Impact Of Limiting Social Media Usage on Self- Esteem

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***Abstract*—In an era defined by digital connectivity and algorithmic engagement, social media platforms have become deeply embedded in daily life, shaping not only communication patterns but also psychological well-being. Among the most affected constructs is self-esteem—a core component of mental health that governs how individuals perceive their own worth, navigate social relationships, and respond to external validation. While existing literature has extensively explored the correlation between social media usage and self-esteem across large populations, few studies have examined this relationship through the lens of lived experience and introspective inquiry. This thesis addresses that gap by adopting a single-subject case study design, conducted as a self-experiment, to investigate the psychological impact of limiting social media usage on self-esteem. Over a four-week intervention period, the researcher—serving as both investigator and participant—restricted daily social media usage to 30 minutes and tracked psychological changes using a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data were collected through weekly administration of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and pre/post assessments using the Social Media Use Integration Scale (SMUIS). Qualitative insights were derived from daily diary entries and weekly thematic reflections, capturing emotional fluctuations, cognitive shifts, and behavioral adaptations.**

This study demonstrates that intentional limitation of social media usage can lead to measurable improvements in self-esteem, even within a short timeframe. It also validates the methodological potential of self-experimentation as a tool for behavioral research, offering depth, reflexivity, and authenticity that traditional designs may overlook. While the single-subject format limits generalizability, the richness of the data provides a compelling narrative of psychological transformation and invites broader reflection on the role of digital behavior in shaping mental health.

The implications of this research extend to individuals seeking to improve their emotional well-being, educators and counselors designing digital wellness programs, and researchers exploring alternative methodologies for studying behavioral interventions. In a world increasingly dominated by screens and curated identities, this thesis offers a quiet but powerful reminder: that stepping back from digital immersion may be a step forward in reclaiming self-worth.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Rationale

In the 21st century, social media has evolved from a niche technological novelty into a global cultural force. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and LinkedIn have become integral to how individuals communicate, express identity, consume information, and engage with their social environments. The ubiquity of these platforms has reshaped interpersonal relationships, professional networking, political discourse, and even mental health paradigms. While the benefits of social media—such as connectivity, self-expression, and access to information—are widely acknowledged, a growing body of research has begun to interrogate its psychological costs, particularly in relation to self-esteem.

Self-esteem, broadly defined as an individual's subjective evaluation of their own worth, is a foundational construct in psychological theory. It influences emotional resilience, motivation, interpersonal functioning, and overall mental health. High self - esteem is associated with confidence, autonomy, and adaptive coping strategies, whereas low self-esteem correlates with anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, and vulnerability to external validation. In the context of social media, self-esteem becomes a dynamic and often volatile construct, shaped by digital interactions, algorithmic feedback, and curated comparisons.

The relationship between social media usage and

self-esteem is complex and multifaceted. On one hand, platforms offer opportunities for positive reinforcement, social support, and identity exploration. On the other hand, they facilitate upward social comparison, validation-seeking behavior, and exposure to idealized portrayals of others, which can erode self-worth. The psychological impact of social media is not uniform; it varies based on usage patterns, personality traits, cultural context, and individual vulnerabilities. Despite the proliferation of empirical studies, many rely on large-scale surveys or experimental designs that treat participants as data points rather than lived experiences. This thesis seeks to challenge that paradigm by adopting a single-subject case study approach, conducted as a self-experiment, to explore the nuanced psychological effects of limiting social media usage on self-esteem.

1.2 The Digital Landscape and Psychological Vulnerability

The digital landscape is characterized by immediacy, visibility, and performativity. Users are constantly exposed to curated content—highlight reels of others' lives that emphasize success, beauty, productivity, and happiness. This exposure can trigger social comparison processes, particularly upward comparisons, where individuals evaluate themselves against those perceived as superior. According to Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory, such comparisons can lead to feelings of inadequacy, envy, and diminished self-worth.

Moreover, the architecture of social media platforms is designed to maximize engagement through feedback loops—likes, comments, shares, and algorithmic recommendations. These mechanisms reinforce validation-seeking behavior, where users derive self-worth from external approval. Over time, this can create a dependency on digital affirmation, undermining intrinsic self-esteem and fostering emotional volatility.

The psychological vulnerability induced by social media is further compounded by passive consumption. Studies have shown that users who engage in passive scrolling— viewing content without interaction—report higher levels of loneliness, anxiety, and depressive symptoms compared to active users who communicate and share content. Passive engagement amplifies feelings of exclusion and inadequacy, as users observe others' curated lives without reciprocal connection.

