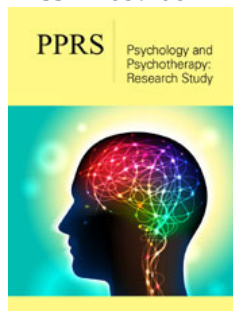


# The Dark Mirror: The Psychological Price of Social Media Validation among Adolescents

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ISSN: 2639-0612



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**Submission:**  March 5, 2025

**Published:**  April 10, 2025

Volume 9 - Issue 1

**How to cite this article:** Prachi Saini\* and Apoorva Choudhary. The Dark Mirror: The Psychological Price of Social Media Validation among Adolescents. *Psychol Psychother Res Stud.* 9(1). PPRS. 000701. 2025. DOI: [10.31031/PPRS.2025.09.000701](https://doi.org/10.31031/PPRS.2025.09.000701)

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## Abstract

This critical examination explores the intricate relationship between adolescents' pursuit of social media validation and its multifaceted psychological consequences. Today's young people navigate developmental milestones while simultaneously managing digital personas where social acceptance is quantified through engagement metrics. This synthesis of contemporary research investigates the neurological underpinnings of digital reward mechanisms, comparative self-evaluation processes, and identity formation challenges within validation-oriented environments. The analysis illuminates connections to specific psychological concerns including mood disorders, anxiety manifestations, body perception disruptions, and emergent phenomena such as self-directed digital negativity. Additional considerations include heightened vulnerability to online harassment, sleep pattern alterations, and distinctive platform-specific influence patterns. The review contemplates demographic variations alongside potential protective elements such as genuine self-expression and technological literacy. Implications for therapeutic approaches, parental guidance strategies, and educational frameworks conclude this comprehensive assessment of adolescent psychological functioning in digitally mediated social contexts.

## Introduction

Adolescence constitutes a pivotal developmental interval characterized by identity exploration, increasing independence, and heightened responsiveness to social evaluation. Recent years have witnessed a fundamental transformation in adolescent social dynamics through the widespread adoption of social media environments. These digital spaces have created unprecedented connectivity opportunities while simultaneously establishing novel arenas for social juxtaposition, validation-pursuing behaviors, and psychological susceptibility.

Contemporary adolescents typically engage with digital media for 7-9 hours daily, with social platforms comprising a substantial portion of this interaction Rideout & Robb, 2019. Unlike preceding generations, today's young people progress through development while maintaining a persistent digital presence that transforms social acceptance into quantifiable measurements through engagement metrics and follower statistics. This numerical representation of perceived social capital produces a tangible manifestation of presumed worth that significantly influences self-conceptualization during crucial developmental phases.

This assessment consolidates current investigations examining how the pursuit of social media validation influences adolescent psychological development, analyzing both direct pathways to emotional distress and the more nuanced ways digital validation mechanisms may alter developmental trajectories. Through understanding these processes, professionals and caregivers can better support adolescents in navigating digital landscapes while safeguarding psychological wellbeing.

## Neurobiological Foundations of Social Media Reward Systems

Social platforms incorporate design elements that deliberately engage neural reward circuitry, particularly through inconsistent reinforcement schedules that optimize dopaminergic responses. Functional magnetic resonance imaging research demonstrates that receiving positive digital feedback activates identical neural pathways as other rewarding stimuli, including the nucleus accumbens and ventral tegmental regions Sherman et al. This activation pattern resembles those observed in other rewarding and potentially dependency-forming behaviours.

The adolescent brain exhibits particular susceptibility to social media's reward mechanisms due to ongoing development in prefrontal regions responsible for impulse regulation and decision processes, coupled with heightened activity in reward-processing circuits. Neuroplasticity during this developmental period creates vulnerability to reward conditioning, potentially establishing validation-seeking patterns that may persist into adulthood [1]. Investigations by Meshi D et al. [2] suggest individual differences in reward sensitivity correlate with both frequency of platform use and psychological dependence on digital validation. This neurobiological predisposition helps explain why certain adolescents develop problematic usage patterns while others maintain healthier relationships with digital environments. These findings indicate that biological predispositions may interact with social media contexts to create varied vulnerability profiles for psychological distress.

