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## Psychological Well-being among Gen Z Social Media Users: Exploring the Role of Self-Esteem, Social Media Dependency as Mediator and Social Media Usage Motives as Moderator

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**Abstract.** *Social media has become an inseparable part of Gen Z's life. However, a number of previous research documented contradictive findings regarding social media use and its effect on psychological well-being among adolescents. This study aimed to investigate the role of self-esteem, social media dependency, and motives of social media use in the psychological well-being of Gen Z adolescents. A total of 647 students (aged 12 to 21 years, comprising 282 males and 365 females) participated and completed several self-reported instruments, including the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), the Online Social Network Dependency Scale (OSNDS), the Social Media Usage Motives Scale (SMUMS), and the Mental Health Inventory (MHI-18). Results from Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) showed that self-esteem was a positive predictor, while social media dependency was a negative predictor of psychological well-being in Gen Z adolescents. Social media dependency was also found significantly mediate the link between self-esteem and psychological well-being. In addition, motives for social media use were a significant moderator of the relationship between social media dependency and psychological well-being, in which a maintaining existing relationship motive intensified this association, while a meet new people and socializing motive weakened it. These findings implied the importance of an intervention targeting self-esteem in understanding the motive behind adolescents' use of social media so that their consumption of social media could be appropriate and offer benefits for their psychological well-being.*

**Keywords:** *gen Z; psychological well-being; self-esteem; social media dependency; social media use motive*

### INTRODUCTION

Adolescents who grow up in the digital era are generally known as Generation Z or Gen Z, i.e., the generation who grew up online and spent most of their time accessing the internet and social media through various digital technology devices. Various statistical data reveal how high the use of the internet and social media by Gen Z is. Rideout and Robb's (2018) research uncovered that more than 92% of Gen Z used social media platforms, of which 70% used it more than once a day, 38% used it several times within an hour, and 16% used it almost continuously. Ahmed (2019) also revealed that more than half of Gen Z accessed various social media several times a day, while one in five Gen Z admitted to accessing social media every hour of the day.

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Less than a third of Gen Z reported spending five to six hours daily on social media, and nearly a third admitted to spending seven to ten hours per day on it. Additionally, four out of five Generation Z acknowledged using social media excessively. Furthermore, seven out of ten Gen Z admitted to having an addiction to the internet, and nearly two-thirds claimed to having an addiction to social media (Niaz Ahmed, 2019). In Indonesia, a survey conducted by the Association of Indonesian Internet Service Providers (APJII) in 2018 showed that the most significant internet users were dominated by adolescents aged 15-19 years classified as Gen Z, with a percentage reaching 91% (APJII, 2019). Meanwhile, the We Are Social survey conducted in Singapore in 2017 demonstrated that the Indonesian population using social media reached 106 million people out of a total population of 262 million. The highest activity of social media users in Indonesia was carried out by digital natives, i.e., Gen Y and Gen Z, with 62% using smartphones, 16% using computers, and 6% using tabs (Triastuti et al., 2017).

The high level of use of social media by Gen Z has attracted the interest of experts to examine how the behavior of using social media and its impact on adolescents, especially on psychological well-being aspects. However, previous research related to the use of internet-based media provides inconsistent results. Several research reports reveal that social media benefits adolescents' psychosocial development and psychological well-being. Liu and Yu (2013) found that using Facebook positively impacted psychological well-being since it could help college students maintain social support online. Nabi, Prestin, and So (2013) also disclosed that the number of friends on Facebook was correlated with a more excellent perception of social support and resulted in lower levels of stress and greater levels of well-being. Moreover, Verduyn et al. (2017) exposed that active use of social networks increased subjective well-being as individuals built social capital, stimulating a high sense of social attachment. In addition, Dogan (2016) showed that using social networks predicted happiness levels, psychological well-being, and life satisfaction.