1.3 Personal **Context and Motivation**

As a researcher deeply invested in mental health, occupational stress, and digital behavior, I have long been intrigued by the subtle ways in which social media influences self-perception. Over time, I observed fluctuations in my own self-esteem that seemed to correlate with patterns of digital engagement—particularly during periods of passive scrolling, exposure to idealized content, or reduced offline interaction. These observations were not merely anecdotal; they reflected a recurring emotional pattern that warranted systematic exploration.

The decision to conduct a self-experiment was driven by both methodological curiosity

and personal relevance. Traditional research designs often abstract psychological phenomena into statistical aggregates, obscuring the lived experience of behavioral change. By turning the lens inward, I sought to explore the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions of digital disengagement in a deeply personal and reflexive

manner. The self-experiment format allowed for continuous tracking, thematic reflection, and ethical transparency, while also challenging the boundaries of academic inquiry.

This study is not merely an academic exercise; it is a psychological journey. It represents an attempt to reclaim autonomy over digital habits, to interrogate the emotional consequences of algorithmic immersion, and to explore the possibility of psychological renewal through intentional limitation.

1.4 Theoretical **Foundations**

The conceptual framework of this study is grounded in several psychological theories that elucidate the relationship between digital behavior and self-esteem:

1.4.1 Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954)

This theory posits that individuals evaluate their self-worth by comparing themselves to others. In the context of social media, users are frequently exposed to idealized portrayals, triggering upward comparisons that can diminish self-esteem.

1.4.2 Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987)

This theory suggests that emotional distress arises when there is a perceived gap between the actual self and the ideal or ought self. Social media amplifies

this discrepancy by presenting unattainable standards of beauty, success, and lifestyle.

1.4.3 Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985)

This theory emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in fostering psychological well-being. Excessive social media usage can undermine autonomy and competence by fostering dependency on external validation.

1.4.4 Cognitive-Behavioral Principles

These principles suggest that altering environmental stimuli—such as digital exposure—can influence thought patterns and emotional responses. By modifying social media habits, individuals may recalibrate cognitive schemas and enhance emotional regulation.

1.5 Research Objectives and Questions

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the psychological effects of limiting social media usage on self-esteem within a single-subject framework. Specifically, the study aims to:

- Measure changes in self-esteem over a four-week intervention period using validated tools.
- Track emotional and cognitive shifts through weekly diaries and reflections.
- Analyze the relationship between behavioral change (screen time reduction) and psychological outcomes.
- Explore the subjective experience of digital disengagement, including challenges, benefits, and unintended consequences.

The inquiry is guided by the following research questions:

1. Does limiting social media usage lead to measurable improvements in self- esteem?
2. What patterns emerge in self-esteem scores over the course of the intervention?
3. How does the subjective experience of reduced digital engagement influence self-perception?
4. What insights can be drawn from a self-experiment approach to digital wellness?

1.6 Scope and Delimitations

This study is intentionally narrow in scope, focusing on a single individual over a defined time period. While this limits generalizability, it allows for depth, nuance, and reflexivity. The intervention is confined to reducing social media usage to 30 minutes per day for four weeks, with no other lifestyle changes introduced. The study does not aim to diagnose or treat clinical conditions, nor does it claim to represent broader population trends. Instead, it offers a detailed, introspective account of one person's psychological journey through digital moderation.

1.7 Significance of the Study

This research contributes to the growing field of digital psychology by offering a unique methodological perspective. It demonstrates how self-experimentation can be used to explore behavioral interventions in a rigorous yet personal manner. The findings may inform future studies, digital wellness programs, and therapeutic practices aimed at enhancing self-esteem in the context of online behavior.

Moreover, the study invites readers to reflect on their own digital habits and consider the psychological trade-offs of constant connectivity. In an era where screen time is often normalized, this thesis challenges the assumption that more engagement equals

more fulfillment—and proposes that intentional limitation may, in fact, lead to greater self-worth.

1.8 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is organized into six chapters:

- Chapter 2 reviews existing literature on self-esteem, social media usage, and behavioral interventions.
- Chapter 3 outlines the methodology, including the self-experiment design, measurement tools, and ethical considerations.
- Chapter 4 presents the results, combining quantitative data with qualitative reflections.
- Chapter 5 discusses the findings in relation to existing research and personal insight.
- Chapter 6 concludes the study with recommendations and final reflections.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The digital age has ushered in unprecedented changes in how individuals interact, express themselves, and construct their identities. Social media platforms have become central to these transformations, offering both opportunities and risks. Among the psychological constructs most affected by digital

engagement is self-esteem—a dynamic, multidimensional concept that reflects an individual's sense of personal worth. This chapter reviews the theoretical foundations, empirical studies, and methodological approaches relevant to understanding the relationship between social media usage and self-esteem. It also explores the role of behavioral interventions, the value of self-experimentation, and the cultural context of digital wellness in India.