## Quantification of Self-Worth: Likes, Followers, and Social Metrics

Social platforms have introduced unprecedented quantification of social validation through easily measured metrics. This transformation of social feedback into numerical values creates concrete, comparable indicators of perceived social standing that significantly impact adolescent self-evaluation [3]. The acquisition and monitoring of these social measurements can become integral to an adolescent's sense of personal value, establishing conditional evaluation patterns where internal worth depends on external validation indicators. Research by Vogel et al. demonstrates that adolescents frequently internalize these metrics as reflections of their social position and personal significance, creating psychological vulnerability to metric fluctuations. Studies indicate approximately 61% of adolescents report anxiety when unable to check their accounts, with particular concern about missing responses to their content [4]. Platform algorithms further reinforce validation-seeking through prioritizing content generating engagement, creating feedback cycles that reward increasingly validation-oriented behaviors. This algorithmic reinforcement may intensify psychological investment in metrics, potentially establishing maladaptive patterns of self-evaluation that continue beyond adolescence [5].

## Comparative Self-Perception and Digital Social Comparison

Social media environments facilitate extraordinary opportunities for social comparison, exposing adolescents to carefully curated representations of peers' experiences that typically emphasize idealized aspects while minimizing difficulties. Research consistently demonstrates that upward social comparison on digital platforms correlates with diminished self-regard, increased body dissatisfaction, and elevated depressive indicators [6].

The comparative process within social media contains several distinctive features that may amplify psychological impact. First, content curation creates unrealistic comparison standards. Second, engagement quantification allows direct numerical comparison of perceived popularity. Third, the continuous availability of comparison targets creates persistent opportunities for self-evaluation against idealized others Verduyn et al. Longitudinal investigations indicate frequent engagement in social comparison predicts increases in depressive symptoms over time, with this relationship mediated by diminished self-worth and perseverative thinking [7]. These findings suggest comparative processes represent a key mechanism through which social media validation-seeking impacts adolescent psychological health.

## Identity Formation in Digital Spaces

Adolescence represents a critical period for identity development, traditionally characterized by exploration, experimentation, and gradual consolidation of coherent self-concept. Social media introduces complexity to this process by creating digital environments where identity can be carefully constructed, modified, and presented according to anticipated audience reception Yau & Reich, 2019. Validation pursuit may lead adolescents to develop "presentation selves" optimized for audience approval rather than authentic self-expression. Research by Mascheroni G et al. [8] demonstrates many adolescents make deliberate self-presentation choices based on anticipated validation, often prioritizing idealized representations over authentic self-disclosure. This pattern may fragment identity development, creating disparities between online and offline self-conceptualizations.

Multiple platform usage further complicates identity formation, as adolescents maintain different personas across platforms based on distinct audience expectations. This management of multiple digital identities may delay identity consolidation and create internal conflict regarding authentic self-perception Yang & Brown, 2016. The developmental task of establishing cohesive identity may be compromised when significant psychological resources are directed toward maintaining validation-optimized digital personas.

## Cyberbullying and Digital Harassment

The pursuit of social media validation creates distinctive vulnerabilities to online aggression and digital harassment,

with significant psychological implications. Research indicates adolescents demonstrating greater investment in social validation metrics also report heightened emotional reactivity to negative online feedback [9]. This increased sensitivity can transform relatively minor digital slights into substantial psychological stressors. Several mechanisms appear to connect validation-seeking behaviors with cyberbullying vulnerability:

### **Increased digital exposure**

Adolescents actively seeking validation typically maintain higher posting frequencies and broader network connections, creating more opportunities for negative interactions [10].

### **Public nature of digital rejection**

Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying often occurs in highly visible digital spaces where public validation and rejection become apparent to broader peer networks. This visibility can magnify psychological harm through perceived public humiliation [11].

