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ADOLESCENT SOCIAL MEDIA USE: UNDERSTANDING ITS IMPACT ON SELF-ESTEEM

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the impact of social media use on adolescent self-esteem. Previous studies have well-documented the negative impacts of social media on adolescents' self-esteem, but the positive impacts have received less attention. This study involved four participants selected through purposive sampling, based on the criteria of being secondary school students aged thirteen to seventeen years old, of either gender, and active users of social media. Using semi-structured interviews, their experiences with social media were recorded and analyzed through thematic analysis, revealing important insights into the impacts of social media use on adolescents' self-esteem. Results indicate that social media use is a source of positive reinforcement, supporting positive identity formation and motivating personal growth. To enhance the applicability of the results, future studies should include larger and more diverse samples from various aspects and explore the conditions under which social media use can have positive effects.

Keywords: *Adolescents, Self-esteem, Social media, Positive effect*

INTRODUCTION

Social media was purposely introduced as an online platform that provides space to create, share, and exchange content with friends, family, and those people who have similar interests to the user. The information sharing and content across all social media can also reach the virtual communities; the social groups formed through the communication platforms may be geographically dispersed but connected by shared interests. Nowadays, the commonly used social media platforms are Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and X, formerly Twitter. The number of social users between the ages of 18 and 24 is 24.5% across the entire Malaysian population. This social media offers numerous advantages to adolescents, such as finding information, expanding opportunities for connection and communication, and educational purposes and self-improvement (Gupta et al., 2022; Hidayat et al., 2022; Kovalova, 2024; Khalaf et al., 2023). It also raises a significant concern about a user's psychological impact. One area of interest to explore in this study is social media and how it influences and results in any

consequences, specifically for adolescent self-esteem. Self-esteem generally refers to an individual's positive or negative attitude towards the self. For adolescents, self-esteem is their overall sense of worth or value for themselves. The nature of online content and the constant exposure through social media of adolescents, for instance, to idealized imagery, follow-up trendings, and seeking validation contributed to both positive and negative effects on the adolescents' self-esteem. Many adolescents are increasingly exposed to the idealized content on social media, which negatively impacts body image, self-esteem, and mood. This issue raises concerns among parents and teachers, as it may affect performance and well-being. Past studies have reported the negative impacts of social media on adolescents' self-esteem, but the positive impacts have received less attention, and also limited studies specifically on Malaysian adolescents. For instance, adolescents often engage in social comparison and cyberbullying, which negatively impacts self-esteem. This study purposely gives more information on the impact of social media on adolescents' self-esteem to see whether they experienced either a positive or negative impact. Hence, this qualitative study aimed to explore the impacts of social media use on self-esteem among adolescents.

METHODS

The study implemented a qualitative design, an approach that examines opinions, attitudes, and perspectives of human beings (Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021). A phenomenological design to collect participants' experiences regarding the impact of actively using social media in their daily lives. Phenomenological studies emphasize the essence of the experiences and the subjective nature of the reality of the individuals. It benefits the study by providing deep insights into participants' perspectives, enhancing understanding of complex social issues, which allows for capturing the richness of narratives. The study involved four participants, two male and two female students, selected from local government secondary schools, aged thirteen to seventeen years old, of either gender, and actively using social media. A set of interview protocols using open-ended questions was created to explore the impact experienced by the participants while using social media. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews, guiding the participants in giving insights into the topic. It allows the researchers to facilitate in-depth exploration of experiences (Boşnak, 2022). All stories collected were recorded and kept safe via recording and transcription, as they are confidential and only used for data analysis purposes. The data collected was then analyzed using thematic analysis, which helps identify recurring themes from the data and makes it easier to interpret qualitative data. The patterns of responses were identified using coding and emerged into noun phrases that served as themes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study purposefully explored the impacts of social media use on adolescents' self-esteem. The findings revealed that these adolescents' daily interactions with social media content had influenced their self-esteem in a positive way. Three key themes emerged from the data collected, which are social media as a source of positive reinforcement, social media supporting positive identity formation, and social media as a motivator of personal growth.

Several participants mentioned how receiving encouraging comments or viewing motivational content on social media platforms contributed to their self-esteem. Participant 1 mentioned that *“If the comments are good, then we can get something positive...”*. This description of gaining something positive from the content emphasizes the role of social media as a source of encouragement and validation. Participant 2 stated that *“For me, when I see motivational videos from TikTokers, I can understand them.”* This statement shows the participant found value in the content and helped them understand and relate to positive messages. The act of sharing content on social media that receives favorable responses can lead to increased feelings of worth and acceptance, and the positive feedback enhances their self-esteem. Adding to that, these adolescents who actively engage in supportive interactions and inspirational content are likely connected to overall flourishing and well-being, including self-esteem (Marciano & Viswanath, 2023). These insights suggest that social media use can provide adolescents with a form of positive reinforcement that reinforces their self-esteem.

The study also found that this social media use through the platforms allows adolescents to explore their identity in diverse and empowering ways. For instance, participant 3 expressed that *“My clothing style has always been like that. Since I never had a specific style before, now I just improvise.”* This shows how social media inspires their clothing styles and encourages self-expression through improvisation, and contributes to positive identity formation. Participant 4 also stated that *“The content ideas make me feel more confident because there are people who create content even though they have plus-size bodies...”* and *“When I see their fashion, it doesn't make me feel insecure. It's like there are still other alternatives for someone to feel confident.”* This noted view of diverse body types and fashion helped them feel confident and secure, suggesting a growing sense of acceptance of body diversity and self-representation. Referring to past studies, adolescents use social media to explore different facets of their identity, experimenting with presenting themselves and then seeking validation on the platforms, which boosts their self-esteem and encourages healthy identity development (Pérez-Torres, 2024; Regita et al., 2024). Moreover, exposure to various role models on social media can also inspire them to adopt positive attitudes and values, supporting their identity exploration too (Pérez-Torres, 2024). These findings indicate that social media use among adolescents can act as an alternative for identity exploration, specifically when the adolescents see themselves positively represented.

Last but not least, another finding was the motivational influence that helps adolescent personal growth, which leads to boosting their self-esteem. According to participant 3, *“When I see other people succeed...others succeeding, getting awards and everything, I want that too. So because of that, I work hard.”* This is the description of seeing others succeed, whether through awards or recognition; it helped as a motivational factor to work harder. This shows that upward social comparison on social media, when these adolescents interpreted it positively, can navigate them toward self-improvement. The use of social media helps adolescents to satisfy their psychological needs, for instance, autonomy and relatedness, which are important for their personal growth. According to Devos et al. (2023), exposure to positive social media content reported can increase the beliefs in their potential to achieve similar lifestyles, but can also lead to pressure if they feel they are not meeting these ideals. Therefore, it shows that adolescents perceive others' success not as a threat but as an inspiration to strive for personal achievement and boost their self-esteem.

CONCLUSION

This study was presented to explore the impact of social media use on adolescents' self-esteem. The findings reported that social media use plays a significant role in shaping adolescents' self-esteem in positive ways. Specifically, it can serve as a source of positive reinforcement, a platform that supports positive identity formation, and a motivator for personal growth. The insights gathered call attention to the constructive use of social media, which has the potential to support the development of self-esteem among adolescents. Educators and parents should promote supportive and empowering online environments for them by engaging in beneficial content. This study was limited to studying the impact on self-esteem of adolescents and participants selected from similar settings. Future studies may further explore larger and more diverse samples from various aspects and explore the conditions under which social media use can have a positive impact.

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