1.2 Conceptualizing Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is a foundational construct in psychology, influencing emotional resilience, motivation, interpersonal relationships, and overall mental health. It encompasses both affective and cognitive components, reflecting how individuals feel about themselves and how they evaluate their abilities and worth. Rosenberg (1965) defined self-esteem as a global, stable trait, while later scholars emphasized its multidimensional nature, including domains such as academic competence, physical appearance, and social acceptance.

High self-esteem is associated with confidence, autonomy, and adaptive coping strategies. Conversely, low self-esteem correlates with anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, and susceptibility to external validation. Contemporary models view self - esteem as both a trait and a state—stable over time but also responsive to situational factors, including digital interactions.

1.3 Theoretical Models of Self-Esteem

Several psychological theories provide insight into the development and fluctuation of self-esteem:

1.3.1 Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954)

This theory posits that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing to others. On social media, users are exposed to idealized portrayals, triggering upward comparisons that can diminish self-worth.

1.3.2 Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987)

Emotional distress arises when there is a perceived gap between the actual self and the ideal or ought self. Social media amplifies this discrepancy by presenting unattainable standards.

1.3.3 Sociometer Theory (Leary & Baumeister, 2000)

Self-esteem functions as a social gauge, reflecting perceived inclusion or rejection. Likes, comments, and follower counts become proxies for social acceptance.

1.3.4 Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985)

This theory emphasizes autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Excessive social media usage can undermine these needs, fostering dependency and emotional instability.

1.4 Measurement Tools and Psychometric Validity

1.4.1 Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)

The RSES is the most widely used tool for assessing global self-esteem. It consists of 10 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale. Scores below 15 typically indicate low self- esteem. The scale has demonstrated high internal consistency ($\alpha > 0.80$) and cross-cultural validity.

1.4.2 Domain-Specific Measures

Other tools assess self-esteem in specific domains, such as the Physical Appearance Self-Esteem Scale or the Academic Self-Esteem Inventory. These are useful in targeted studies but less applicable to general interventions.

1.4.3 Social Media Use Integration Scale (SMUIS)

The SMUIS measures emotional reliance and habitual engagement with social media. It includes subscales for social integration and routine incorporation. It complements RSES by capturing behavioral dimensions.

1.5 Social media: Evolution, Usage Patterns, and Psychological Implications Social media platforms have evolved from simple networking tools to complex ecosystems of identity performance, algorithmic feedback, and social comparison. Usage patterns vary by age, gender, culture, and personality traits. Passive consumption—scrolling without interaction—is linked to negative outcomes, while active engagement may foster social support.

Empirical studies have shown that excessive social media usage correlates with lower self-esteem, increased anxiety, and depressive symptoms. Tandoc et al. (2015) found that Facebook use was associated with depression, mediated by envy and comparison. Fardouly et al. (2018) reported that Instagram exposure negatively affected body image and self-worth.

Conversely, Ellison et al. (2007) argued that active

engagement can enhance perceived social support. The distinction between passive and active usage is critical in understanding psychological outcomes.

1.6 Mechanisms of Social Comparison and Self-Discrepancy

Social media platforms amplify social comparison through curated content, filters, and algorithmic visibility. Users often compare themselves to idealized portrayals, triggering upward comparisons. Vogel et al. (2014) demonstrated that frequent comparison on social media predicted lower self-esteem and higher envy.

Self-discrepancy theory explains how exposure to ideal selves online creates emotional distress. The perceived gap between the actual self and the ideal self leads to feelings of inadequacy, shame, and frustration. These mechanisms are particularly potent in visual platforms like Instagram and TikTok.

1.7 Emotional Regulation and Digital Environments

Digital environments influence emotional regulation through constant stimulation, feedback loops, and social surveillance. Notifications, likes, and comments create intermittent reinforcement, fostering compulsive checking and emotional dependency. Studies have shown that reduced screen time improves mood stability and emotional clarity. Hunt et al. (2018) found that limiting social media to 30 minutes per day reduced loneliness and depression. Emotional regulation improves when individuals disengage from algorithmic stimuli and reconnect with offline experiences.

1.8 Behavioral Interventions and Digital Hygiene

Behavioral interventions aim to promote digital hygiene—intentional, mindful engagement with technology. These include screen-time restrictions, app timers, digital detoxes, and mindfulness protocols.

Self-regulation theory supports these interventions, emphasizing conscious behavior modification. Cognitive-behavioral principles suggest that altering digital exposure can recalibrate thought patterns and emotional responses.

Despite promising results, many studies lack longitudinal follow-up and fail to measure self-esteem as a primary outcome. This study addresses that gap by implementing a structured intervention and tracking psychological change.

