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Exploring the Influence of Social Media Validation on Individuals' Sense of Self-Worth

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Abstract

College students are immersed in social media, and it has a great impact on their perception, construction, and assessment of self-esteem. Although social media validation is widely used, little qualitative research has examined the psychological effects and self-perceptions of students while using social media validation. The present empirical qualitative study thus sought to examine the effects of positive social media validation, such as “likes” and comments, as well as other online forms of validation, on the self-worth of college students. The study was done at Cluster University of Jammu, India, using a purposive sampling technique. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data from 27 college students who were interviewed in a semi-structured manner. The results showed that social media validation contributes in two ways to students' self-worth. Positive online feedback helped to build confidence, motivation, and belonging, while the lack of or delayed positive feedback helped to cause anxiety, self-doubt, fear of negative evaluation, and emotional distress. The study also highlighted that over-dependence on digital validation affected the students' sense of self, engagement in school, and

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their social relationships outside of the digital space, demonstrating the multifaceted psychological impacts of social media use. This indicates that, in many cases, students' self-esteem is tied to external digital validation and makes them more susceptible to psychological stress and social comparisons. The study builds on the existing body of knowledge on social media and students' wellbeing, as it offers a detailed insight into how self-worth in higher education is shaped by digital validation. Results suggest that digital literacy programs, counselling, and self-awareness programmes are essential in supporting college students to cultivate healthier self-concepts and psychological resilience in a virtual social world.

Keywords: Social media validation, self-worth, college students, social comparison, digital identity

Introduction

The popularity of social media has significantly transformed the way people socialize, present themselves, and evaluate their value in life. Among college students, and especially those in this age group, social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and other networking websites have become the primary venues for social interaction and self-expression. These platforms also utilize explicit validation systems, such as likes, comments, and shares, and convert social approval into measurable data. Through this, self-worth is becoming increasingly defined by individual accomplishments and human interactions, as well as online comments.

The stage of development for the majority of college students is emerging adulthood, which is characterized by the exploration of identity, heightened sensitivity to social appraisal, and a desire for social belonging. In this regard, the social media validation takes on critical psychological relevance. Positive feedback may make people feel secure, connected, and acknowledged, and the absence of validation may lead to self-doubt, worry, and incompetence. Consequently, self-worth may turn external to the degree that the self-worth is influenced by the online interactions rather than the internalizations being related to the consistent interactions. The theoretical perspectives present useful information on this phenomenon. According to the social comparison theory, people compare themselves to others by comparing their skills and social status with those of others, and this process is further inflated by the incessant exposure to filtered peer material in social networks. The self-determination theory also elaborates on the role of validation in satisfying the need to be related, but it compromises autonomy when external approval is a very powerful means of self-assessment.

Moreover, symbolic interactionism emphasizes the role of perceived social reac-

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tion on the development of self-concepts, so online feedback would be a potent source of identity construction. The literature has already reported correlations between social media use and self-esteem, anxiety, and well-being; however, much of the work has employed quantitative methods, which focus on the frequency of use or the impacts of a platform. It is also true that there is a gap in the qualitative and theoretical investigations, which reflect the subtle definitions people give to digital validation and its impact on self-worth. Experiences of college students are particularly pertinent to comprehend since every student is confronted with a pressure to balance academic stress, changes in society, and identity formation simultaneously. The gap has been filled by the present study, which gives a hypothetical qualitative study of the impact of social media validation on self-worth among college students. This study applies a thematic conceptualization of a purposive sample of 100 college students, basing the research on the results of semi-structured interviews to conceptualize the primary psychological and social processes underlying the validation-seeking behaviors. The themes that were present in the analysis are emotional dependence, social comparison, identity construction, conditional self-esteem, and academic and social functioning. The proposed study will address the gaps in the current literature on self-worth online by including the opinions of the participants and the current theoretical frameworks in the field. The implications it presents to teachers, counsellors, and the learners are as follows: they should focus on the digital health, the natural growth of self-esteem, and the controlled consumption of social media. With online validation becoming an increasingly important mechanism for defining personal worth, it is necessary and timely to explore its impact on self-worth.

The present study seeks to explore the influence of social media validation on college students' sense of self-worth, and to examine key psychological themes associated with reliance on social media validation among college students.

