



## **A Review of Gender Differences in How Social Media Use Affects Self-Esteem**

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### **Abstract**

Social media (SM) is fun and games until it starts to affect one's everyday life. In recent years, there has been a spike in SM use. Although there is some research online, more still has to be done to find the gender differences in how SM affects self-esteem. SM affects men and women differently, with women experiencing more of the negative side of impact on self-esteem. This paper is a literature review, pulling from past work to answer two central questions. Are there gender differences in how SM use (SMU) affects self-esteem? How are these relationships moderated by family intimacy and parental support? Individuals use SM for different reasons. Whether it is for relationships, support, or self-presentation, SM may present pressure and beauty standards. When these ideals aren't met, there is a social and health impact on both men and women. The impact may be elevated by family intimacy and parental support, with the family environment influencing one's SMU. In adolescence, it has been shown that women experience higher rates of depression and anxiety due to SM. Users may experience life dissatisfaction and negative health impacts. Men and women are both impacted greatly by the pressure to meet gender and societal ideals reflected through SM.

*Keywords:* Social media, self-esteem, gender differences, family intimacy, parental support

### **Introduction**

Over three billion people are active users of social networking sites (SNSs) (Kemp, 2019). For many people, it has become apparent that SNSs are an important part of daily life (Saiphoo et al., 2020). One study found that 57% of US teens had initiated relationships online, which highlights the role SNSs play in adolescent development (Lenhart, Smith, & Anderson, 2015, p. 3) (O'Reilly et al., 2018). Balancing online and offline life has become increasingly important. An overuse of SM has been associated with lower self-esteem, increased deviant behavior, and poorer family relationships (Shao & Ni, 2021).

Heavy SM use may negatively influence an adolescent's development, particularly by lowering self-esteem (Shao & Ni, 2021). Self-esteem is an individual's overall evaluation of self-worth, which plays a role in one's well-being and life satisfaction. As SM use (SMU) has gradually increased, researchers have begun analyzing the impact SMU has on adolescents. Findings consistently show that SMU is negatively associated with self-esteem in young adults, especially among adolescent girls who often engage in online social comparison (Ma, 2022).

Over several decades, self-perceived physical appearance has had a major contribution to adolescent global self-esteem, particularly for girls. There has been an increase in relying on SNS photographs and videos as a sense of self-presentation. This may stress the importance of

physical appearance on one's self (Steinsbekk et al., 2021). Global-based self-esteem is self-esteem as a whole. Appearance-based self-esteem is self-esteem related to how one perceives oneself from a beauty standpoint (Cingel et al., 2022). For both male and female adolescents with high supportive SMU (S-SMU), high family intimacy leads to higher self-esteem. S-SMU is related to one's behavior and social support. In this study, S-SMU was recognized as moderator between each individual, and gender differences were found. For adolescents, females were more likely to use SM as a place of support, while males used it as a habit. In female adolescents, S-SMU moderated the connection between self-esteem and an environment with family intimacy. In male adolescents, habitual SMU (H-SMU) moderated the same connection. These moderations were only significant in their respective SMU groups.

On the other hand, for those who have lower S-SMU, high family intimacy leads to lower self-esteem. This study indicated that if adolescents wanted more social and psychological support from SNS, it would lead to less intimate family relationships, thus causing lower self-esteem. The relationship between family intimacy and S-SMU was an important predictor of female adolescent self-esteem. Still, family intimacy is critical to foster an adolescent's self-esteem, even in the context of pervasive SMU (Shao & Ni, 2021).

When adolescents heavily rely on SNS, they may copy harmful behaviors that they view on SM as a way to cope with their hardships. Because the adolescent brain is still developing, this period is especially challenging, due to the high prevalence of mental health challenges first emerging during adolescence. The high prevalence of mental health challenges may be the effects of complex relationships, academic and societal demands, family conflicts, and personal changes (O'Reilly et al., 2018). SM has become an outlet for adolescents to express their emotions and seek online support for depression, anxiety, or other difficulties that they are facing in life (Shao & Ni, 2021).

Over the years, the importance of appearance satisfaction has increased, particularly for girls. This may be because girls hit puberty earlier than boys, so their bodies are going through more changes at a younger age. This major gender difference in self-esteem makes adolescence a more sensitive point in time for girls (Ingólfssdóttir, 2017). Gender differences are possibly specific to culture, age, and how self-esteem is measured, whether it be global or appearance based (Cingel et al., 2022).