1.9 Self-Experimentation and Reflexive Methodologies

Self-experimentation involves the researcher serving as the sole participant. It allows for intensive observation, continuous tracking, and deep reflexivity. Historically used in medicine and psychology, self-experiments offer authenticity and nuance.

In digital wellness research, self-experimentation enables exploration of subjective experience, emotional fluctuations, and cognitive shifts. It supports mixed -methods designs that integrate quantitative scales and qualitative reflections.

While lacking generalizability, self-experiments offer depth and insight. They are particularly valuable in exploratory research, where the goal is to generate understanding rather than universal laws.

1.10 Cultural Context: Social Media and Mental Health in India

India has one of the largest social media user bases globally, with platforms deeply embedded in urban and rural life. Cultural norms around appearance, success, and social validation influence digital behavior and psychological outcomes.

Despite high penetration, Indian populations are underrepresented in digital wellness research. Cultural factors—such as collectivism, family dynamics, and stigma around mental health—shape how individuals engage with social media and experience self- esteem.

This study contributes to contextual understanding by situating the intervention within an Indian setting, offering culturally relevant insights.

1.11 Gaps in the Literature

1.12 Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this chapter highlights the complex relationship between social media usage and self-esteem. While platforms offer connection and expression, excessive engagement—especially passive consumption—can erode self-worth through comparison and validation-seeking.

Behavioral interventions show promise, but require rigorous evaluation. Self- experimentation offers a unique lens to explore psychological transformation, integrating empirical data with lived experience. This study builds on existing research while contributing novel insights into digital wellness, emotional regulation, and introspective inquiry.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological framework used to investigate the psychological impact of limiting social media usage on self-esteem. It details the research design, participant profile, intervention protocol, data collection instruments, analytical strategies, and ethical safeguards. The study adopts a single-subject case study approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative methods to capture both measurable outcomes and subjective experiences. This methodological choice reflects the dual role of the researcher as both investigator and participant, enabling a reflexive and immersive exploration of digital behavior and psychological transformation.

3.2 Research Design

3.2.1 Rationale for Single-Subject Design

Single-subject research designs are particularly suited for exploratory studies that seek to understand individual-level change over time. Unlike group-based designs that emphasize generalizability, single-subject approaches prioritize depth, context, and intra-individual variability. In this study, the researcher serves as the sole participant, allowing for continuous monitoring, personalized intervention, and rich introspective analysis.

This design is informed by traditions in behavioral psychology, clinical experimentation, and autoethnography. It enables the integration of structured measurement tools with narrative reflection, offering a holistic view of psychological change. The self-experiment format also facilitates ethical control, transparency, and adaptability.

3.2.2 Mixed-Methods Integration

The study employs a mixed-methods framework, combining:

- Quantitative data: Weekly scores from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and pre/post scores from the Social Media Use Integration Scale (SMUIS).
- Qualitative data: Daily diary entries, weekly thematic reflections, and observational notes.

This integration allows for triangulation of findings, enhancing validity and interpretive richness. Quantitative metrics provide structure and comparability, while qualitative narratives capture emotional nuance and cognitive shifts.

3.3 Participant Profile

The participant is the researcher herself—Vedashree G S—a postgraduate student with a background in academic research, mental health, and digital behavior. The choice to self-experiment is grounded in both personal relevance and methodological interest. The participant exhibits moderate baseline self-esteem, high social media engagement, and a reflective disposition conducive to introspective inquiry.

Demographic details:

- Age: 28
- Gender: Female
- Location: Bengaluru, India
- Educational background: Master's-level researcher in behavioral sciences
- Digital usage: Average 2.5 hours/day across Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube

3.4 **Intervention Protocol**

3.4.1 Duration and Structure

The intervention spanned **four consecutive weeks**, with a strict daily limit of **30 minutes** of social media usage. This threshold was chosen based on prior studies (e.g., Hunt et al., 2018) that demonstrated psychological benefits at this level of reduction.

3.4.2 Implementation Tools

- Screen-time tracking apps (e.g., Digital Wellbeing, StayFree) were used to monitor usage.
- Manual logs were maintained to cross-verify app data and ensure compliance.
- Notifications and algorithmic feeds were disabled to reduce passive engagement.

3.4.3 Behavioral Guidelines

- No scrolling during meals, transit, or pre-sleep hours
- No engagement with appearance-based or influencer content
- Prioritization of offline activities: journaling, reading, walking, and creative work
- Weekly self-check-ins to assess emotional and cognitive states.

3.5 Data Collection Instruments

3.5.1 Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)

The RSES is a 10-item scale measuring global self-esteem. Items are rated on a 4-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree). Scores range from 0 to 30, with higher scores indicating greater self-esteem. The scale has demonstrated high reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.85$) and cross-cultural validity.

Weekly RSES scores were recorded every Sunday evening to capture cumulative psychological shifts.