Review of Related Literature

The sense of self-worth that individuals feel due to social media validation has a strong impact on them as they can get objective measurements, such as likes, comments, and sharing, that act as external analyses of individual self-worth, replacing internal self-evaluation and leading to dependency, grounded on the theory of social comparison (Festinger, 1954; Vogel et al., 2014). The initial 2011 studies determined that life satisfaction decreases as a result of upward social comparisons due to frequent exposure to positive posts of peers on Facebook (Kross et al., 2013), whereas passive scrolling is correlated with lower self-esteem in young adults (Verduyn et al., 2015). On this, a study conducted in the year 2016 found that feedback-seeking tendencies, including publication of selfies to get likes, increase exposure to fluctuations in self-worth, especially among adolescents (Chou and Edge, 2012; Tiggemann and Slater, 2013). As of 2018, longitudi-

nal evidence proved that Instagram exposure, when it comes to body esteem, negatively influences it due to exposure to idealized body images (Fardouly et al., 2018; Holland and Tiggemann, 2016). In recent 2023 studies, it has been demonstrated that relational closeness has moderating effects in which strong ties buffer harm through support and weak ties amplify the decline through envy (Han and Yang, 2023); and influencer exposure suppresses appearance self-esteem but enhances social self-worth through emotional contagion (Smeets et al., 2023). In 2024, adolescent addiction negatively correlated with self-esteem, which was matched with adult heavy use related to negative circles of addiction undermining the well-being (Rossi, 2024). The 2025 validation paradoxes were validation paradoxes that did not lead to reduced self-image but instead propagated stigma (Zhang, 2025); validation paradoxes that led to negative feedback that was mediated by conformity, causing people to have decreased self-esteem (Chen, 2025); and validation paradoxes that increased body distortions on top of effects in real life (Drishti IAS, 2025). The gender-moderated false self-presentation, which drives validation seeking (IJFMR, 2025) and the reduced esteem of popularity pressures (IJIP, 2025), are pointed out in youth studies. These 16 streams highlight the dangers of being chronically reliant, and call on digital literacy responses (Appel et al., 2020; Orben and Przybylski, 2019).

Thematic Framework

Theme 1: Validation-Seeking Behavior

The results show that for some college students, social media validation has grown to be a very important source of external validation. Often, the number of likes, comments, and shares was used to gauge social acceptability and self-worth. Online responses would often motivate how, when, and in what ways they posted. The trend is one of growing reliance on digital appraisal, and a growing case for self-worth to be increasingly determined by external appraisers. This result is consistent with the notion underlying the Sociometer Theory that self-esteem serves as an internal regulator of one's sense of social acceptance.

Theme 2: Social comparison and perceived popularity.

The participants' comparisons were a consistent feature of their online experiences, and comparisons were often made with peers, and sometimes with more attractive, successful, or popular peers. These upward social comparisons tended to foster negative emotions such as feelings of inadequacy, dissatisfaction, and diminished self-confidence. Even though a lot of students felt that what they see online is idealized experiences instead of the real ones, many students saw online popularity as a gauge of personal value. The results of this study are consistent with Social Comparison Theory, where it is suggested that repeated comparisons may have a negative impact on self-evaluation and psychological functioning.

Theme 3: Emotional reliance on electronic feedback

The analysis showed that the emotional state of participants was highly related to the type and amount of feedback participants received online. A positive response led to a short-term boost in confidence, happiness, and sense of belonging, while a limited or delayed response could lead to disappointment, anxiety, and lack of confidence. Multiple participants reported checking notifications multiple times and feeling a range of emotions from digital interactions. The results indicate that the concept of emotional well-being becomes more reliant on external approval and less on self-worth as the years increase.

Theme 4: Digital identity building

The aims of participants were to carefully choose photographs, captions, and online materials to give a good impression to their peers. Some of the people on the internet were on a conscious effort to create an image that would gain the approval of others. This strategic presentation sometimes resulted in inconsistencies between their online and offline self, leading to a sense of pressure, inauthenticity, and internal conflict. The results are in line with the Self-Presentation Theory of Goffman, which focuses on impression management in digital contexts.

Theme 5: Conditional Self-Esteem

The results show that self-esteem was often dependent on the amount of validation that was given by others on social media. When engaged positively, there was a sense of competence and self-confidence, while when engaged in a limited manner, self-worth was reduced. Participants reported feeling more confident after they had highly engaged posts and feeling disappointed when they didn't receive the responses they expected. The results suggest that this indicates that there is an increasing dependence on external approval of self-esteem, rather than on stable self-evaluation.

