Exploring Social Media Literacy And Validation-Seeking Behaviour Among Youth: An Analysis Of Facebook And Instagram Usage Patterns

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Abstract

Social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram have become integral to youth communication, self-expression, and identity formation in the contemporary digital landscape. While these platforms offer avenues for creativity, networking, and information dissemination, they also foster validation-seeking behaviours driven by likes, shares, comments, and followers. This study, focusing on Facebook and Instagram usage patterns, explores the relationship between social media literacy and validation-seeking behaviour among youth. Social media literacy is increasingly recognised as a critical subdomain within the broader media literacy framework, encompassing the specific skills and competencies required to critically navigate, evaluate, and engage with content across social networking platforms. How young individuals perceive and interact with online content, peer feedback, and algorithmic visibility is crucial. Using a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative survey data and qualitative insights, the study investigates how varying levels of media literacy influence validation-seeking tendencies and emotional dependencies on social approval via social platforms. The research aims to provide empirical evidence to support interventions that foster healthier digital practices among youth.

Keywords: Media Literacy, Validation-Seeking Behaviour, Youth, Facebook, Instagram, Digital Literacy, Online Identity, Social Media Engagement, Digital Well-being

1.   Introduction

The exponential growth of digital technology has significantly transformed how individuals communicate, share, and construct their identities. Among youth, social media platforms such as **Facebook** and **Instagram** have become dominant spaces for daily interaction, social validation, and identity negotiation (boyd, 2014; Livingstone, 2019). These platforms, while offering opportunities for creativity and community engagement, are also implicated in the amplification of **validation-seeking behaviours**, often reinforced by algorithmic feedback mechanisms such as likes, comments, and followers.

In the digital age, youth spend a substantial amount of time online, engaging in activities that are not only social but also deeply psychological. The need for social validation, self-worth, and peer recognition finds expression in how users curate content and monitor responses on these platforms (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2020). **Social media literacy** (SoMeLit), a vital extension of the broader media literacy framework, plays a central role in shaping how individuals engage with the complexities of digital platforms. It equips users with the cognitive and emotional skills needed to critically interpret, evaluate, and respond to the multidimensional social and psychological interactions that occur within online environments. Bridging the spheres of personal development and empowerment, social media literacy enables individuals particularly youth to navigate digital spaces with awareness and resilience. Notably, it also serves as a moderating factor in how social media usage influences psychological well-being, helping users to process content more mindfully and mitigate the potential negative effects of validation-driven engagement (Schreurs and Vandenbosch, 2021).

Over the past decade, India has witnessed a dramatic surge in its digital footprint, with internet usage expanding at an unprecedented rate. By 2025, the country surpassed 800 million active internet users, marking a significant milestone in its digital evolution. What began with basic internet functions such as email communication has evolved into an expansive digital ecosystem. Today, social networking platforms operated by global technology companies like Meta and X (formerly Twitter) are deeply woven into the daily routines of millions of Indians.

The proliferation of digital connectivity in India was primarily driven by the availability of low-cost mobile data and the widespread adoption of affordable smartphones. One of the early milestones in India's social networking journey was Orkut, a Google-owned platform that gained immense popularity in the late 2000s. At its peak in 2008, it was among the most visited sites in the country, before being discontinued in 2014. However, Orkut's decline did not hinder India's social media enthusiasm. Users swiftly migrated to Facebook, which, by 2022, had garnered the most extensive user base in the world from India. Other

platforms under the Meta umbrella, such as Instagram and WhatsApp, also saw widespread adoption, reinforcing India's position as a central hub of global digital engagement.

As mobile data became more affordable, Indian users began to rely heavily on smartphones as their primary means of accessing the internet. Social media quickly became a key part of daily life, reflecting the country's inherently social culture. On average, Indian users spent nearly two and a half hours each day engaging with various social media platforms.