On the other hand, various survey reports in the media and research results demonstrate the negative impact of using social media on children and adolescents. Internet use is thought to be positively associated with increased feelings of loneliness, depression, stress, and anxiety in individuals (Satici & Uysal, 2015; Marino, Mazzieri, Caselli, Vieno, & Spada, 2018). Sampasa-Kanyinga and Lewis (2015) also showed that daily social networking use of more than two hours per day was associated with lower self-assessment of mental health and more significant psychological distress and suicidal ideation. Burke, Marlow, and Lento (2010) reported that individual consumption of social media content reduced social capital and increased loneliness. The negative consequences triggered by excessive use of social media also had a detrimental effect on users' personal, social, and/or professional lives (Griffiths et al., 2014; Ryan et al., 2014). Thadani, Cheung, and Lee (2016) suggest that excessive use of social media (Facebook) impacts work, academic performance, and interpersonal relationships.

These conflicting research results indicate a complex relationship between internet technology-based media use and psychological well-being (Gordon et al., 2007), so further research is required to clarify this relationship. Kraut et al. (2002, 1998) revealed the importance of examining potential moderators of the relationship between internet technology-based media use and outcomes on psychological well-being. One of the variables deemed as an essential moderator in influencing the relationship between the two variables is the individual's motives for using internet-based media. Understanding what motivates individuals, especially adolescents, to use social media aims to fully understand the consequences of such use since different motives not only produce different behaviors but also lead to different psychological effects. Related to that, the use and gratification theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973; Grant, 2010) suggests that

understanding the impact of a media is necessary to consider the motives of its users. Through this approach, individuals are seen as active users who selectively seek and use certain technologies or media to fulfill their psychological satisfaction and needs. Studies by Kraut et al. (2002) and Zhao (2006) uncovered different patterns in the relationship between internet use and loneliness when they distinguished the types of internet use for social and non-social motives. The research results found by Gordon et al. (2007) also showed that students with a coping motive in using the internet had higher depression and anxiety scores and lower family ties, while internet use for information seeking and e-mail (social purpose) provided a positive relationship with attachment to family.

Therefore, in this study, adolescents' motives for social media use were tested as a moderator in the relationship between social media dependency and psychological well-being. This study also focuses on two main types of motives driving individuals' use of social media: the motive for maintaining existing relationships and the motive for meet new people and socializing (Ellison et al., 2007; Joinson, 2008). The motive for maintaining relationships describes the need for adolescents to interact through online communication with people they already know, while the motivation for meeting new people on social media refers to the development of new relationships. The exploratory research results conducted by Brandtzaeg and Heim (2008) exposed two primary motives for people using social media: "to get in contact with new people" (new relations), and the second most common motive is "to keep in touch with their friends." Meanwhile, Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield (2006) explained the two motives with the terms social searching (finding information about offline contacts) and social browsing (finding and developing new relationships). Moreover, survey results by Lampe et al. (2006) reported that the most crucial primary reason for using Facebook is social searching. Additionally, the hypothesis proposed by Rae and Lonborg (2015) indicates that individual motives for using Facebook moderated the relationship between Facebook use and psychological well-being, where individuals tended to have higher psychological well-being when Facebook use was motivated by a desire to maintain social relationships.

Further, various literature and research results have shown that high self-esteem will improve psychological well-being (Enwere & Mbakwe, 2021; Nwankwo et al., 2015; Paradise & Kernis, 2002). In contrast, low self-esteem is correlated with depression (Orth & Robins, 2013; Rieger et al., 2016), loneliness (Al Khatib, 2012; Ishaq et al., 2017), anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Creemers et al., 2012), and substance abuse (Akhter, 2013; Richardson et al., 2013; Uba et al., 2013). Self-esteem, in general, is defined as self-evaluation or how one values oneself (Rosenberg, 1989), playing a crucial role and is a fundamental component in adolescent consciousness as it is related to mental health and psychological well-being (Dunham et al., 2007).