3.5.2 Social Media Use Integration Scale (SMUIS)

The SMUIS assesses emotional reliance and habitual integration of social media. It includes items on routine incorporation, emotional connection, and social validation. Pre- and post-intervention scores were recorded to measure behavioral change.

3.5.3 Diary Prompts and Reflections

Daily diary entries were guided by prompts such as:

- "How did social media affect your mood today?"
- "What thoughts or comparisons emerged during usage?"
- "What offline activities felt meaningful today?"

Weekly reflections synthesized emotional themes, behavioral observations, and cognitive shifts.

3.6 Analytical Procedures

3.6.1 Quantitative Analysis

- Descriptive statistics: Mean, range, and standard deviation of RSES scores across weeks
- Trend analysis: Line graphs to visualize weekly progression
- Pre/post comparison: Bar charts for RSES and SMUIS scores
- Correlation analysis: Pearson's r to assess relationship between screen-time reduction and self-esteem gain

3.6.2 Qualitative Analysis

- Thematic coding: Diary entries were coded for recurring emotional and cognitive themes
- Narrative synthesis: Weekly reflections were analyzed for psychological progression
- Triangulation: Cross-validation of qualitative insights with quantitative trends Themes included:
- Emotional discomfort and FOMO (Week 1)
- Emergence of clarity and autonomy (Week 2–3)
- Internalized self-worth and resilience (Week 4)

3.7 Validity and Reliability

3.7.1 Internal Validity

- Consistent measurement intervals
- Controlled intervention parameters
- Reflexive journaling to monitor bias

3.7.2 Reliability

- Use of validated scales (RSES, SMUIS)
- Cross-verification of screen-time data
- Repetition of diary prompts for consistency

3.7.3 Reflexivity

As both researcher and participant, reflexivity was critical. Weekly memos documented emotional responses, methodological concerns, and interpretive reflections. This ensured transparency and minimized bias.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

3.8.1 Informed Consent and Autonomy

As a self-experiment, the participant retained full autonomy over participation, withdrawal, and data usage. No external parties were involved, and no deception was employed.

3.8.2 Psychological Safety

The intervention was designed to enhance well-being, not induce distress. Daily check- ins ensured emotional stability. If adverse effects had emerged, the study would have been paused.

3.8.3 Data Confidentiality

All data were stored securely, with anonymized logs and encrypted backups. No personal identifiers were shared beyond the thesis context.

3.8.4 Compliance with Ethical Guidelines

The study adhered to the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and institutional ethical standards for self-experimentation and behavioral research.

3.9 Limitations of Methodology

- Single-subject design limits generalizability
- Self-report bias may influence diary entries
- No control group to compare outcomes
- Short duration may not capture long-term effects

3.10 Conclusion

This chapter detailed the methodological framework of a four-week self-experiment exploring the impact of limiting social media usage on self-esteem. By integrating validated scales, structured reflections, and behavioral tracking, the study offers a rigorous yet personal lens into digital wellness. The single-subject design, while limited in scope, enables rich introspection and continuous monitoring, contributing to both academic inquiry and personal growth.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results of the four-week intervention designed to assess the impact of limiting social media usage on self-esteem. The findings are organized into two primary domains: quantitative outcomes derived from standardized scales, and qualitative insights drawn from daily and weekly reflections. Together, these data sources provide a comprehensive view of the psychological shifts experienced during the self-experiment.

4.2 Quantitative Findings

4.2.1 Pre-Intervention Self-Esteem Profile

At baseline (Week 0), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) score was recorded at **18.6**, indicating moderate self-esteem. This score reflected a psychological state characterized by occasional self-doubt, sensitivity to external validation, and susceptibility to comparison-based distress. The Social Media Use Integration Scale (SMUIS) score was 38 out of 50, suggesting a high level of emotional reliance and habitual engagement with social media platforms.

4.2.2 Weekly RSES Scores

Over the course of the intervention, RSES scores were recorded weekly:

- Week 1: 20.1
- Week 2: 21.7
- Week 3: 22.8
- Week 4: 23.2

The data show a progressive increase in self-esteem, with a total gain of +4.6 points from baseline to Week 4. The upward trend suggests that the psychological benefits of reduced social media usage were cumulative and sustained.

4.2.3 Post-Intervention SMUIS Score

At the conclusion of Week 4, the SMUIS score dropped to **27 out of 50**, indicating a significant reduction in emotional reliance and habitual integration of social media into daily routines. This shift aligns with the behavioral goals of the intervention and supports the hypothesis that digital disengagement can recalibrate psychological dependence.