### **Metric-based comparison of negative feedback**

The quantification of negative feedback creates tangible indicators of rejection that validation-sensitive adolescents may interpret as objective evidence of social failure Wright, 2017. The psychological consequences of cyberbullying among validation-seeking adolescents appear particularly pronounced. Longitudinal research by [12] found adolescents reporting high validation orientation demonstrated more persistent depressive symptoms following cyberbullying incidents compared to peers with lower validation concerns. This finding suggests dependency on external digital validation may undermine psychological resilience to online negativity. Importantly, the relationship between validation-seeking and cyberbullying appears bidirectional. Experiences of digital harassment may intensify validation-seeking behaviors as adolescents attempt to “recover” social standing through increased posting and engagement [13]. This pattern can create vulnerability cycles where psychological harm and maladaptive validation-seeking behaviors mutually reinforce each other.

### **Sleep Disruption and Physical Health Consequences**

The pursuit of social media validation significantly impacts adolescent sleep patterns, with substantial implications for both physical and psychological development. Research consistently demonstrates validation-seeking behaviors correlate with sleep disruption through several mechanisms:

#### **Nighttime checking behaviors**

Adolescents invested in social validation frequently monitor platforms during evening hours to track feedback, directly reducing sleep duration and disrupting sleep onset Scott et al.

#### **Anticipatory alertness**

Concern about potential responses to posted content creates heightened arousal states incompatible with quality sleep, particularly affecting sleep initiation Woods & Scott, 2016.

### **Light exposure effects**

The physiological impact of screen illumination on melatonin production compounds psychological factors, further disrupting circadian patterns among validation-seeking users [14].

These sleep alterations have significant developmental implications. Research by Owens JA [15] demonstrates chronically reduced sleep quality during adolescence correlates with impaired cognitive function, decreased academic performance, and compromised emotional regulation. These outcomes may create additional vulnerability to psychological distress, establishing feedback loops where validation-seeking behaviors, sleep disruption, and psychological symptoms mutually reinforce each other. Beyond sleep, validation-seeking behaviors correlate with additional physical health concerns. The sedentary nature of intensive social media engagement contributes to reduced physical activity, while appearance-focused validation concerns correlate with unhealthy weight management behaviors and disordered eating patterns Wilksch et al. These physical health impacts represent important considerations in understanding the comprehensive developmental impact of social media validation pursuit.

### **Digital Self-Harm and Self-Validation**

An emerging research area examines the phenomenon of digital self-harm, wherein adolescents anonymously direct negative feedback toward themselves online. This behavior appears particularly connected to validation-seeking patterns and represents a complex manifestation of psychological distress in digital environments. Research by Englander E et al. [16] found approximately 6% of adolescents report engaging in digital self-harm behaviours, with higher rates among those reporting heightened concerns about social validation. Several motivational patterns have been identified, including:

#### **Attention and support elicitation**

Creating situations where peers defend against seemingly external attacks, generating supportive validation that feels more authentic than routine positive feedback.

#### **Self-verification**

Expressing negative self-perceptions anonymously to reconcile internal negative self-views with external positive feedback that feels incongruent with self-perception.

#### **Emotional management**

Using negative feedback as a form of emotional release or self-discipline that provides temporary relief from psychological distress. These behaviours demonstrate the complex relationship between validation needs and psychological wellbeing, highlighting how distorted validation-seeking patterns can manifest in seemingly contradictory behaviours. Digital self-harm correlates significantly with offline self-harm behaviours, depression, and suicidal ideation, representing a critical area for identification and intervention

[13]. A related phenomenon involves “emotional fishing”-the deliberate exaggeration of emotional distress to generate sympathy and engagement. While less overtly self-destructive than digital self-harm, this behaviour similarly represents a maladaptive approach to meeting validation needs through manipulative digital performances [17].

### **Platform-Specific Effects and Validation Mechanisms**

Different social media platforms employ distinct validation mechanisms that appear to create varied psychological impacts. Research increasingly demonstrates platform-specific features shape both validation-seeking behaviors and their developmental consequences.