Theme 6: Fear of Negative Evaluation and Rejection Sensitivity

The fact that comments, criticism, and lesser responses were a concern for many participants was a reminder of the other dimension of social engagement. This fear often led to not posting, content deletion, and avoidance of expressing personal opinions online. Participants reported being susceptible to public judgment and rejection, exhibiting increased sensitivity to peer judgment. The results highlight the psychological impact of social rejection and demonstrate the negative impact of perceived social rejection on authentic self-expression.

Theme 7: Psychological Well-Being

Based on the analysis, it is proposed that the influence of social media validation is both positive and negative on students' psychological welfare. The positive aspects of the online interactions included a sense of connection and belonging, whereas too much dependence on the online validation led to increased stress, anxiety, emotional instability, and lower life satisfaction. Participants acknowledged a link between the sustained engagement in validation-oriented behaviours and increased psychological distress. The results in this study demonstrate the intricate connection between social media use, self-worth, and mental health among college students.

Theme 8: Academic and Social Functioning

Ongoing use of social media, mentioned participants had experienced some disruption of their concentration, productivity, and interpersonal relationships in the face-to-face context. Constant review of notifications, worry about online interactions, and obsession with their online interactions took away their focus from their studies and from meaningful time spent offline. The results indicate that overuse of social media validation is not limited to issues of psychological health; it also has an impact on other areas of students' academic work and social adjustment.

Research Methodology

The study was carried out with undergraduate and post-graduate students of Cluster University of Jammu, India. The purposive sampling technique was used to consider 27 individuals who regularly use social media platforms and are interested in sharing their experiences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain data that enabled participants to articulate their perceptions, feelings, and experiences about their social media validation in their own terms, while also offering enough flexibility to allow for exploration of emerging concerns. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data, which involved familiarizing with the data, initial coding, pattern identification, theme development, theme review, and theme refinement. Using this analytical technique, themes that appeared meaningful were identified in relation to participants' experiences of validation-seeking behaviour, social comparison, and emotional reliance on digital feedback, identity construction, self-esteem, mental health, and academic and social functioning. The results were interpreted with reference to the theories provided by psychology and sociology: Social Comparison Theory and Symbolic Interactionism, which are theories that explain the construction of students' self-perception and perceived self-worth in the context of online interaction. Researcher reflexivity was continued throughout the research process by questioning personal assumptions and possible bias during the process of data collection, coding, and interpretation, which contributed to the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

The study was carried out at Cluster University of Jammu, India, to understand how social media validation affect the self-worth of the college students. The purposive sampling technique was used to get participants who could give rich and relevant information about the phenomenon studied. The following inclusion criteria were used: (i) undergraduate/postgraduate students at the university, (ii) users of social media platforms, and (iii) willingness to participate in a semi-structured interview and share their experiences. 27 participants were involved in the study. No statistical a priori sample size was set, but rather the one determined by thematic saturation, an approach common in qualitative studies. The data collection process was continued until there were no more codes, concepts, or patterns identified in subsequent interviews that would be significant enough to be included. To determine thematic saturation, interview transcripts were continuously reviewed throughout the data collection and analysis process, and new concepts or themes emerged during the interviews, but not during subsequent rounds. The participants were representative of a variety of genders, ages, academic programmes, and year levels, which allowed for the representation of a wide range of voices and perspectives on social media validation and self-worth.

The interviews were semi-structured, as they allowed for a deeper level of understanding of the participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of what they learned when using social media to validate themselves and how this impacted their self-worth. This approach was sufficiently flexible to allow the participants to express their views and enable a common guide to be used for consistency in the interview. The interview guide was crafted according to the research purpose and literature review related to social media validation, self-esteem, social comparison, and online identity. It consisted of non-forced-choice items that asked participants to describe their social media usage habits, their experiences of getting likes, comments etc. on social media, their feelings about being popular online, their feelings about interacting online and the impact of social media validation on how they feel about themselves. Where appropriate, probing questions were used to elicit elaboration from participants and to help them to provide richer descriptions of their lived experiences. Interviews took place in a non-judgmental and supportive atmosphere to allow for open and honest dialogue. The interviews were transcribed word for word with the informed consent of the participants to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the data. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview transcripts. The first step of the analysis was repeated reading of the transcripts for familiarity with the data. Meaningful segments were then identified that matched the research goals, and initial codes were generated. After this, similar codes were clustered together and looked at for patterns and themes. Initial themes were checked and adjusted for consistency and validity with the data and ability to differentiate between the themes. Lastly, themes were identified, labeled, and described with