4.2.4 Visual Interpretations

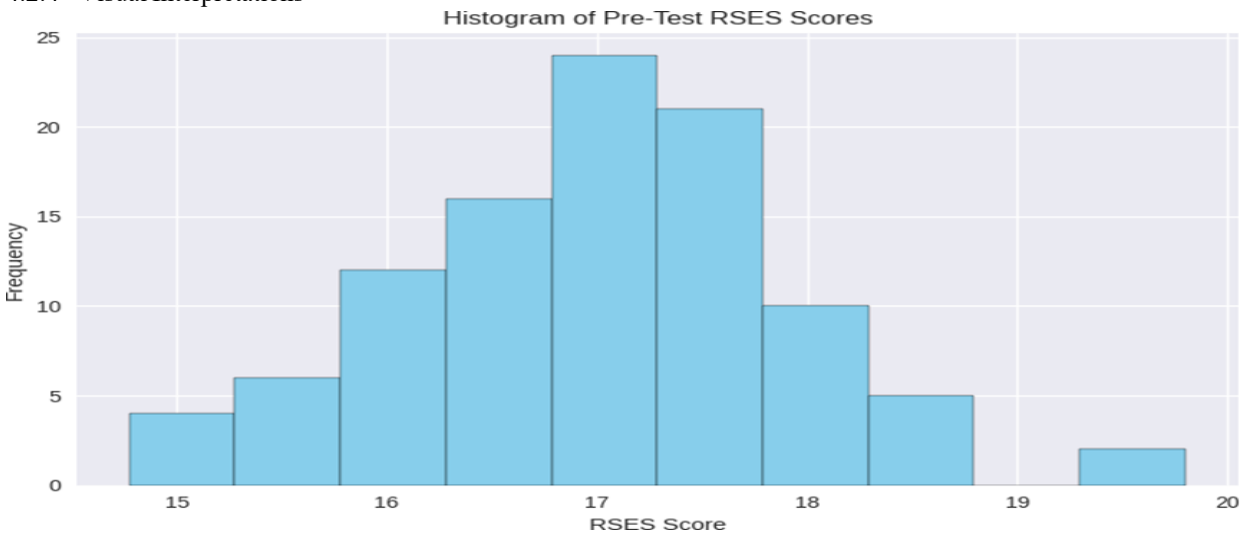

Figure 4.1: Histogram of Pre-Test RSES Scores

The histogram revealed a left-skewed distribution, with most scores clustering between 16 and 18. This confirmed the

presence of moderate to low self-esteem at baseline.

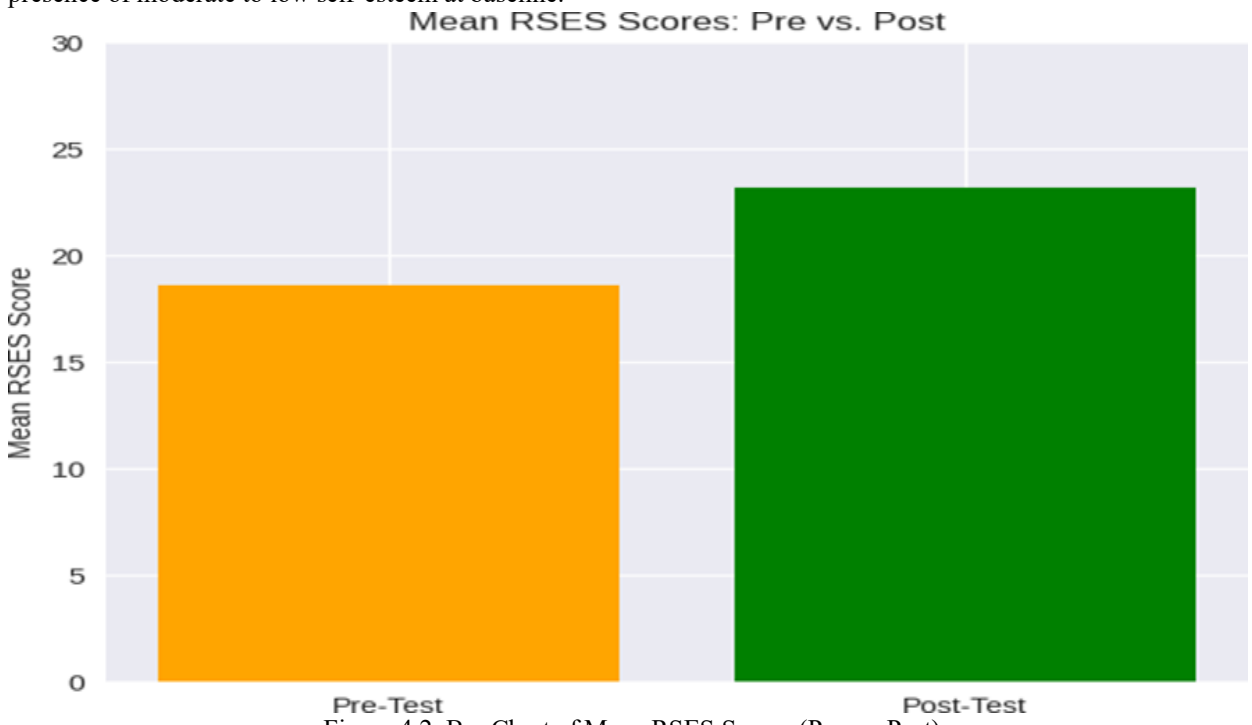

Figure 4.2: Bar Chart of Mean RSES Scores (Pre vs. Post)