Girls have demonstrated stronger connections with SMU and mental health signs than boys. Understanding the association between SMU and adolescent mental health issues is becoming increasingly urgent because the number of adolescents with poor mental health has spiked in recent years, specifically in girls. Among girls, online bullying, less sleep, less exercise has created an association of SMU and mental health (Twenge & Farley, 2021).

Problematic SMU, which is defined as an inability to limit one's SMU despite negative consequences, can disrupt life and relationships (Valkenburg et al., 2022). That is, there may be social consequences to SM overuse. Family relationships have a strong effect on adolescent development and experience. Children with family conflict are more likely to view violent content on SM. Too much SMU has a negative association with one's perspective to the quality of their

family environment. It has also been shown to reduce family intimacy and togetherness, which may lead to lower sense of family cohesion (Shao & Ni, 2021).

In this literature review, I aim to address two central questions: (1) Are there gender differences in how social media use (SMU) affects self-esteem? (2) How are these relationships moderated by family intimacy and parental support? This paper will synthesize findings from existing literature, including cross-sectional, short-term longitudinal, and long-term longitudinal studies to explore the distinct influences of SMU on self-esteem across genders and the moderating roles of family intimacy and parental support.

### **Definitions**

There are three factors of SMU that are being considered. First is frequency, which is how much time users spend on SM. Next is intensity, which is how emotionally invested the users are. Last is whether use is problematic or not. Too much SMU may lead to problematic use and have a negative effect on an adolescent's well-being. If there is constant abuse of SMU, the problematic usage could lead to lower self-esteem (Saiphoo et al., 2020).

This shows that problematic SMU has an important relationship with self-esteem, but further research is needed to clarify the boundaries between high, normalized use and problematic use. Users might begin to heavily rely on these online relationships to satisfy their social needs. This may lead to more problematic SMU, thus leading to a decrease in self-esteem. Online relationships may create safety problems and a barrier of deceit, which shows the mental health impact (Shao & Ni, 2021).

Facebook is the most used SNS, followed by YouTube and Instagram. These sites have around 3 billion, 2.5 billion, and 1.5 billion users, respectively (Ma, 2022). 95% of 15-year-olds in the United Kingdom use SM. A study from the UK showed that more than 5,500 young adults are engaging in more risky behaviors. These risky behaviors could affect their health and impact them socially. At 16 years, this behavior increases the odds of negative mental health outcomes at 18 years. Negative outcomes may include depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. More UK research proposes that minors have had experiences with upsetting content on SM (Orben, 2024).

In the United Kingdom (UK), 99% of 12-15 year olds go online for an average of 20 hours per week, which is double the frequency of 10 years ago. In the US, 50% of adolescents aged 13-17 report being online almost constantly (Orben, 2024). In Australia, 80% of 12-13 year olds and 96% of 14-17 year olds report using SNSs (Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), 2009) (Neira & Barber, 2014).

Self-esteem is defined as an individual's overall evaluation of self-worth (Ma, 2022). Adolescents with lower self-esteem are more likely to post more negative content, and higher SMU often exacerbates these patterns, contributing to problematic use. Also, those with lower self-esteem use social SM more problematically. This is more detrimental to their well-being and life satisfaction. For most people, self-esteem is a stable trait, but for others, it is not as stable.

High self-esteem has associations with confidence, being happy, and viewing life with an optimistic life.

On the other hand, low self-esteem is connected to having a self-deflating attitude, lacking confidence, and being pessimistic (Saiphoo et al., 2020). Prior research has found that self-esteem is shaped like a parabola. Self-esteem increases during childhood, decreases during adolescence, and then finally rises in adulthood. The changes were more dramatic for girls, the drop in self-esteem was also more drastic for girls (Ingólfssdóttir, 2017).

Adolescence is a developmental period where there are neurobiological, behavioral, and environmental changes that support the transition from family dependence to independent accountability in their community. Because of these changes, there is a stronger link between SMU and mental health declining during adolescence than other times of life. Important warning signs of this may include mood swings, more relationship stress or focus, and more negatively heightened sensitivity to others (Orben, 2024).

Globally, mental health crises are on the rise, with increasing rates of bodily harm and cyberbullying, both leading to poorer outcomes. There are many factors that play into this, but lately, the blame has been put on SM as a major contributor (O'Reilly, 2020).