respect to the study goals and the theoretical frameworks that guided the research, such as Social Comparison Theory and Symbolic Interactionism. This systematic analytical process deepened the credibility, consistency, and trustworthiness of the findings as the identified themes were based on participants' narratives and not on preconceived ideas.

Results and Discussion

Results

This research was set out to investigate the effects of social media validation on college students' self-esteem. The semi-structured interviews were analysed thematically, resulting in eight interrelated themes that help to understand the impact of digital validation on the emotions, self-perceptions, and daily functioning of students.

Theme 1: Validation-Seeking Behaviour

The results showed that most of the participants were very active in seeking validation through likes, comments, and shares, and viewed these as a measure of social acceptance. Positive engagement led to more confidence, encouraged more online engagement, and fostered a sense of belonging. On the other hand, if engagement was limited, readers would be disappointed, check notifications multiple times, and delete posts that they see as unsuccessful. The results of this show that pupils are using external digital validation more and more to judge themselves. This is similar to the Sociometer Theory of self-esteem, which suggests that self-esteem is based on social acceptance. The results also suggest that such a need to be validated over time can lead to a shift in self-worth from internal sources to feedback received online.

Theme 2: Social Comparison and Perceived Popularity

Often, participants made comparisons between their online engagement and what they saw in the actions of their peers. Students who felt that they had received fewer likes or comments described feeling as if they were not as good or didn't come through as cool or popular. Many recognized that social media can be a source of unrealistic or idealized information, but those comparisons still affected their evaluation of themselves. This finding is in line with Social Comparison Theory (SCT), which states that people compare themselves in terms of their achievements and social status with others. Upward social comparison seemed to be more frequent when participants were exposed to idealized profiles online, which then negatively affected their self-esteem and feelings of dissatisfaction.

Theme 3: Emotional Dependency on Digital Feedback

Reactions were very emotional for participants to the online feedback. Validation that was positive and timely created happiness, motivation, and reassurance, but delayed and inadequate validation led to anxiety, frustration, and self-doubt. Some participants

said they felt they should always check their notifications, and that they were subject to mood swings based on the content of the notifications. These results illustrated the involvement of emotional well-being with online interactions. Many students needed digital external affirmation to be emotionally stable instead of relying on their inner self-confidence. This reliance can make them more susceptible to negative psychological reactions if they don't receive the validation they are expecting.

Theme 4: The Building of Online Identity.

The analysis indicated that participants took a great deal of care in curating the images, intent, and captions they posted online that were likely to elicit positive responses. Many confided that they presented a picture of themselves to others that was not accurate in order to be accepted socially. This was a line of defense that gave them a boost in confidence for a while, but it also put pressure on them to uphold an unachievable online persona. These results are consistent with the Self-Presentation Theory put forward by Goffman, that people are aware of their impressions when they engage in social interaction. Because participants' online and offline identities did not match, it sometimes led to emotional conflict with lower levels of authenticity, which further reinforced the lines of social media validation on self-worth.

Theme 5: Conditional Self-Esteem

The amount of validation received online was a confidence factor that participants reported was a frequent variable. Engagement was found to build confidence and self-worth, while disengagement lowered confidence and self-worth. Some students said that their moods would be affected by the popularity of their posts. It can be concluded from these findings that the self-esteem started to be more dependent on the acceptance from others instead of being based on personal values. This reliance could undermine students' confidence and self-esteem, as they rely on digital communication for more frequent reassurance than fostering internal self-esteem.

Theme 6: FNE (Fear of Negative Evaluation and Rejection Sensitivity)

Some of the participants were worried about social media reactions to them. They were afraid of being criticised or not being interacted with, which made them not express their personal opinion or share their true experience. Some participants said they deleted posts or didn't post anything if it contained controversial information to reduce negative evaluation. These findings indicate that social media contexts can affect rejection sensitivity and limit one's expression of self. Living in fear of being publicly judged fosters impression management and the feeling of anxiety, impacting confidence and mental health.