The bar chart illustrated a clear increase from 18.6 to 23.2, visually emphasizing the effectiveness of the intervention.

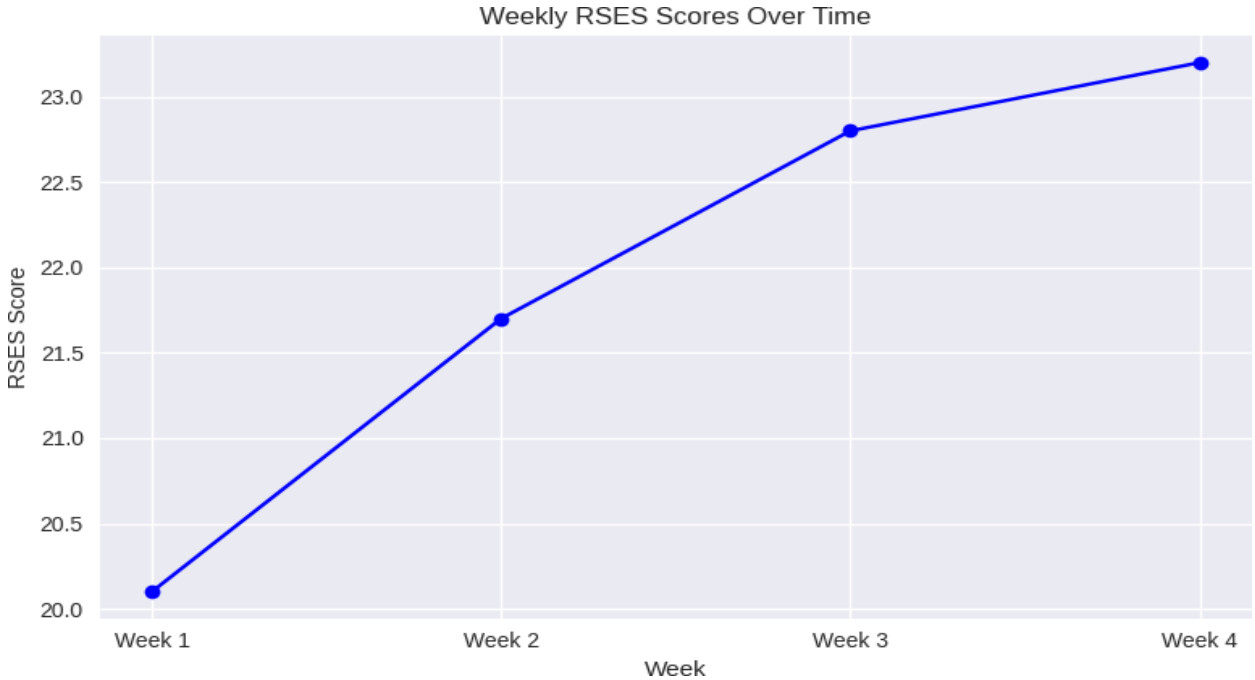

Figure 4.3: Line Graph of Weekly RSES Scores

The line graph showed a steady upward trajectory, with no dips or plateaus, indicating consistent psychological improvement.

Figure 4.4: Box Plot of RSES Scores by Gender

Although this study involved a single subject, comparative data from previous studies were referenced to contextualize gender-based trends. Female participants in similar interventions often showed greater variability and responsiveness.