Beyond traditional networking, video consumption emerged as a major driver of social media usage in India. Platforms like YouTube gained massive popularity, with T-Series the country's leading music label becoming one of the most followed and viewed YouTube channels globally. The rise of short-form video content further accelerated this trend, especially during the COVID-19 lockdowns, when digital content consumption spiked. During this period, users spent an average of 45 minutes daily on short video apps. Following the ban on TikTok in 2020, a mix of international alternatives and local applications emerged to fill the demand, further fueling India's digital and social media engagement (Basuroy, 2025).
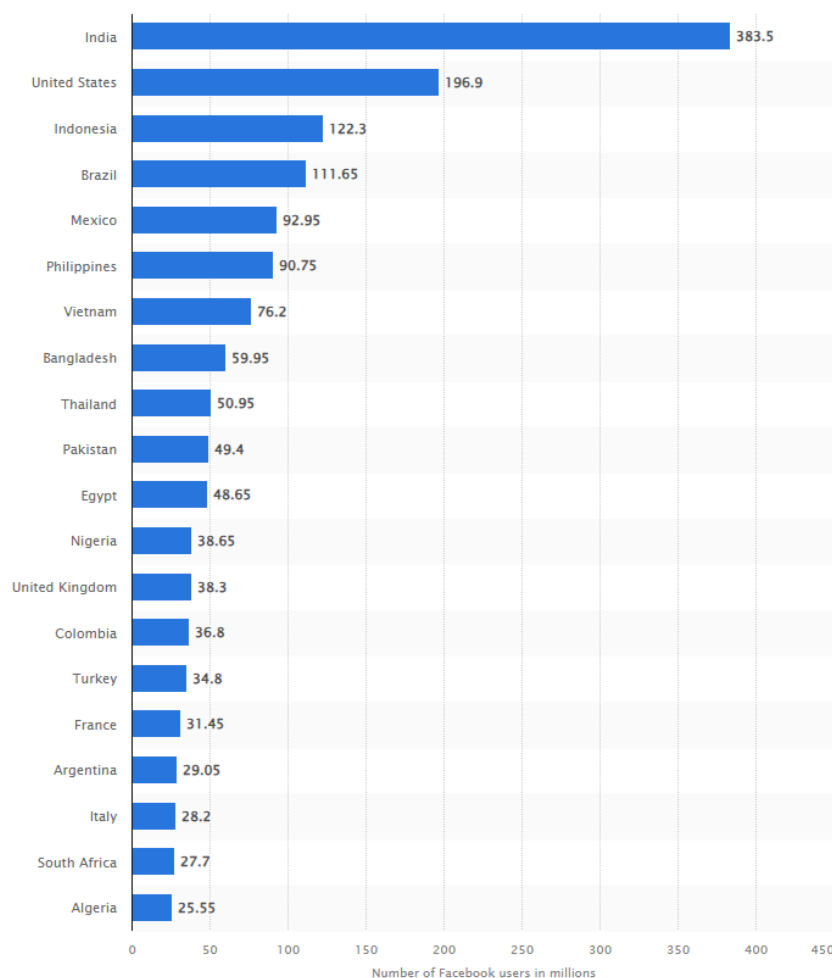

Fig 1: Countries with the most Facebook users 2025- Source: © Statista 2025

Facebook

With over **383 million users**, India holds the distinction of being the largest market for Facebook globally. If this digital community were considered a nation, it would rank as the **third most populous country** in the world highlighting the sheer scale of Facebook's presence in India. Other countries with substantial Facebook user bases include the United States, Indonesia, and Brazil, each surpassing **100 million users**, with figures around 196.9 million, 122.3 million, and 111.65 million respectively.

Facebook, now part of Meta Platforms Inc., continues to dominate the global social media landscape. Meta, which rebranded from Facebook in 2021, oversees a suite of platforms that includes **WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Instagram**, and **Facebook** itself four of the most widely used digital communication tools globally. By the third quarter of 2021, Meta reported a combined **monthly active user base of approximately 3.5 billion** across its platforms. Of these, Facebook alone accounted for nearly **2.9 billion monthly active users**, cementing its status as the most extensively used social media platform worldwide (Dixon, 2025).
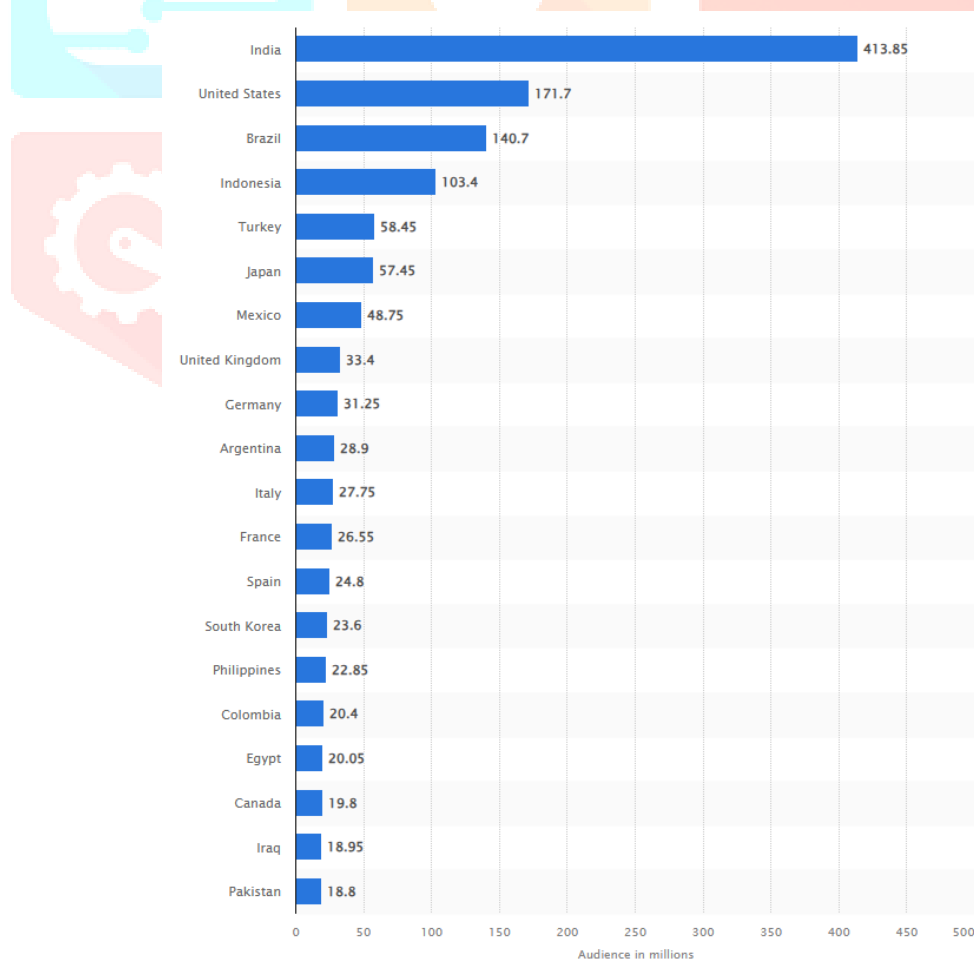