Additionally, self-esteem is considered to predict the use of social media. Zywicka and Danowski (2008) and Ardi (2017) stated two hypotheses regarding the relationship between the two variables: 1) individuals with low self-esteem can use the internet to compensate for their difficulties in social relationships in the real world; 2) individuals with high self-esteem can also use the internet depending on their motives. Several other studies have also demonstrated how self-esteem impacts the use of social media because of the benefits they get when they use it.

The studies mentioned above indicate the relationship between self-esteem and social media dependency, as well as the relationship between social media dependency and psychological well-being. Based on this, it is assumed that social media dependency can mediate between self-esteem and psychological well-being. In addition, from the contradictions of studies related to the relationship between social media use and psychological well-being, it can be hypothesized that the variable of motive for using social media is a moderator, as researched by Rae & Lonborg (2015). Therefore, the hypotheses in this study are (H1) social media dependency acts as a mediator in the relationship

between self-esteem and psychological well-being; (H2) the motive for maintaining existing relationships acts as a moderator influencing the relationship between social media dependency and psychological well-being; (H3) the motive for meet new people and socializing acts as a moderator influencing the relationship between social media dependency and psychological well-being.

For this reason, this study examines the relationship between the variables mentioned earlier in Generation Z adolescents in Mataram City. Research revealing behavioral characteristics and psychological aspects related to the use of social media for adolescents in Mataram City has not been widely disclosed. On the other hand, data from the Basic Health Research (Riskesdas) of West Nusa Tenggara Province in 2018 reported that the prevalence of depression in the population aged over 15 years in Mataram City was 8.11%, and the prevalence of mental-emotional disorders in the same age population was recorded at 12.63% (LPB Litbang Kesehatan, 2019). Considering that the use of social media can provide positive and negative impacts on individual well-being, it encourages the need for intensive and in-depth research to determine the factors playing a role in influencing the use of social media and how they impact adolescents' psychological well-being in Mataram City.

## METHOD

The participants in this study were 647 Gen Z adolescents in Mataram City, with an age range of 12-21 years (Mean = 16.12 and SD = 2.19), consisting of 282 (43.59%) boys and 365 (56.41%) girls. The data retrieval was conducted online through the google form distributed through social media. Before filling out and completing the data, participants were asked to read the informed consent form and state that they were willing to participate in the study. Respondent data were obtained from as many as 668 people. From the data attained, 21 respondent data were not included in the analysis since they were more than 21 years old, had incomplete instrument data filling, and were unwilling to participate in this study.

The demographic characteristics of the participants showed that most adolescents were in the age range of 15-17 years (43.43%), with 31.84% junior high school students, 44.05% senior high school students, and 24.11% college students. Almost all participants reported having more than one social media account (97.53%), and Instagram was the most widely and most actively used social media by participants (49.46%), while WhatsApp was the short message application utilized by almost all subjects (99.38%). On average, participants used social media for 3.5 years, of which 83% accessed social media daily, and the average time spent using social media was 6-7 hours a day.

This study included psychological well-being, self-esteem, social media dependency, and motives for maintaining existing relationships and meet new people and socializing. Participants were then asked to complete a self-report instrument related to each variable. Psychological well-being was measured using the Mental Health Inventory (MHI-18) adaptation scale from Veit and Ware (1983). The MHI-18 adaptation scale consisted of four dimensions: anxiety, depression, behavioral control, and positive affect, with 15 statement items related to how often participants felt or experienced various emotions during the previous four-week period. Alternative answers were given on a six-point scale, ranging from one (never) to six (all the time) for favorable items and vice versa on a range of one (all the time) to six (never) for unfavorable items. The score's reliability was indicated by the composite reliability (CR) value = 0.93. The confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) test results for the MHI-18 adaptation scale showed the RMSEA value = 0.07 ( $\leq$  0.08); SRMR = 0.06 ( $\leq$  0.1); NFI = 0.95 ( $\geq$  0.90); CFI value = 0.97 ( $\geq$  0.90).