#### **Visual-Centric platforms (Instagram, TikTok)**

Platforms prioritizing visual content demonstrate stronger associations with appearance-based social comparison and body image concerns. These environments create more pronounced appearance-validation concerns, particularly among female adolescents [18]. TikTok’s algorithm-driven content delivery creates rapid validation feedback loops through view counts and engagement metrics that may intensify validation dependency.

#### **Anonymous platforms (Reddit, Discord)**

Environments allowing anonymous participation show distinct validation patterns centered on ideological alignment and group identity rather than personal attributes. These platforms create different vulnerability patterns, potentially reducing appearance concerns while increasing ideological polarization and identity-based validation seeking [19].

#### **Ephemeral content platforms (Snapchat, Stories)**

Platforms featuring temporary content create unique validation anxieties centered on continuous engagement and exclusion concerns. The transient nature of validation metrics on these platforms may increase checking frequencies and validation monitoring [20].

#### **Achievement-oriented platforms and virtual worlds**

Performance-focused digital environments create accomplishment-based validation metrics that may particularly impact male adolescents. Research by Beard CL et al. [21] demonstrates performance validation in gaming environments correlates with both self-esteem fluctuations and problematic usage patterns.

These platform-specific effects have important implications for both research and intervention. The rapid evolution of platform features necessitates ongoing assessment of emergent validation mechanisms and their psychological impacts. Interventions may require tailoring to address specific validation vulnerabilities created by an adolescent’s preferred platforms rather than treating social media as a monolithic entity [22].

### **Positive Potential and Resilience Factors**

While the potential negative impacts of social media validation-seeking deserve substantial attention, balanced assessment requires recognition of potential positive outcomes and identification of factors promoting resilience. Research increasingly identifies conditions under which digital environments may support rather than undermine psychological wellbeing.

#### **Authentic self-presentation and validation**

Adolescents who maintain genuine rather than idealized self-presentation report more stable self-concepts and reduced psychological distress from social media engagement. Research by Reinecke & Trepte 2014 demonstrates receiving validation for authentic self-aspects contributes to identity consolidation and psychological wellbeing, contrasting with negative outcomes associated with validation of curated personas.

#### **Supportive digital communities**

Participation in interest-based or identity-affirming digital communities provides validation opportunities that may be unavailable in immediate physical environments. For marginalized adolescents particularly, such communities can provide critical validation of identity aspects that face stigmatization offline [23]. This targeted validation appears associated with increased resilience and reduced psychological distress.

#### **Digital literacy and critical engagement**

Adolescents demonstrating higher digital literacy skills, particularly regarding understanding of platform design and algorithmic curation, report reduced investment in validation metrics. Educational approaches developing critical evaluation of digital metrics appear to reduce their psychological impact [24].

#### **Balanced online-offline engagement**

Maintaining strong offline relationships alongside digital engagement represents a significant protective factor. Research by Twigg et al. found adolescents with diverse validation sources demonstrated reduced psychological dependency on digital metrics and greater stability in self-evaluation.

#### **Purpose-oriented usage**

Adolescents who engage with social media primarily for specific purposes beyond social validation (information gathering, creative expression, skill development) report healthier usage patterns and reduced psychological distress Thorisdottir et al. This purposeful engagement appears to shift attention from quantitative validation to qualitative engagement measures. Understanding these resilience factors provides important direction for both prevention and intervention approaches. Rather than focusing exclusively on risk reduction, effective approaches may emphasize cultivating positive engagement patterns while developing psychological resources that reduce validation dependency.

## Developmental Impacts and Mental Health Consequences

### Disruption of healthy developmental processes

The pursuit of social media validation can significantly disrupt normative developmental processes essential for psychological health. Research indicates several key areas of developmental vulnerability:

**Autonomy development:** Excessive dependence on external validation may undermine the development of independent self-evaluation, creating patterns where self-worth requires continuous external reinforcement Reich et al. This dependency may interfere with the development of internal standards and self-regulation capacities.