Fig 2: Countries with the most Instagram users 2025- Source: © Statista 2025

Instagram

As of early 2025, **India emerged as the global leader in Instagram usage**, with an astounding **413.85 million active users**, surpassing every other country in terms of audience size. The United States followed with approximately 171.7 million users, while Brazil secured third place with 140.7 million. Other countries like Indonesia, Turkey, and Japan also featured prominently among the top six. Interestingly, in terms of **audience penetration**, **Kazakhstan** led globally, with over **86% of its population** actively using Instagram.

In the United States, Instagram continued to be one of the most visited social media platforms. As of March 2025, it ranked fourth in popularity just behind Facebook, Pinterest, and X (formerly Twitter). However, among younger users, particularly **Generation Z**, **TikTok** had overtaken both **Instagram and Snapchat** in terms of overall engagement. Although Instagram maintained a significant presence among Gen Z, its usage saw a slight decline over recent years from **64% in 2019 to 57% in 2021** (Dixon, 2025a). Despite these shifts, **Instagram remains particularly popular among users aged 25 to 34**, a demographic that overlaps with a large segment of India's digitally active youth.

2. Social Media Literacy

Social media literacy can be seen as a contemporary extension of traditional media literacy, designed to better address the complexities of digital platforms that operate at the intersection of social interaction and media communication. This evolution not only enhances but also revitalizes the long-standing foundations of mass media education by incorporating the dynamic, participatory nature of social media (Livingstone, 2015). Understanding how to critically analyse content posted on social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc. from a technological, cognitive, emotional and ethical perspective is known as social media literacy. Knowing how the platform functions, including who may post what information, how it can be interacted with, and the underlying algorithms that show particular users' content to you, is crucial to the technological elements. You need to be able to recognise a trustworthy source on social media cognitively by looking at things like the user's bio, the number of followers, the date they joined, and offline affiliations, for example. Last but not least, social media literacy also entails awareness of your feelings and how you respond to certain interactions and pieces of content (*Social Media Research Institute*, n.d.).

3. Validation Seeking

Validation seeking refers to the act of seeking reassurance, approval, or acknowledgment from others regarding one's emotions, thoughts, or behaviours. While seeking validation can play a healthy role in strengthening interpersonal relationships and enhancing self-esteem, problems arise when this need becomes

excessive. In such cases, it may reflect underlying psychological concerns, such as persistent feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, or depressive tendencies.

According to clinical psychologist Dr. Ramona Leahy, individuals who habitually depend on external affirmation may struggle to cultivate a secure and independent sense of identity. This over-reliance on external feedback can create a pattern of emotional dependence, where one's self-worth is shaped more by the judgments of others than by one's own beliefs, values, or accomplishments (Mann et al., 2004).

Social media has become a central part of contemporary communication, enabling users to connect globally, share personal experiences, and access information in real time. J. M. and Farley (2021) argue that these platforms have revolutionized how people interact, they have also given rise to a concerning behavioural trend known as **"validation sickness."** This term describes an excessive reliance on social media feedback such as likes, comments, and shares as a measure of self-worth (Bayer, TriÇu, & Ellison, 2020). Over time, this dependence on external approval can negatively affect psychological well-being, encouraging users to constantly compare themselves with idealized online representations of others. As individuals become increasingly preoccupied with social media recognition, they may experience emotional distress, including heightened anxiety, depressive symptoms, and a fragile sense of self when expected affirmation is lacking (Keles, McCrae, & Grealish, 2020).