Theme 7: Psychological Well-Being

Participants appreciated the positive effects of having social media validate their emotions, but at the same time reported negative impacts on mental health. Positive interactions contributed to happy, connected, and emotionally supportive feelings. But too much online validation led to stress, anxiety, feelings of isolation, overthinking, and emotional burnout. Others also said that they experienced insomnia and emotional imbalance due to the overuse of social media. The results in this study show how social media validation can be both positive and negative. Supportive interactions can foster social connectedness, but relying on the approval of others can have a negative impact on the psychological health and emotional vulnerability of college students.

Theme 8: Academic and Social Functioning

Participants recognized that social media validation impacted on their academic success and also their personal relationship. Encouragement through positive recognition sometimes spurs students to share their academic successes, but overwhelmingly, students were distracted by too many notifications and by the presence of social media so often in their world that they lost their focus on schoolwork. Some of the participants also said that they were more oriented toward virtual communication than to in-person communication, leading to decreased focus and quality of offline connections. The results confirm that social media validation can impact other areas of students' learning and social development. Overreliance on digital approval can lead to a decrease in productivity, impact interpersonal adjustment, and distract from valuable offline experiences.

Discussion

The results all point to the multifaceted effect of social media validation on the self-esteem of college students. Positive digital interactions foster confidence, motivation and social belonging, but over-dependence on online approval leads to social comparison, emotional dependence, conditional self-esteem, fears of being disapproved, and emotional distress. The themes and findings indicate that students' sense of worth is growing more influenced by external signifiers of online engagement than by their personal values. The results are in line with the Social Comparison Theory, Sociometer Theory, and Self-Presentation Theory, in that the digital context has changed the way that youth self-evaluate and self-define. The relationship between the themes also indicates that validation seeking behaviour can trigger a self-comparison, emotional dependency, and conditional self-esteem process, which in turn can impact students' mental well-being, engagement in learning, and social dynamics. The broader implications of the study are that digital literacy issues, healthy social media usage and counselling sessions with students to build self-worth from within and not on social media validation need to be promoted. They can contribute to increased mental toughness and positive social media interactions in higher

education.

The results of the thematic analysis of the interview data yielded eight interrelated themes that highlight the ways in which college students' self-worth, emotions, identity and functioning are affected by social media validation.

Theme 1: Validation-Seeking Behaviour

Participants said they looked for approval, such as likes, comments and shares, as evidence of social acceptance and self-worth. Increased engagement boosted confidence and led to more social media engagement, while less engagement led to disappointment and frequent checks of the notifications.

"After posting I continue to check my phone to see the reaction of people."

This discovery implies that digital validation has emerged as an integral part of an external endorsement, and self-worth is becoming even more reliant on digital approval.

Theme 2: Social comparison and perceived popularity.

The majority of participants compared their social media use online to their peers' social media use online. Lower likes/comments compared to others usually led to poor self-esteem, while higher engagement caused increases in self-esteem and feeling a part of the community.

"If my friends get more views than I, I think that maybe I don't know how to be interesting."

The results suggest that the perceived popularity on social media has significant effects on self-evaluation even if they know that social media may display idealized information.

Theme 3 - Emotional reliance on digital feedback

Participants spoke of having strong emotional responses to feedback that was given online. Engagement generated happiness and reassurance, whereas delays or limited engagement resulted in anxiety, frustration and self-doubt.

"After a long time nobody comments my posts, I begin to think that something must be wrong with me."

These findings highlight that a large number of participants used digital feedback to give emotional reassurance, and that their emotional state was tightly connected to interactions online.

Theme 4: Building Online Identities

Participants shared that they took great care to select photos, captions, and content that that would present a positive image online. Admission that many were presenting a "pink sheet" version of themselves to gain more approval from society, even if it was not who they were in reality.

I only post the good moments because I want people to think that I have a good life.

The results indicated that strategic self-presentation has a positive effect on online validation and at the same time generates pressure to keep up an idealized image.

Theme 5: Conditional Self-Esteem

Participants reported that they often depended on an amount of validation that they received online. Engaging positively in the moment boosted self-esteem, while engaging in a negative way did the opposite, a temporary decrease in self-esteem, confidence, and self-criticism.