Self-esteem was determined using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), which consisted of ten items with scores using a Likert scale. Each statement item comprised four alternative answers (one = strongly disagree and four = strongly agree for favorable items and vice versa for unfavorable items). The composite reliability (CR) value obtained was 0.87. Confirmatory factor analysis revealed the value of RMSEA = 0.10 ( $>0.08$ ); SRMR = 0.08 ( $\leq 0.1$ ); NFI = 0.93 ( $\geq 0.90$ ); CFI value = 0.95 ( $\geq 0.90$ ). Furthermore, social media dependency was gauged using the Online Social Network Dependency Scale developed by Thadani and Cheung (2011). This scale encompassed seven dimensions with 25 favorable and unfavorable items. Each item had seven alternative answers ranging from one (strongly disagree) to seven (strongly agree). The composite reliability value obtained was CR = 0.96. The CFA test results uncovered RMSEA = 0.07 ( $\leq 0.08$ ); SRMR = 0.06 ( $\leq 0.1$ ); NFI = 0.93 ( $\geq 0.90$ ); CFI value = 0.96 ( $\geq 0.90$ ).

Subsequently, the measurement of the motive for using social media, i.e., the motive for maintaining existing relationships and the motive for meet new people and socializing, was carried out using both dimension on the Social Media Usage Motives scale (Horzum, 2016). Each motive dimension covered three statement items with five alternative answers with a score range of one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). The composite reliability value obtained for maintaining the existing relationship motive was CR = 0.76, while the composite reliability value obtained for meet new people and socializing motives was CR = 0.70. In addition, confirmatory factor analysis demonstrated the value of RMSEA = 0.08 ( $\leq 0.08$ ); SRMR = 0.09 ( $\leq 0.1$ ); CFI = 0.93 ( $\geq 0.90$ ); NFI value = 0.89 ( $< 0.90$ ). Descriptive statistical analysis utilizing SPSS was then conducted to obtain an overview of participant data in general. Afterward, testing the hypotheses of the relationship between variables employed a structural equation model (SEM) using Lisrel 9.10.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistical analysis results, presenting the minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation values for each variable. Participants generally showed a moderate level of psychological well-being, a relatively high level of self-esteem, a high level of social media dependency, and a motive for maintaining the existing relationship higher than the motive for meet new people and socializing.

**Table 1.**  
Descriptive Statistics of Variables

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Psychological well-being	647	8	100	55.95	15.10
Self-esteem	647	11	40	27.10	4.36
Social media dependency	647	27	175	93.89	26.07
The motive of maintaining the existing relationship (MER)	647	3	15	12.25	1.88
The motive for meet new people and socializing (MNPS)	647	3	15	10.65	1.88

Table 2 shows the bivariate Pearson correlation matrix between the variables. In general, all variables were correlated with each other.