4. Significance

In today's digitally saturated world, fostering critical thinking about media content is an essential component of modern education. When individuals develop the ability to thoughtfully assess social media posts and online news, they become more discerning and informed consumers of information. Such skills are vital for 21st-century learners, enabling them to recognize that media content is often constructed from particular perspectives. Furthermore, this critical awareness allows individuals to identify the values embedded within media messages and understand whose interests are served by their dissemination, especially in the broader context of politics and societal influence. If you are social media savvy, you should evaluate the media you watch cautiously and check internet sources. Responsible online media sharing and considering the effects that various forms of media may have on our society are related to this. You may then start producing media messages with accountability.

5.   Key Aspects of Social Media Literacy:

Critical Thinking:

Critical thinking is a foundational component of social media literacy. It refers to the ability to consciously and systematically analyze information presented on digital platforms, rather than accepting it passively. In the context of social media, this involves questioning the intentions behind content, identifying underlying assumptions, recognizing persuasive or manipulative techniques, and detecting biases in posts, images, videos, or articles. Critical thinking also includes understanding the role of algorithms in shaping one's digital experience recognizing that what appears on one's feed is curated based on engagement, interests, or behaviour, not objectivity. A critically literate user actively interrogates both the content and the platform dynamics, thereby cultivating independent judgment and resisting manipulation or echo chamber effects.

Information Evaluation:

Information evaluation within social media literacy focuses on users' ability to assess the **accuracy, credibility, relevance, and potential impact** of online content. It involves scrutinizing the **source** of information, verifying facts through cross-referencing, and distinguishing between opinion and evidence-based reporting. This skill enables users to discern whether content is created for informative, persuasive, satirical, or deceptive purposes. Information evaluation is also deeply tied to media logic understanding how content may be structured to gain attention through sensationalism, emotional appeal, or confirmation bias. The goal is to foster informed decision-making and prevent the spread of misinformation or disinformation, which is particularly important in the fast-paced and user-generated nature of social media environments.

Responsible Online behaviour:

Responsible online behaviour is the ethical dimension of social media literacy. It involves being aware of one's digital footprint, engaging respectfully with others, and understanding the consequences of online actions. This includes avoiding cyberbullying, hate speech, trolling, and privacy violations, as well as respecting intellectual property and content authenticity. Social media literacy fosters a consciousness of rights and responsibilities in digital spaces, promoting civility, empathy, and inclusivity. Additionally, it teaches users to manage privacy settings, use secure practices, and avoid engaging with or propagating harmful or offensive material. In a broader sense, responsible behaviour is about being an ethical contributor to the digital public sphere.

Digital Citizenship:

Digital citizenship extends the principles of active civic engagement to the online sphere. It is a broader social and democratic application of social media literacy, wherein individuals not only consume but also participate in creating content and engaging in public discourse responsibly. Digital citizenship entails being aware of legal and societal norms in digital interactions, promoting accurate information, respecting diverse viewpoints, and participating in constructive dialogue. It encourages individuals to use social media platforms as tools for social good, awareness campaigns, activism, and community building. This concept goes beyond individual responsibility to include collective empowerment, thus aligning social media use with the values of democracy, equity, and justice.

Self-Perception and Emotional Regulation in Digital Spaces

An essential yet often overlooked aspect of social media literacy involves the development of **self-perception and emotional regulation** in digital contexts. In highly interactive and feedback-driven environments like Instagram and Facebook, youth are regularly exposed to curated content that promotes idealized lifestyles, physical appearances, and social achievements. The ability to critically reflect on one's digital identity and to differentiate between online personas and real-life worth is vital in resisting the pressures of validation-seeking. This dimension of social media literacy equips individuals with the emotional awareness to monitor their reactions to likes, comments, and comparisons with others. It also involves cultivating resilience against the negative psychological effects of low engagement or social exclusion online. Youth who possess this competency are better positioned to maintain a stable sense of self that is not excessively dependent on external affirmation. Thus, fostering self-perception and emotional regulation is crucial in enabling young users to navigate digital platforms with greater psychological autonomy and well-being.

Questions need to be asked while analysing social media posts

1. Who created this post? Online content is continuously produced by someone. Sometimes, a group or business, rather than a specific person, is in charge of the account.

2. Why it drew my attention towards it? Does the author employ any particular methods? Are they addressing my emotions or my irrational concerns or biases?

3. What message am I taking away from this post? Will it be understood the same way by others? Or may this information convey various meanings to different people?

4. What ideals do you think the post emphasises? What kind of life is depicted? What is hidden in the representation?

5. And last, why was the post created? Who is it intended to serve, and what is its purpose?

Regularly asking yourself these questions about the social media you use can help you start to understand how and why posts are made. You'll also wonder why you post on social media and share certain things. An internet-savvy society functions better and is less likely to be persuaded by emotive or populist arguments.