**Emotional regulation:** Social media metrics often produce emotional volatility as validation levels fluctuate. Adolescents who connect self-worth to these metrics may experience difficulty developing stable emotion regulation strategies, instead becoming reactive to external feedback patterns Rodgers et al.

**Relationship formation:** The pursuit of quantified validation may transform relationship development from quality-focused to quantity-focused, potentially undermining the formation of meaningful, authentic connections in favor of broader, validation-providing networks [25].

**Cognitive development:** Constant monitoring of social media feedback may fragment attention and establish cognitive patterns centered on external evaluation rather than internal reflection, potentially interfering with metacognitive skills and independent thinking [1].

### Specific mental health concerns

The pursuit of social media validation has been linked to multiple mental health concerns with particular relevance to adolescent development:

**Depression and mood disorders:** Numerous studies have established correlations between social media validation-seeking and depressive symptoms, with longitudinal research suggesting potential causal relationships. A meta-analysis by Keles B et al. [26] found validation-dependent social media use predicted increases in depressive symptoms over time, with effect sizes strongest among younger adolescents.

**Anxiety manifestations:** Social anxiety shows particularly strong associations with validation-seeking behaviours. Research by Vannucci et al. demonstrated adolescents with heightened social anxiety often engage in more intensive monitoring of social media feedback and experience greater distress when validation metrics fail to meet expectations. Social media may also contribute to generalized anxiety through constant evaluation concerns and fear of negative assessment.

**Body image concerns and disordered eating:** The visual nature of many social media platforms creates environments

where appearance-based validation is prominent. Studies consistently show associations between appearance-focused social media engagement and body dissatisfaction, with some research suggesting pathways to disordered eating behaviors [27]. The validation of idealized body images through engagement metrics may reinforce unhealthy body standards and self-evaluation patterns.

**Digital usage patterns and behavioral concerns:** Problematic patterns of social media use show significant overlap with dependency models, including tolerance, withdrawal symptoms, and continued use despite negative consequences. Validation-seeking appears particularly associated with potentially addictive usage patterns, as the intermittent reinforcement of social approval creates powerful behavioral conditioning effects [28].

**Identity uncertainty:** Excessive investment in curated online personas may contribute to identity confusion, particularly when online self-presentation diverges significantly from authentic self-perception. Research by Yang et al. found adolescents who maintained highly idealized online personas reported greater identity confusion and decreased authenticity in offline relationships.

## Gender Differences in Social Media Validation Patterns

Research consistently demonstrates gender differences in both social media usage patterns and psychological responses to digital validation. Female adolescents typically report higher investment in validation metrics and greater psychological distress in response to negative or insufficient feedback [4].

Platform preferences also demonstrate gender differences, with image-focused platforms showing stronger associations with body image concerns among female adolescents, while gaming and competition-focused platforms may create different validation pressures for males [29]. Gender differences in socialization likely influence these patterns, with female adolescents often receiving stronger messaging about appearance and social approval. Importantly, research indicates the psychological mechanisms connecting validation-seeking to mental health outcomes operate across genders, though specific manifestations and pathways may differ. Both male and female adolescents demonstrate vulnerability to external validation dependency, though content domains and expression patterns may reflect gendered socialization patterns [30].

## Cultural And Socioeconomic Factors

The psychological impact of social media validation-seeking demonstrates important variations across cultural and socioeconomic contexts. Research indicates collectivistic versus individualistic cultural orientations may influence both the intensity of validation-seeking behaviours and their psychological consequences [28].

Socioeconomic factors also play significant roles in determining both access patterns and psychological impacts. Access disparities

create differences in platform participation and digital literacy that may either protect from or exacerbate validation concerns. Research by Mascheroni G et al. [31] suggests socioeconomically disadvantaged adolescents may experience heightened pressure to demonstrate social capital through digital metrics, potentially increasing psychological vulnerability. Cross-cultural research demonstrates while validation-seeking behaviours appear universally present across diverse adolescent populations, their specific manifestations and consequences are shaped by cultural norms regarding social behaviour, self-presentation, and psychological well-being [32]. These findings highlight the importance of culturally-sensitive approaches to both research and intervention.