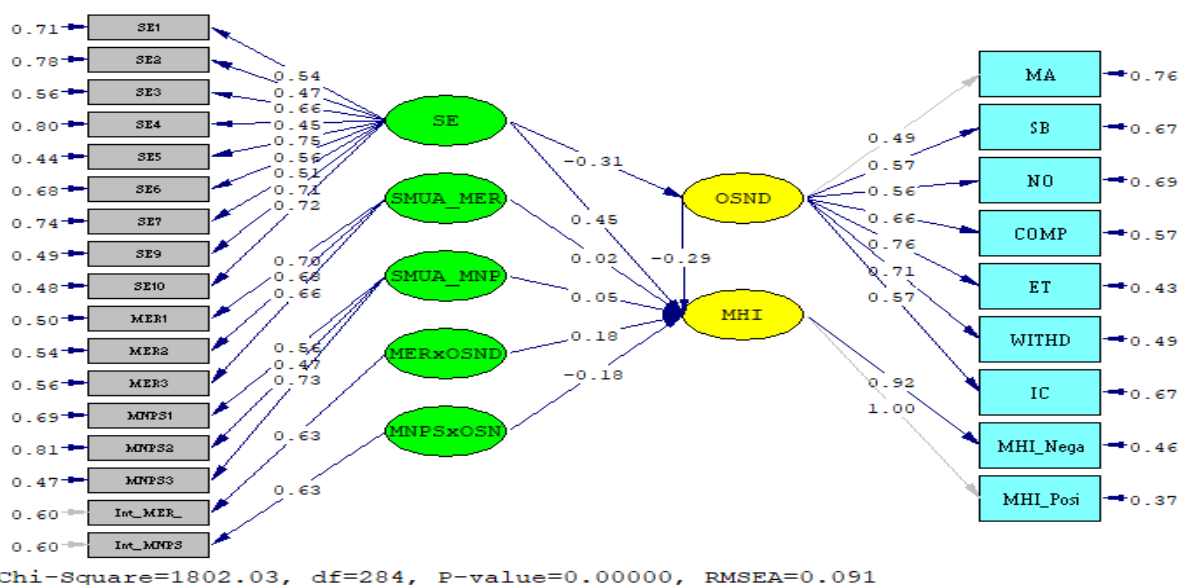


**Table 2.**  
 Pearson's Bivariate Correlation Matrix

Variable	Psychological well-being	Self-esteem	Social media dependency	MER motive	MNPS motive
Psychological well-being	-				
Self-esteem	0.574*	-			
Social media dependency	-0.452*	-0.270*	-		
MER motive	0.066	0.132*	0.112	-	
MNPS motive	-0.025	0.082	0.283*	0.403*	-

Note: MER = Maintaining existing relationship; MNPS = Meet new people and socializing; \*p < 0.01

Data analysis was then carried out using a structural equation model (Figure 1). The results obtained revealed the value of SRMR = 0.09; NFI = 0.86; CFI = 0.88; GFI = 0.82. The results indicate that the data supported the model since it met the criteria for the absolute suitability index, while the relative conformity index was close to the minimum criteria.



Note: SE = Self-esteem; SMUA\_MER = Motive of maintaining the existing relationship; SMUA\_MNPS = Motive for meet new people and socializing; OSND = Social media dependency MHI = Psychological well-being; MERxOSND = Interaction of MER motive and social media dependency variables; MNPSxOSND = Interaction of MNPS motive and social media dependency variables.

**Figure 1.**

SEM analysis of the structural model of psychological well-being of Gen Z adolescents

The analysis results of the hypothesis 1 test indicate that social media dependency played a significant role in mediating the relationship between self-esteem and psychological well-being (t-value = 4.66, where t-value > t-table). The indirect relationship path through social media dependency demonstrates a partial mediation path since the indirect effect value obtained was 0.09 [the multiplication of the path between self-esteem and social media dependency ( $b = -0.31$ ) with the path of social media dependency and psychological well-being ( $b = -0.29$ )], smaller than the direct effect value of  $b = 0.45$ .

Hypothesis 2 also uncovered significant results with  $t$ -value = 2.32, where  $t$ -value >  $t$ -table. It suggests that the motive of maintaining the existing relationship significantly strengthened the relationship between social media dependency and psychological well-being ( $b_{OSND-MHI} = -0.29$ ;  $b_{MER-MHI} = 0.02$ ;  $b_{OSND*MER-MHI} = 0.18$ ). Based on the results obtained, the hypothesis was supported by the data.

Then, the third hypothesis revealed a significant test result with a  $t$ -value = -2.20, where  $t$ -value >  $t$ -table. These results indicate that the motive for meet new people and socializing significantly weakened the relationship between social media dependency and psychological well-being ( $b_{OSND-MHI} = -0.29$ ;  $b_{MNPS-MHI} = 0.05$ ;  $b_{OSND*MNPS-MHI} = -0.18$ ).