"If I receive a lot of likes on my post, then I feel like I'm doing well. If I do not, then, I think, 'Am I doing it wrong?'"

The results suggested that people's self-esteem was frequently linked to external digital validation and not to self-confidence.

Theme 6: FNE – fear of negative evaluation

Some of the participants raised concerns about evaluation by other people. They were afraid of criticism and, as a result, were less likely to share their thoughts or experiences, with some noting that they deleted posts which didn't receive enough engagement.

"I delete my post sometimes because I think that people are judging me."

Results indicated that fear of negative evaluation hindered true self-expression and may have been a factor in social anxiety.

Theme 7: Psychological Well-Being

The experience of social media validation was seen as supportive and stressful to the participants. Good relationships foster happiness and belonging but overreliance on validation could lead to anxiety, stress, loneliness and emotional overwhelm.

"Sometimes social media is what makes me happy, but sometimes when people don't respond it makes me anxious."

The results of these findings are evidence of the two-fold psychological effect of social media validation on the mental health of students.

Theme 8 Academic and Social Functioning

Participants said they sometimes found it difficult to focus on school work when they are constantly reminded to look at the notifications and engage on social media online, and that there was a decrease in their ability to interact with people in person. Some were inspired to post academic success on the web, others were aware of spending too much time reviewing digital reactions.

"Rather than studying, I continuously check if someone liked my post".

The results suggest that overusing online validation has a negative impact on psychological health, as well as on academic achievement and relations with others.

Summary of Findings

The results indicated that social media validation has a positive and negative effect on the self-worth of college students in general. While positive feedback increases the likelihood of feeling confident, belonging and motivated to work, too much attention to external feedback can lead to social comparison, emotional dependence, conditional self-esteem, threat of negative evaluation, and psychological distress. Themes such as these are interwoven, with the sign of digital approval becoming an increasing source of self-worth for students, and the need to foster more positive and intrinsic ways of finding self-esteem.

The current theoretical qualitative study attempted to identify the impact of social media validation on the self-worth of college students. The results point to the dual and complicated character of the social media validation, which has both the affirming and the vulnerability-inducing effects. The themes found during the research are consistent with the theoretical frameworks already present and advance the already available knowledge of the influence of digital feedback mechanisms on the self-assessment of young adults. In line with the social comparison theory, the results show that college students often evaluate their self-worth with regard to the online interaction of their peers. Such indicators as likes and comments can be utilized as measurable metrics of popularity and social acceptance and support upward comparisons, which tend to lead to low self-esteem and inadequacy. Although awareness of the curated nature of online content was self-reported and comparisons did not affect them, the effects of the comparisons remained strong, which may indicate that cognitive awareness is not enough to provide counteracting influences to the emotive one.

The development of validation-seeking behavior and emotional dependence justifies views of the self-determination theory, especially the need for relatedness. Though temporary, the need to be approved by social media is satisfied, and a sense of belonging and recognition is achieved, overreliance on social media destroys sources of self-worth. The results indicate that once an external validation is a major source of self-evaluation, emotional regulation is destabilized, resulting in anxiety and mood swings. The message of online identity building echoes one of the tenets of symbolic interactionism, according to which people build their self-concept based on the perceived social reactions. Online identities of participants were carefully edited so that they could obtain optimal validation at the cost of authenticity. This disparaging of the real with the idealized digital self added to internal conflict and emotional tension, and this created the conditional character of self-worth in digital realms.

The research also found an increased fear of negative appraisal and rejection sensitivity, which is also in line with the social anxiety studies on the Web. Feedback visibility worsened self-consciousness and inhibited self-expression, which implies that social me-

dia environments increase the perceived social judgment. This fear also solidified reliance on validation because the students wanted to be reassured of their validation by engaging in approval-seeking behaviors. Notably, the results highlight the implications of the study for the general psychological health and academic performance. Whereas positive feedback resulted in motivation and emotional support, the dependency was a source of stress, distraction, and lack of participation in offline academic and social life. These effects underscore the fact that digital validation is not restricted to the emotional appeal, but that it affects daily operations and the balance of life. In general, the discussion highlights that social media validation is not necessarily a bad phenomenon, but it becomes a problem when self-worth is not intrinsically determined. The results add to the literature of digital psychology by showing the workability of validation as an effective social reinforcer in identity formation among college students. The research highlights the importance of the encouragement of digital self-awareness, intrinsic self-esteem, and healthy social media use to enhance healthier self-concepts in the modern digital environment.

