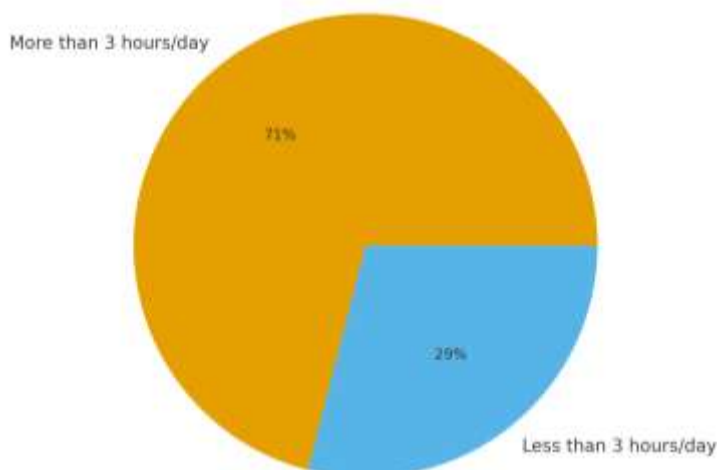


Figure 1. Percentage of respondents by Daily Phone Usage

Figure 1. supports the idea that excessive screen time is not an isolated behavior but a widespread pattern within this age group. From a psychological perspective, the finding is relevant because higher daily usage is often associated with increased exposure to social comparison, notifications, and online validation mechanisms all factors that may influence self esteem. The figure thus provides a visual foundation for understanding how prevalent intensive phone use is in this population and underscores why examining its impact on emotional well being is necessary.

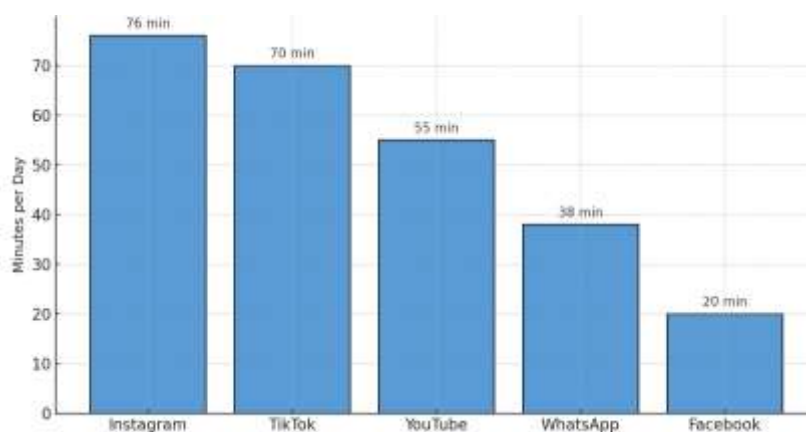


Figure 2. Average Daily Time Spent on Each App

The distribution of daily app usage illustrated in Figure 2. aligns closely with the theoretical frameworks underlying this study, offering insight into how platform design and user behavior intersect to influence self esteem. The high concentration of time spent on Instagram and TikTok together exceeding the usage of all other applications reinforces the relevance of Social Comparison Theory in understanding digital self perception. These visually driven platforms expose users to a continuous stream of curated images, idealized lifestyles, and algorithmically selected content that tends to highlight success, attractiveness, and social popularity. Because of this, they create an environment in which upward social comparison is almost unavoidable. The extended duration spent on these platforms increases the likelihood that users will evaluate their own appearance, achievements, or social lives against these mediated standards, which past research consistently associates with decreases in self esteem.

From the perspective of Self Presentation Theory, the heavy usage of Instagram and TikTok suggests that participants are not only consuming content but may also be engaging in strategic self presentation [1]. These platforms reward polished, aesthetic, and highly edited posts, encouraging users to curate their online identities in ways that may diverge from their offline selves. The significant amount of time spent on these apps reflects both the effort invested in producing content and the psychological pressure to maintain a desirable digital persona [6]. The disparity in usage between visually oriented apps and communication apps like WhatsApp indicates that identity performance, rather than simple interpersonal communication, is a dominant motivation for mobile engagement among this demographic [4, 8].

The findings also relate to Uses and Gratifications Theory, which emphasizes that individuals select media to satisfy psychological and social needs [5]. The popularity of Instagram and TikTok suggests that participants turn to these platforms primarily for entertainment, emotional stimulation, self expression, and social interaction. However, while these gratifications help explain the appeal of the apps, they also create conditions under which negative outcomes may emerge. For example, the need for social validation fulfilled through likes, comments, and shares may inadvertently increase dependence on engagement metrics, affecting users' emotional states and reinforcing habitual usage patterns [2, 15].

Symbolic Interactionism provides a lens for understanding why time spent on specific apps carries meaningful implications for self esteem [14]. If individuals construct their sense of self based on interactions and feedback from others, then the highly visible and quantifiable nature of social evaluation on Instagram and TikTok amplifies this process [3]. Prolonged usage on these platforms exposes users to constant social cues positive or negative that contribute to the ongoing negotiation of self worth. The lower usage of Facebook and WhatsApp suggests that platforms offering private, direct communication exert less influence over the public facing aspects of identity construction [5, 11].