Furthermore, the mediation analysis revealed that social media dependency was a significant mediator in the relationship between self-esteem and the psychological well-being of Gen Z adolescents. This path of mediation relationship was partial as the direct effect of self-esteem on the psychological well-being of Gen Z adolescents was more significant than when mediated by social media dependency. Although social media dependency had a smaller effect than self-esteem, it still mediated relationships. In other words, adolescents with higher self-esteem tend to have lower social media dependency, resulting in higher psychological well-being.

The significant relationship between self-esteem and social media dependency has been explained by several previous research results, asserting that self-esteem was negatively correlated with social media dependency or internet addiction behavior (Aydin & Sari, 2011; Lee & Cheung, 2014; Malik & Khan, 2015; Wang et al., 2012). Here, adolescents must maintain or increase their self-esteem by attending and using social media (Lee & Cheung, 2014; Mehdizadeh, 2010). Self-esteem is also crucial in encouraging youth involvement in social media dependency. On the other hand, social media dependency has serious adverse effects on psychological well-being (Andreassen, 2015; Devine & Lloyd, 2012; Kraut et al., 1998; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). The study results by Sampasa-Kanyinga and Lewis (2015) disclosed that daily use of social networks for more than two hours per day was independently associated with low self-assessment of mental health and experiencing psychological stress. The hourly analysis results of social media use in this study also exposed that participants used social media quite intensely (six-seven hours a day).

Meanwhile, the partial mediating relationship in this study proved the role of a more robust direct relationship between self-esteem and psychological well-being. In several studies, high self-esteem was generally closely associated with well-being, life satisfaction, and happiness (Dogan, Totan, & Sapmaz, 2013; Enwere & Mbakwe, 2021; Hwang, Kang, Tak, & Lee, 2015; Poudel, Gurung, & Khanal, 2020). Coopersmith (1967) defines high self-esteem as a positive evaluation of oneself in which positive emotions trigger and build psychological resilience and enhance emotional well-being (Fredrickson, 2001; 2013). Positive self-esteem in adolescents is seen not only as a fundamental feature of mental health but also as a protective factor contributing to better health and positive social behavior. Conversely, poor self-esteem in adolescents can play a crucial role in developing various mental disorders and social problems, such as depression, anxiety, violence, substance abuse, and high-risk behavior (Mann et al., 2004).

This study's results also uncovered that the moderating role of the motive for maintaining existing relationships strengthened the negative relationship between social media dependency and psychological well-being. It is possible because maintaining existing relationships on social media is not easy but requires significant effort, which increases dependency's effect. In this case, context collapse (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014) in social media causes the boundaries that separate group-based online communities to become blurred (Boyd & Heer, 2006). Context collapse has flattened the network into a single context. It makes managing the online identity of individuals

(adolescents) in various networks – which are many and have various kinds of interests – becoming more complicated and challenging for individuals, especially in setting the boundaries of personal territory (privacy) in various online groups with interests and norms respectively (Boyd, 2004; Meyrowitz, 1986).

Moreover, there is a tendency for social media users in Indonesia to ignore the issue of information accessibility (privacy) when they are increasingly using and expressing themselves on social media (Ardi & Maison, 2014). The collapse of multiple social contexts in online situations, the interests of large and disparate groups on social media (such as schoolmates, family, and other communities), and the demand for privacy may allow adolescents to experience difficulties and conflicts in maintaining relationships with existing social networks online. It suggests that they have to present themselves differently depending on the demands of various networks, be it friends from school, family, or other communities. Responding to various demands of a large and diverse group to maintain relationships requires great effort and then allows adolescents to experience tension, pressure, and anxiety (Binder et al., 2009; Brandtzæg et al., 2010), which in turn significantly affecting psychological well-being. The high motive for maintaining social relationships through social media also results in individuals who already tend to use social media excessively having declining psychological well-being since they are required to present themselves with different expectations held by online social networks (school friends, family, or other communities) at the same time.