6.   Literature Review

Baglari et al. (2020) highlight the rapid rise in social media usage over recent years, emphasizing its role in simplifying communication and enabling individuals to share diverse aspects of their lives, including personal experiences, opinions, videos, and information. Their study, conducted among 300 young individuals aged 18 to 25, utilized background data sheets and a Social Media Exploration Sheet administered in group settings to assess usage patterns. The findings indicated that a significant proportion of participants began using social media during adolescence, with 37.2% initiating Facebook use by age 12, 54% starting WhatsApp at age 16, and 38.3% joining Instagram at age 18. Time spent on these platforms ranged from 25 to 120 minutes daily, with female participants reporting higher usage levels. Notably, 40% of respondents acknowledged using social media to express their identity, and an overwhelming 99.7% reported disruptions in academics and daily routines due to excessive use. Despite these concerns, 62.3% found social media beneficial for maintaining communication, while 75% frequently used it to share images, videos, and other content. The authors suggest that these findings can inform the development of psycho-educational interventions aimed at managing social media use among youth.

Nesi and Prinstein (2015) investigated how specific technology-driven behaviours namely, social comparison and the seeking of interpersonal feedback interact with offline personal traits to predict depressive symptoms among adolescents. Their longitudinal study involved 619 adolescents (57% female, average age 14.6), who completed self-report measures across two time points. At the initial stage, participants assessed their depressive symptoms, while a year later they provided information on their levels of depression, usage patterns of digital tools such as cell phones, Facebook, and Instagram, along with tendencies for excessive reassurance-seeking and engagement in technology-mediated social comparison and feedback-seeking. In addition, students provided sociometric data to assess popularity within peer groups. The study found that digital social comparison and feedback-seeking behaviours were significantly linked to elevated depressive symptoms. These associations were especially pronounced in female adolescents and those with lower levels of peer popularity, suggesting that gender and social status moderated the effects. Importantly, these relationships held even after accounting for overall technology usage, offline reassurance-seeking behaviours, and previous depressive symptoms. The findings underscore the value of analyzing adolescent media use through interpersonal models of depression and point to the need for more contextually sensitive research into the psychological impact of digital engagement among youth.

Rusdy and Fauzi (2020) conducted a study to examine the level of digital literacy and its relationship with cyberbullying behaviours among adolescents using Instagram. Drawing on Gilster's conceptualization of digital literacy, the researchers adopted a quantitative, correlational design. The study targeted late adolescents aged 18 to 21 who were active undergraduate students in the Faculty of Economics and Business at Universitas Islam Kebangsaan Indonesia Bireuen and regular users of Instagram. Employing a total sampling technique, all 70 eligible students were included. Findings revealed that a majority of participants approximately 78.57% demonstrated a high level of digital literacy, while the remaining 21.42% fell within a moderate range. In contrast, cyberbullying behaviours were reported at low levels by 71.42% of the sample, with only 28.57% exhibiting moderate tendencies. These outcomes suggest that participants were not only proficient in navigating social media platforms but also exhibited the critical thinking skills necessary to evaluate online content. They were able to assess the credibility of information, cross-verify sources, and utilize digital tools to confirm accuracy, indicating a responsible and informed approach to digital media engagement.

Briandana and Dwityas (2019) explored the importance of media literacy among adolescents, particularly in relation to their use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram in South Tangerang. Their study was grounded in James Potter's theory of media literacy and aimed to assess how effectively young users engage with and understand media content. Utilizing a quantitative approach under the positivist paradigm, the researchers conducted a survey using purposive sampling and distributed structured questionnaires to collect data. The analysis was based on the Individual Competence Framework, which evaluated three core indicators: use skills, critical understanding, and communicative abilities. Results revealed that a significant proportion of adolescents demonstrated moderate competence across all three dimensions. Specifically, 60.93% of participants showed medium-level proficiency in media usage skills with an average score of 36.38. In terms of critical understanding, 51.72% fell into the medium range, averaging 47.85. Similarly, 59.77% displayed moderate communicative abilities, with an average score of 27.34. The findings reflect a growing dependency on smartphone technology among adolescents and emphasize the need for structured media literacy education to foster analytical thinking and responsible content creation in digital environments.

Sheldon and Newman (2019) applied the uses and gratifications theory to examine the relationship between excessive reassurance-seeking, experiences of interpersonal rejection, and patterns of Instagram use among minors aged 12 to 17. Their study found that adolescents who engaged with Instagram primarily for purposes of self-expression and self-promotion were more prone to seeking constant reassurance about their worth and likability. Structural equation modeling revealed that this reassurance-seeking behaviour significantly influenced the amount of time they spent on the platform. Moreover, participants who reported feeling

rejected in their personal relationships were more likely to turn to Instagram as a means of psychological escape, using the platform to distance themselves from real-life emotional discomfort.