### Parental Mediation and Educational Approaches

Parental involvement is a significant protective factor in mitigating social media validation-seeking psychological risks. Research by Padilla-Walker LM et al. [33] indicates active mediation-characterized by an open discussion of digital content and values-shows stronger protective effects than restrictive mediation focused solely on limiting access. Digital literacy education demonstrates promising outcomes for reducing validation dependency and promoting healthier digital engagement. Programs specifically addressing critical media analysis, understanding of platform design mechanisms, and healthy identity development show particular promise [24]. School-based interventions that normalize digital struggles and provide peer support appear especially effective, potentially due to their alignment with the importance of peer perspectives during adolescence. These approaches can reduce isolation while providing practical strategies for maintaining psychological wellbeing in digital environments Throuvala et al.

### Clinical Implications and Therapeutic Interventions

The emergence of social media-related psychological distress has significant implications for clinical practice. Evidence-based treatments increasingly incorporate digital components to address validation-seeking behaviors and their consequences. Cognitive-behavioral approaches show particular promise, especially those targeting maladaptive beliefs about social evaluation and worth Twenge & Martin 2020.

Mindfulness-based interventions demonstrate effectiveness in reducing both frequency and psychological impact of social comparison and validation-seeking behaviors. These approaches appear to operate by increasing present-moment awareness and reducing automatic engagement with validation metrics [22].

Family-based interventions addressing systemic patterns around digital usage and validation also show promise, particularly when incorporating both adolescent autonomy support and clear boundaries around digital engagement. These approaches recognize validation-seeking behaviors develop within family systems that may inadvertently reinforce external validation dependency [34].

### Future Directions and Policy Considerations

The rapidly evolving nature of social media platforms

necessitates ongoing research and adaptive intervention approaches. Several key directions warrant particular attention:

#### Platform design ethics

Increasing evidence suggests platform design significantly influences psychological outcomes. Ethical design approaches minimizing exploitation of psychological vulnerabilities while promoting healthy engagement represent an important intervention point [35].

#### Developmental timing

Research examining age-specific vulnerability periods could inform more targeted intervention approaches. Preliminary evidence suggests early adolescence may represent a period of heightened risk for establishing validation-dependent patterns [36].

#### Protective factors

Identifying elements that buffer against negative psychological outcomes despite high social media engagement could inform more effective prevention approaches. Preliminary research suggests purpose orientation, strong offline relationships, and secure attachment may serve protective functions [37].

#### Longitudinal Trajectories

Extended longitudinal studies examining how adolescent validation patterns influence adult psychological functioning could clarify the long-term implications of digital validation dependency Coyne et al.

### Conclusion

The pursuit of social media validation represents a significant factor shaping adolescent psychological development in the digital age. The evidence reviewed indicates validation-seeking behaviours can disrupt normative developmental processes and contribute to various mental health concerns, including depression, anxiety, body image disturbance, identity confusion, and vulnerability to cyberbullying. These impacts appear particularly pronounced during early and middle adolescence when identity formation and social sensitivity reach peak importance. Additional concerns include sleep disruption, physical health consequences, and emerging phenomena like digital self-harm that further complicate the psychological landscape.

However, these outcomes are not inevitable. Protective factors including active parental involvement, digital literacy education, and supportive peer environments can significantly mitigate risks. The challenge for researchers, clinicians, educators, and parents involves developing approaches acknowledging both the centrality of digital environments in adolescent life and the potential psychological vulnerabilities they create.

Future interventions must balance respecting adolescents' autonomy and digital engagement with providing support and structure necessary to develop healthy self-evaluation patterns extending beyond validation metrics [38]. By understanding the

psychological mechanisms through which social media validation impacts development, we can better support adolescents in navigating complex digital landscapes while preserving psychological wellbeing.

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