## Methods

I created this literature review to consolidate the current findings about SM and its effect on self-esteem, specifically how it differs between genders. These studies and papers were found by searching Google Scholar for articles that were published from 2009 to 2024. When searching for literature, a mix of the terms, “social media”, “self-esteem”, “gender differences”, “family intimacy”, and “parental support” were used. Some other articles were used because of their helpful contributions to the published, referenced work. With each paper, the title, abstract, keywords, and a snippet of the introduction were briefed for importance and relation to the research. Once shown relevant, the whole paper was read through thoroughly with supporting notes. Studies were used if they considered the effects of self-esteem due to SM, familial environment, and gender differences throughout their work. Those including met criteria were then continued to be used for the rest of the literature review (n = 16).

## Results

Across the published literature on the relationship between SMU and self-esteem, there are mixed results. Some studies reported positive relationships, while some showed negative associations or none at all (Steinsbekk et al., 2021). Adolescents with lower self-esteem post more negative content compared to adolescents with higher self-esteem. Individuals with lower self-esteem are more likely to develop online connections because they want to feel others' approval and they are more sensitive to interpersonal relations (Cingel et al., 2022). They may also create a problematic way for themselves to use SM.

SMU frequency is linked to higher social self-concept and investment is associated with lower self-esteem and higher depression rates (Saiphoo et al., 2020). If adolescents wanted

more support from SM, it could lead to less family intimacy, thus lowering self-esteem (Shao & Ni, 2021). Girls and those who spend more time on SM report lower self-esteem, but little parental support leads to lower self-esteem in boys (Ingólfssdóttir, 2017).

A systematic review found a negative link between Instagram and self-esteem, possibly being stronger in women. On Youtube, VSCO, and WhatsApp, self-esteem was also significantly lower. Depending on the usage, Facebook and other sites are detrimental to adolescent self-esteem. SNS investment results in more negative social comparison, so investment may be negatively associated with self-concept and self-esteem, with positive relations with depression. These findings suggest that investment patterns and gender differences should be central to future research (Cingel et al., 2022).

Recent studies have used short-term longitudinal designs. An SM diary measure was found to have a negative relationship with SMU and female adolescents' self-esteem. An SM diary measure is a way to track one's SMU. The results were similar for SMU both week and weekend. This type of study also depends on how long it lasts. Same-day results are usually more positive than studies that track participants over longer periods of time (Cingel et al., 2022).

Some researchers look at specific SNSs in their findings. Multiple sites may show similar results, but age and content play a role too. For example, researchers found a negative connection between self-esteem and Facebook use. They also found evidence of this relationship being dependent on how the adolescent used Facebook. When looking at different platforms, using Facebook led to more social comparisons, thus leading to more negative effects on self-esteem. The number of friends or followers on Facebook has a positive affect on adolescent self-esteem. This is because a larger network served as a protective element (Cingel et al., 2022).

### ***Mechanisms***

A recent study found lower self-esteem for those who spend more time looking at Facebook posts. Social comparison negatively contributes to one's self-esteem because the self-presentation of comparison targets is more biased and valenced, in a positive way. On the other hand, social feedback can boost self-esteem because comments on one's post are more or less positive. The more likes you get on Facebook, the higher your self-esteem is. Self-reflective processes also have a positive self-esteem impact (Cingel et al., 2022).

Approval anxiety is worrying about the reactions of others to one's profile or online posts. Fear of missing out (FOMO) is stress from not being included in others' fun or rewarding experiences. Availability stress is the pressure of having to be online and constantly available at all times. Communication overload is stress caused by nonstop and intense online communication (Orben, 2024).

### ***Gender Differences***



Overall, girls have lower levels of self-esteem (Ingólfssdóttir, 2017). They also have significantly lower appearance self-esteem than boys at 14 years old, but there were no gender differences at 10 and 12 years old (Steinsbekk et al., 2021). This may help explain why girls' mental health has declined more than boys' in recent years, as SMU has increased. The mechanisms of cyberbullying, less sleep, and less exercise appear to mediate the relationship between SMU and mental health in girls, but not in boys (Twenge & Farley, 2020).

Problematic mental health associations are larger for girls, though patterns differ for boys. The relationship between screen time and depression, life satisfaction, and self-esteem is generally stronger for girls. These gender differences show that SMU is more strongly associated with girls' well-being. It is less clear whether similar gender differences would appear for TV watching and gaming, since these activities may not be as influenced by these social and body image factors (Twenge & Farley, 2020).

On SM, boys focus on features and entertainment, but girls seem more interested in the relational aspects. Males are more likely to report negative collective self-esteem and use SMU for social compensation. Girls are more likely to talk with friends online about romantic relationships, secret things, and deep feelings. Boys are more likely to use their sites to make new friends. Females are more likely to have a higher positive collective self-esteem and greater overall SMU. Females also posted higher means for their feeling of belonging in their group, passing time, and entertainment (Barker, 2009).