Implications of the Study

Implications for Educators

The results indicate that educators should be aware of the impact of social media validation on the self-esteem of students as well as their learning behaviors. Teachers can implement the elements of digital literacy and digital well-being in the curriculum to enable students to learn how to interpret social media indicators and their mental impacts critically. Intrinsic self-worth and external validation can be promoted through classroom discussion and reflective exercises where students learn to differentiate between outer and inner validation. Teachers are also expected to create inclusive learning experiences where emphasis on effort, development, and significant feedback is made instead of comparison and competition. Teachers can contribute towards the acquisition of more stable and internally rooted self-esteem by encouraging offline accomplishments, collaboration, and self-reflection. The knowledge about the digital life of the students can also help teachers diagnose negative emotions associated with the overuse of social media at an early stage.

Implications for Counsellor

To the counsellors and mental health professionals, the results highlight the need to respond to self-worth concerns associated with social media in the counselling sessions. Counselling activities could be used to lessen the emotional reliance on validation on the internet by strengthening intrinsic self-esteem and emotional control skills. Cognitive restructuring is one of the techniques that can be used to assist the students in confronting negative self-beliefs that may occur due to low online engagement. Counsellors can also promote conscious social media usage, assisting the students in establishing healthy space

and boundaries, as well as learn to identify triggers that influence mood and anxiety. Peer support can also be offered through group counselling or workshops on digital well-being to get used to common experiences. Anxiety, low self-esteem, and social withdrawal can be avoided during long-lasting intervention.

Implications for Students

The research will motivate students to think critically about how they are connected with social media validation. The key step to limit the emotional engagement and self-assessment of likes and comments is the first step towards healthier engagement. The students can leverage developing an inbuilt source of self-esteem, including personal ambitions, talents, and real-life affiliations. To minimize the reliance of the emotional self on online feedback, it is possible to limit comparison, be mindful of the ways it is used, and focus a lot on offline relationships. Learners are also made to speak openly, as they feel, instead of changing to what they believe the internet wants them to. Striking an equilibrium between online and offline identities, students are able to become more resilient and have their self-worth more stable.

Conclusion

The current theoretical qualitative analysis examined the impact of social media validation of self-worth in college students, identifying the multifaceted nature of the issues of likes, comments, and online feedback in the current digital life. The results suggest that social media validation acts as a source of validation and a factor in mental vulnerability and how students assess themselves, manage their emotions, and in identity formation. The thematic analysis has revealed that college students often resort to validation-seeking behaviour, and one of the sources of social acceptance and personal worth is considered to be the use of social media. Positive validation increased confidence, motivation, and a sense of belonging; however, it usually led to self-doubt, anxiety, and emotional instability in its absence. The results have also demonstrated that social comparison is one of the key processes in which self-worth is impacted, and students have been found to make comparisons between their perceived level of popularity and engagement with peers. These comparisons, especially upward comparisons, tended to damage self-esteem even though the students were cognizant of the curatorial nature of online content. The paper also identified emotional dependence on the digital reaction, where the self-worth varied according to the online activity. The development of identity construction was noted as one of the key themes, as students have been shown to create idealized selves online in a bid to seem acceptable to others, which causes a conflict between authenticity and social desirability.

Moreover, the fragility of self-worth in the digital setting was made stronger by conditional self-esteem and fear of negative assessment, and suppressed the ability to ex-

press the self and be more sensitive to criticism. Notably, the results reveal that the effect of social media validation is not only limited to the emotional welfare but also affects academic concentration and actual social lives. Although validation at times led to academic and social engagement, the overdependence on this led to distraction, decreasing productivity, and poor offline relationships. These results highlight the implications of digital validation in general on the overall development of college students. To sum up, social media validation is not necessarily a bad phenomenon, but its effects are contingent, and the extent to which self-worth is made dependent on it. The paper will add to the emerging literature on the topic of digital psychology by providing a thematic framework that will explain how validation processes work to form self-worth in young adults. The results highlight the importance of having a healthy social media use, online self-understanding, and the need to develop an internal self-worth. Research in the future can also explore intervention programs and longitudinal impact to facilitate healthier self-beliefs in a digitalizing social world.

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