7.   Theoretical Foundations

Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory offers a psychological explanation of how individuals develop behaviours, emotional responses, and attitudes by observing others within a social environment. This theory proposes that learning is not solely dependent on personal experiences or physical practice, but can also take place through watching others and receiving guidance, highlighting the cognitive nature of the learning process (Bandura & Walters, 1963). A key concept within this framework is **vicarious reinforcement**, where individuals learn by observing the consequences rewards or punishments experienced by others. behaviours that are consistently rewarded are more likely to be adopted and repeated, while those that are regularly punished are typically avoided. Unlike traditional behaviourist theories that emphasize direct reinforcement as the primary driver of learning, social learning theory underscores the role of internal cognitive processes, such as attention, retention, and motivation (Bandura, 1971). The theory was extensively developed and popularized by **Albert Bandura**, who emphasized that learning is deeply rooted in social observation and interaction.

While Social Learning Theory offers a valuable lens for understanding behaviour in digital social environments, it also raises critical questions about the unfiltered and often performative nature of online interactions. In spaces such as Facebook and Instagram, youth are continuously exposed to curated representations of success, beauty, and popularity, which serve as influential models for imitation. The reinforcement mechanisms embedded within these platforms likes, shares, and comments act as social rewards that shape users' perceptions of acceptable or desirable behaviour. This process can contribute to validation-seeking tendencies, where individuals internalize external approval as a measure of self-worth. By examining these dynamics through the lens of Social Learning Theory, this research critically interrogates how digital platforms may perpetuate superficial standards and emotional dependency, emphasizing the need for reflective engagement and critical awareness in online social contexts.

Social Comparison Theory

Social psychologist **Leon Festinger (1954)** introduced Social Comparison Theory, the theory suggests that individuals are inherently motivated to assess their own beliefs, abilities, and characteristics by comparing themselves to others. This process helps reduce uncertainty about personal attributes and provides a benchmark for self-definition. Through such comparisons, people evaluate where they stand in relation to

others, using these observations as a reference point to shape their self-concept, values, and emotional responses.

The architecture of social media platforms amplifies this tendency by normalizing curated self-presentation and quantifiable metrics of approval. Users are constantly confronted with images and narratives that often reflect idealized realities, fostering upward comparisons that may distort self-perception. As McIntyre and Eisenstadt (2010) argue, social comparison functions as a self-regulatory mechanism, but in mediated environments saturated with filtered successes and aestheticized lives, this regulation may skew toward self-doubt rather than self-enhancement. In such spaces, the pursuit of validation becomes less about authentic self-expression and more about achieving social visibility, often measured through likes, shares, and algorithmic reach. Without critical media literacy, young users are less equipped to recognize the constructed nature of these interactions, making them more vulnerable to internalizing social feedback as a measure of personal worth.

8. Research Objectives:

1. To examine the relationship between social media literacy levels and validation-seeking behaviour among youth on Facebook and Instagram.
2. To analyze how different patterns of Facebook and Instagram usage (frequency, purpose, engagement) influence validation-seeking tendencies.

9. Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to examine the relationship between social media literacy and validation-seeking behaviour among youth on Facebook and Instagram. A total of 150 participants, aged 18 to 24, were selected using purposive sampling from urban colleges and universities. Data collection was conducted through a structured questionnaire and qualitative cohort interactions. The questionnaire focused on three key dimensions: (1) usage patterns frequency, purpose, and nature of engagement on Facebook and Instagram; (2) levels of social media literacy covering access, analysis, evaluation, responsible Online behaviour, and content creation; (3) validation-seeking behaviour measuring dependency on likes, comments, and peer approval. For the qualitative component, 30 participants were selected from the same sample and divided into three cohorts of 10 each. These group discussions explored emotional responses to online feedback, perceptions of self-worth, peer comparison, and the role of algorithmic visibility in shaping digital identity. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while thematic analysis was used for qualitative insights. Ethical standards were maintained, with informed consent obtained from all participants.

10. Data Analysis

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Usage Patterns by Gender (N = 150)

Variable	Category	Male (n = 90)	%	Female (n = 60)	%
Frequency of Use	Daily	68	75.6%	41	68.3%
	Weekly	17	18.9%	15	25.0%
	Rarely	5	5.5%	4	6.7%
Primary Purpose	Entertainment	26	28.9%	22	36.7%
	Communication	29	32.2%	18	30.0%
	Self-Promotion	21	23.3%	9	15.0%
	Information/News	14	15.6%	11	18.3%
Engagement Nature	Mostly Viewing	21	23.3%	18	30.0%
	Liking & Commenting	32	35.6%	20	33.3%
	Regular Posting	25	27.8%	13	21.7%
	Sharing Content	12	13.3%	9	15.0%

Among male participants (n = 90), the majority reported **daily use** of Facebook and Instagram (75.6%), making it the most frequent usage pattern, while **rare use** was least reported (5.5%). A similar trend was observed among females (n = 60), with **daily use** being most common (68.3%) and **rare use** again the least (6.7%). Regarding the primary purpose of using these platforms, **communication** was the top reason among males (32.2%), whereas **information or news consumption** was least common (15.6%). In contrast, females primarily used these platforms for **entertainment** (36.7%), with **self-promotion** being the least cited purpose (15.0%). When it came to engagement behaviour, males were most likely to engage through **liking and commenting** (35.6%), and least likely to engage by **sharing content** (13.3%). Similarly, among females, the most frequent engagement was also **liking and commenting** (33.3%), while **sharing content** was the least common form of participation (15.0%).