Nevertheless, the results demonstrated that the moderating role of the motive for meet new people and socializing weakened the negative relationship between social media dependency and psychological well-being. It is possible because interactions through social media with new people are actually facilitated and free from social cues, such as gestures and other nonverbal cues (Nguyen et al., 2012), thereby reducing interaction anxiety. The anxiety-provoking social features and cues typically present in face-to-face interactions are also largely absent online. Additionally, adolescents who lack social skills and are anxious in face-to-face interactions tend to use social media to meet and make new friends (Mckenna & Bargh, 2000). Characteristics of text-based online communication (such as lack of nonverbal cues, e.g., visual and auditory, and anonymity) can facilitate contact with new/foreign people. Individuals can present their ideal selves and express themselves more freely in their new relationships. It impacts decreasing loneliness and depression in users (Valkenburg et al., 2006).

Further, meeting new people online according to their personal preferences may help adolescents with high social anxiety validate themselves or obtain socio-emotional support that they may find challenging in a face-to-face environment. This online communication with new people also makes adolescents feel as though they are free from stress and helps improve their psychological well-being. However, the results revealed that the role of the motive for meet new people in weakening the impact of adolescents' social media dependency on psychological well-being is not without long-term risks. Online interactions with new people who have never met and are considered suitable often cause comfort but are often based on imagination and exaggerated attributions (Walther, 1996) since they are not based on actual knowledge of how the new person behaves in the real world.

## CONCLUSION

This study's results confirmed the role of social media dependency as a mediator of the relationship between self-esteem and psychological well-being. The mediating role of social media dependency was partial, meaning a more substantial relationship exists between self-esteem and



psychological well-being. However, social media dependency cannot be ignored for its role in mediating the relationship between self-esteem and psychological well-being. This finding further verifies the results of previous studies that self-esteem is a crucial factor affecting adolescents' psychological well-being while still paying attention to the role of mediator of social media dependency.

Subsequent results from this study indicate that the role of the motive for using social media, in this case, the motive for maintaining the existing relationship and the motive for meet new people and socializing, was a significant moderator in influencing the relationship between social media dependency and psychological well-being. The two motives had different effects: the motive for maintaining the existing relationship strengthened the negative relationship between social media dependency and psychological well-being, while the meet new people and socializing motive weakened the negative relationship between social media dependency and psychological well-being. Nevertheless, the results related to meet new people and socializing motives in weakening the relationship between social media dependency and psychological well-being are not without risks. The comfort obtained on social media with new people considered suitable is not necessarily directly proportional to the situation to be faced in the long term. Adolescent users may be trapped in unwanted relationships and situations, such as crime, fraud, or other harmful situations.

This study has limitations in taking samples, which were less varied since participants were only limited to formal schools in Mataram City, so they were not sufficiently representative in representing the general characteristics of Gen Z adolescents. Thus, further research is recommended to pay attention to a stricter sample frame (considering quotas with a balanced proportion in demographic factors) to predict results more accurately. Another limitation is that the data collection used a self-report and cross-sectional design, which cannot be used as a solid basis to explain the existence of a causal relationship. In the future, it is necessary to consider using longitudinal research methods and other instruments, such as a behavioral checklist describing the actual use or dependency of social media, to obtain a more in-depth and comprehensive picture of its effect on psychological well-being.

Further, this study's results imply the importance of intervention on self-esteem by understanding adolescents' motives and needs to fulfill when utilizing social media to impact psychological well-being positively. This study's discussion also demonstrates the possible future risks that adolescents can face because the role of the motive for meeting new friends is quite prominent in the relationship between social media dependency and psychological well-being. These risk factors can be mitigated by the authorities (such as psychologists and counselors in schools) by providing an understanding of the psychological processes that make individuals feel comfortable interacting with new people and the impact of uncertainty that may occur in the future if the user does not have sufficient knowledge about his new interaction opponent.

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