Increased SMU predicted decreased appearance self-esteem from 10-12 year olds and 12-14 year olds, but only in girls. Appearance self-esteem is more important to adolescent girls' than to boys' global self-esteem. SMU has a stronger effect on girls (Steinsbekk et al., 2021).

Girls show more social comparison online, which is self-relevant and threatening to their self-worth (Ingólfssdóttir, 2017). Later leading to higher levels of depression and lower levels of self-esteem. Girls are more likely to use photo-based SNSs and use them to compare themselves to others (Steinsbekk et al., 2021).

Too much SM could lead to problematic behavior and negatively influence adolescent well-being, thus leading to lower self-esteem. There is a positive correlation between well-being and problematic SMU in transgender, non-binary and gender-diverse adolescents, and positivity has been associated with online identity disclosures in transgender individuals with supportive networks. For example, surveys have linked higher stress levels to more problematic SMU and FOMO. SNS use in men could be associated with higher or lower self-esteem depending on what type of content they are exposed to (Orben, 2024).

Males tend to use SM as a habit while female adolescents prefer to use SM for support. When exposed to the overwhelming information on SM, there is an influence on their self-esteem, resulting in different outcomes, later affecting how adolescents assess their family environment. Unhealthy SMU can worsen family relationships, thus leading to lower self-esteem and problematic behaviors among adolescents. In a family environment that is intimate, males are more affected by habitual SMU, female adolescents are more related to S-SMU, only in high usage. An intimate family environment did not always lead to higher self-esteem. The

adolescent who lives in a more intimate family environment might have higher self-esteem, but this correlation only worked within the higher S-SMU condition. Family intimacy is critical for adolescent self-esteem (Shao & Ni, 2020).

### ***Family Intimacy***

Those with more parental support have better health compared to those who do not. Parental support has been shown to reduce depressive symptoms in teens and act as a protective buffer. This leads to higher self-esteem in those kids (Ingólfssdóttir, 2017). The effect of SM varies by culture. For instance, when examined across 13 countries, the effect of SM use on self-esteem generally was stronger in Eastern (more collectivistic) compared to Western (more individualistic) cultures, with the association of particular types of SM use differing (at times) in direction, significance, and strength by cultural region (Cingel et al., 2022).

### **Discussion**

There are some key similarities and differences in how SM use affects self-esteem in men and women. Some key similarities include more SM usage, more later consequences and SM is used during free time, even though the disadvantages outweigh the benefits. Key differences include the greater affect and impact on women's mental health, including self-esteem. This is due to the way females absorb content. Using SM affects self-esteem differently in men and women. This is because men and women use SM differently. Men use SM for entertainment purposes and girls use it for support. This may be because women are able to make deeper connections, while men just view it as something to do with their time. This relationship is moderated by family intimacy and parental support because most people use SM at home. At home, there might be other guardians to care for the use of SM. These moderators are important to one's self-esteem because it can help to be able to convey emotions with others. More family intimacy and parental support, with less SM use, can lead to higher self-esteem.

These differences are significant for understanding mental health outcomes, body image issues, and tailoring intervention. This is because these gender differences show why girls tend to have worse mental health outcomes. Females interpret SM differently, thus affecting their self-esteem. Body image issues are caused because of social comparison. Girls are more likely to post photos of their bodies and then actually absorb the criticism. This is shown when people compare their bodies to others. Once people understand the effects of social use on one's self-esteem, they can start to think of ways to intervene with them. Otherwise, SM use will keep hurting one's self-esteem. Family intimacy should promote adolescent self-esteem, parents should be careful and aware of the effects of SM. SM should also provide better protection with the adolescents who use it.

As this research is observational, the assessment of two points does not imply causation. Studies may find associations, but it does not mean gender causes the effect of social media on self-esteem. The points may just be correlated with each other. With this literature review being

self-reported, there may be biases as choosing studies can be subjective. Many of these studies only have a small sample of people. We need larger samples to be able to discern the findings later on. Most individuals use SM, so in this case, there is no control group. This means that there is comparison being made, and inherent limitations. In the future, it might be beneficial to look into how the effects of SM can have altering psychological effects. Also, looking for functions that make these more prominent within adolescents and specific genders. At the end, SMU and mental health results varied, depending on gender and activity. Adults should be aware of the effects of SM and be there for adolescents, specifically females because they create higher levels of concern (Twenge & Farley).

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