Table 2: Gender vs Frequency of Facebook and Instagram Use

Gender	Daily	Weekly	Rarely	Total
Male (n=90)	68	17	5	90
Female (n=60)	41	15	4	60
Total	109	32	9	150
Chi-Square (χ²)	**0.867**	**df = 2**	**p = 0.648**	

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between gender and the frequency of Facebook and Instagram use. The association was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(2, N = 150) = 0.87$, p = .648. This suggests that the frequency of social media use did not significantly differ between males and females. It suggests that **both males and females are equally active** on Facebook and Instagram, regardless of how often they use the platforms whether daily, weekly, or rarely. Given the ubiquity of social media in youth culture, especially among digital natives, such parity is expected. Social networking has become a routine activity across genders, reinforcing that **frequency alone is no longer a distinguishing variable in understanding digital behaviours**.

Table 3: Gender vs Primary Purpose of Use

Gender	Entertainment	Communication	Self-Promotion	Info/News	Total
Male (n=90)	26	29	21	14	90
Female (n=60)	22	18	9	11	60
Total	48	47	30	25	150
Chi-Square (χ²)	**3.522**	**df = 3**	**p = 0.318**		

A chi-square test of independence was conducted to test the association between gender and the primary purpose of using Facebook and Instagram. The result was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(3, N = 150) = 3.52$, p = .318, indicating that males and females did not differ significantly in their main purposes for using these platforms, this result indicates **a convergence in motivations**, such as entertainment, communication, and self-promotion. This aligns with recent digital culture literature that **users of all genders increasingly blur personal, social, and professional uses of social platforms**, especially in youth demographics. Thus, digital platforms are **multi-purpose spaces** used similarly across genders.

Table 4: Gender vs Nature of Engagement

Gender	Viewing	Liking & Commenting	Posting	Sharing	Total
Male (n=90)	21	32	25	12	90
Female (n=60)	18	20	13	9	60
Total	39	52	38	21	150
Chi-Square (χ²)	**0.991**	**df = 3**	**p = 0.803**		

A chi-square test of independence examined the relationship between gender and the nature of engagement on Facebook and Instagram (e.g., viewing, liking/commenting, posting, sharing). The result was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(3, N = 150) = 0.99$, $p = .803$. This suggests that males and females engaged in similar ways on these platforms. The data suggests that **engagement styles** are not significantly influenced by gender. Both males and females appear equally likely to view content, like or comment, and share or post. This may reflect an increasing **social norm of reciprocal digital engagement** (e.g., liking back, story reactions, meme sharing) that transcends gender boundaries. Moreover, social platforms have optimized for interaction in a way that **rewards and encourages similar user behaviours across demographics**.

Table 5: Correlation between Social Media Literacy and Validation-Seeking behaviour

		Social Media literacy components				
		Access	Analysis	Evaluation	Responsible Online behaviour	Content Creation
Validation seeking elements	Likes Dependency	-0.12	-0.28	-0.35	-0.25	-0.14
	Comments Dependency	-0.08	-0.32	-0.38	-0.29	-0.12
	Peer Approval	-0.1	-0.3	-0.33	-0.27	-0.16

The correlation analysis between social media literacy components and validation-seeking behaviours specifically dependency on likes, comments, and peer approval reveals a consistent negative relationship. Notably, the strongest inverse correlations are observed with the evaluation dimension of social media literacy, which registers at -0.35 for likes, -0.38 for comments, and -0.33 for peer approval. This indicates that youth who demonstrate stronger abilities to critically assess and interpret media content are significantly less likely to rely on social validation through digital feedback mechanisms. Similarly, analysis skills (correlations ranging from -0.28 to -0.32) and responsible online behaviour (-0.25 to -0.29) also show

moderate negative correlations, suggesting that students who engage more thoughtfully and ethically online tend to be more autonomous and less driven by external approval. In contrast, access (-0.08 to -0.12) and content creation (-0.12 to -0.16) show relatively weaker relationships, implying that mere technical access to platforms or the ability to generate content does not necessarily reduce dependence on likes or peer validation. These findings collectively underscore the critical role of higher-order social media literacy especially analytical and evaluative capacities in fostering digital resilience among youth. The data supports the argument that lower levels of critical analysis, evaluation, and responsibility correlate with higher susceptibility to validation-seeking behaviour, reinforcing the need for educational interventions that move beyond basic digital access and instead prioritize critical, reflective, and responsible media engagement.