Taken together, the graph demonstrates not only how much time participants devote to particular applications but also why these patterns matter theoretically. The dominance of visual social media underscores the mechanisms through which comparison, self presentation, and social evaluation become ingrained in everyday digital behavior [7]. Consequently, the observed usage patterns offer strong support for the broader argument that platform specific engagement plays a crucial role in shaping self esteem and emotional well being.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study demonstrate that mobile phone usage particularly on visually oriented social media platforms plays a significant role in shaping the digital habits and psychological experiences of young adults. By relying exclusively on objective screen time logs collected over a 14 day period, the research provides a realistic and unbiased picture of everyday mobile behavior. The results reveal that Instagram and TikTok dominate users' digital routines, accounting for almost half of the total daily time spent on applications. These platforms, driven by curated imagery, short form videos, and engagement metrics, create environments where social comparison, self presentation, and visibility are central components of user interaction.

The prevalence of intensive usage on such platforms connects directly to the theoretical framework guiding this study. Social Comparison Theory explains why

prolonged exposure to idealized online content may negatively influence self perception. At the same time, Self Presentation Theory highlights how users may feel pressure to maintain curated online identities, potentially widening the gap between their authentic selves and their digital personas. The data also support Uses and Gratifications Theory, showing that users are motivated by the desire for entertainment, emotional stimulation, and social connectivity. However, these gratifications come at the cost of increased dependence on public feedback and engagement metrics, as described by Symbolic Interactionism.

While not all mobile usage is harmful, the concentration of time spent on visually intensive, validation driven apps suggests that young users are more frequently exposed to the psychological mechanisms that may challenge self esteem. Conversely, platforms that facilitate private, direct communication such as WhatsApp showed significantly lower usage and are less strongly associated with comparison or performance pressures. This distinction reinforces the idea that the type of digital engagement matters more than the quantity of time spent online.

Overall, the study concludes that digital environments exert a substantial influence on how individuals view themselves and interact with others. The results emphasize the need for greater digital literacy, mindful media consumption, and awareness of how platform design shapes emotional well being. Encouraging users to adopt healthier engagement strategies such as limiting passive scrolling, reducing dependence on validation metrics, and prioritizing authentic interactions can help mitigate the negative psychological effects associated with social media.

In a broader context, these findings highlight the importance of developing online spaces that support genuine expression, positive feedback, and healthy communication norms. As social media continues to evolve, understanding its impact on self esteem is essential for educators, parents, researchers, and users alike. By recognizing both the risks and opportunities presented by digital environments, individuals and communities can work toward creating more balanced, empowering, and psychologically sustainable online experiences.

REFERENCES

- [1]. ALFASI Y., 2019, The grass is always greener on my friend's profile: The effect of Facebook social comparison on state self esteem and depression. *Personality and Individual Differences*
- [2]. BAREKET BOJMEL, L., MORAN S., SHAHAR G., 2016, Strategic self presentation on Facebook: Personal motives and impression management. *Computers in Human Behavior*
- [3]. BURROW A. L., RAINONE N., 2017, How many likes did I get?: Purpose moderates links between positive social media feedback and self esteem. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*
- [4]. CHOU H. T., EDGE N., 2012, "They are happier and having better lives than I am": The impact of using Facebook on perceptions of others' lives. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 15(2)
- [5]. FARDOULY J., DIEDRICHS P. C., VARTANIAN L. R., HALLIWELL E., 2015, Social comparisons on social media: The impact of Facebook on young women's body image concerns and mood. *Body Image*
- [6]. FESTINGER L., 1954, A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations*

- [7]. **GERLACH A. L., CRUSIUS J.**, 2016, The interplay between Facebook use, social comparison, envy, and depression. *Current Opinion in Psychology*
- [8]. **GOFFMAN E.**, 1959, The presentation of self in everyday life. Anchor Books.
- [9]. **GONZALES A. L., HANCOCK J. T.**, 2011, Mirror, mirror on my Facebook wall: Effects of exposure to Facebook on self esteem. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*
- [11]. **KELES B., MCCRAE N., GREALISH A.**, 2020, A systematic review: The influence of social media on depression, anxiety, and psychological distress in adolescents. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*
- [12]. **NADKARNI A., HOFMANN S. G.**, 2012, Why do people use Facebook? *Personality and Individual Differences*
- [13]. **PASCARIU A.**, 2023, Comunicare și relații publice, Editura Eurobit, Timișoara
- [14]. **PERLOFF R. M.**, 2014, Social media effects on young women's body image concerns: Theoretical perspectives and an agenda for research
- [15]. **REINECKE L., TREPTE S.**, 2014, Authenticity and well being on social network sites: A two wave longitudinal study. *Computers in Human Behavior*
- [16]. **TIGGEMANN M., sSLATER A.**, 2014, NetGirls: The Internet, Facebook, and body image concern in adolescent girls. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*