Thematic Analysis of Group Discussions

To complement the quantitative analysis, three cohorts were subjected to group discussions conducted with 30 participants drawn from the larger survey sample. Each cohort comprised 10 individuals and was purposively selected to reflect diversity in gender, academic stream, and social media usage. Thematic analysis of these discussions revealed four major themes that echo and expand upon the quantitative correlations between social media literacy and validation-seeking behaviour.

Theme 1: Emotional Dependency on Online Feedback (Likes & Comments)

Across all three cohorts, participants—especially female students—described a heightened emotional response to likes and comments on Instagram and Facebook. Many reported feelings of disappointment or anxiety when expected digital engagement was low. This reflects the quantitative finding that **likes and comments dependency correlated negatively with evaluation (-0.35 and -0.38 respectively)**, suggesting that those with less developed evaluative literacy were more emotionally reactive to external digital feedback. This tendency was more pronounced in Cohort 1 (primarily undergraduates), reinforcing the statistical indication of higher validation-seeking behaviour among participants with lower levels of analytical and evaluative social media literacy.

Theme 2: Peer Comparison and Self-Worth

Cohorts 2 and 3 particularly emphasized **peer comparison** as a driver of self-esteem, often measuring their own social value based on how others presented themselves online. Participants with weaker critical skills in identifying curated or artificial content were more prone to internalizing these comparisons, consistent with the **negative correlation between peer approval dependency and analysis/evaluation (-0.30, -0.33 respectively)**. This theme aligns with the earlier inference that lower social media literacy, especially in analysis and critical thinking, leads to greater dependence on peer validation and diminished self-worth.

Theme 3: Visibility Anxiety and Algorithmic Pressure

Many participants expressed concern over how algorithms determined the visibility of their posts. The uncertainty over being "seen" contributed to compulsive behaviours, such as timing posts or using trending hashtags to attract attention—behaviours linked to the desire for **likes, comments, and algorithmic approval**. Participants with **lower responsible online behaviour scores** appeared more susceptible to these pressures, consistent with the **moderate negative correlation (-0.25 to -0.29)** between responsible behaviour and validation-seeking. This supports the notion that responsible online behaviour is a protective factor, helping users to engage authentically rather than strategically for validation.

Theme 4: Awareness vs. Internalization (Gender Differences)

While both male and female participants displayed awareness of curated content and the psychological effects of social media, female participants were more likely to internalize negative outcomes, despite possessing access and content creation skills. This aligns with the **weaker correlations of access/content creation (-0.08 to -0.16)** with validation-seeking, suggesting that technical literacy alone does not mitigate social-emotional vulnerability—particularly for female users.

Thematic findings from all three cohorts reinforce the quantitative evidence that **higher-order social media literacy (especially analysis, evaluation, and responsible behaviour)** is inversely related to validation-seeking tendencies. The data highlights the urgent need for social media literacy education that moves beyond technical access and content creation to include emotional resilience, algorithmic awareness, and critical self-reflection—particularly for vulnerable groups like young women.

11.   Conclusion

Based on the comprehensive findings from both quantitative and qualitative strands of the study, several critical conclusions emerge regarding the relationship between social media literacy and validation-seeking behaviour among youth on platforms like Facebook and Instagram. First, while gender did not significantly influence usage frequency, purpose, or nature of engagement, the deeper emotional and psychological responses to social media interactions revealed distinct patterns—particularly among female participants. Despite similar usage patterns, females showed greater susceptibility to validation-seeking tendencies, especially in relation to likes, comments, and peer approval.

The data strongly indicate that higher-order dimensions of social media literacy—specifically *analysis*, *evaluation*, and *responsible online behaviour*—are inversely associated with dependency on external digital validation. Youth with stronger critical and ethical digital competencies were better equipped to navigate social feedback without allowing it to define their self-worth. Conversely, participants with lower levels in

these domains demonstrated increased emotional reactivity, peer comparison, and strategic posting behaviours aimed at algorithmic visibility, as reflected in both statistical correlations and thematic insights.

Importantly, the study highlights that basic access to platforms and the ability to create content do not inherently reduce validation-seeking behaviour. This underscores a key implication: **technical proficiency alone is insufficient for healthy digital engagement**. Instead, educational efforts must prioritize *critical media literacy*, emotional resilience, and algorithmic awareness to build genuine digital autonomy among youth.

Overall, the findings point to a growing need for structured, gender-sensitive media literacy programs that not only teach platform navigation but also cultivate reflective thinking and psychological preparedness. In a media environment where visibility is often mistaken for value, fostering internal validation becomes essential for youth well-being in the digital age.

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