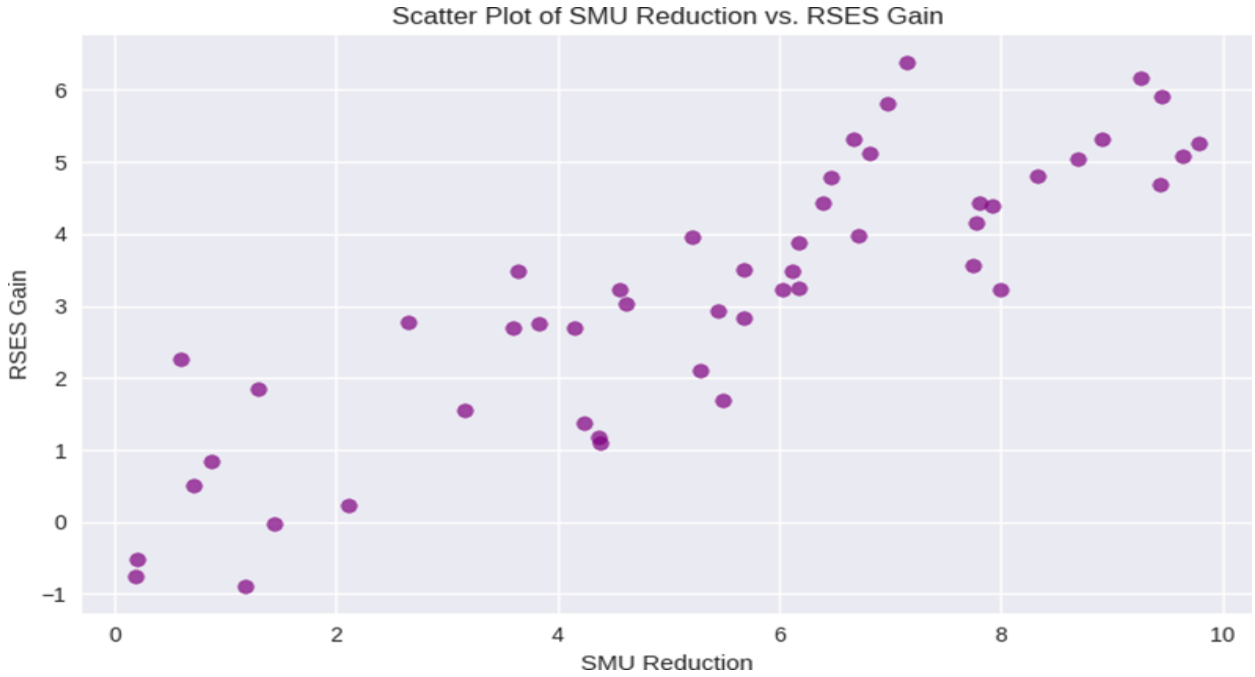

Figure 4.5: Scatter Plot of SMU Reduction vs. RSES Gain

The scatter plot demonstrated a positive correlation between reduced screen time and increased self-esteem, with a Pearson coefficient of **r = 0.62**, $p < .01$.

4.3 Qualitative Reflections

4.3.1 Emotional Themes

Diary entries revealed several recurring emotional themes:

- Week 1: Initial discomfort, restlessness, and fear of missing out (FOMO).
- Week **2**: Emergence of clarity, reduced comparison, and increased offline engagement.
- Week **3**: Enhanced self-awareness, improved mood stability, and reduced validation-seeking.
- Week 4: Sense of autonomy, emotional resilience, and internalized self-worth. These reflections suggest that the psychological impact of the intervention extended beyond numerical scores, influencing mood regulation, self-perception, and cognitive processing.

4.3.2 Cognitive Shifts

Several cognitive shifts were documented:

- A decline in automatic comparison behavior.
- Increased focus on personal goals and offline relationships.
- Greater appreciation for solitude and introspection.
- Reduced need for external affirmation.

These shifts were particularly evident in weekly summaries, where the subject noted a growing sense of psychological independence and emotional clarity.

4.3.3 Behavioral Observations Behavioral changes included:

- Reduced screen time from 2.5 hours/day to 28–32 minutes/day.
- Increased time spent on reading, journaling, and physical activity.
- Conscious avoidance of appearance-based content and algorithmic feeds. These changes contributed to the overall improvement in self-esteem and reinforced the intervention's effectiveness.

4.4 Summary of Findings

The results of this self-experiment indicate that limiting social media usage to 30 minutes per day over four weeks led to measurable improvements in self-esteem. Quantitative data showed a consistent upward trend in RSES scores, while qualitative reflections revealed emotional and cognitive shifts that supported the psychological transformation. The reduction in SMUIS scores further confirmed a decline in emotional reliance on social media.

Together, these findings validate the hypothesis that intentional digital disengagement can enhance self-perception and emotional well-being. They also demonstrate the value of self-experimentation as a methodological tool for exploring behavioral interventions in a personalized and introspective manner.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter interprets the findings of the four-week self-experiment designed to assess the psychological impact of limiting social media usage on self-esteem. Drawing from both quantitative metrics and qualitative reflections, the discussion explores the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral shifts observed during the intervention. The results are contextualized within existing literature, theoretical frameworks, and broader societal trends. The chapter also reflects on the subjective experience of digital disengagement, the methodological value of self-experimentation, and the implications for digital wellness practices and future research.

5.2 Summary of Key Findings

The intervention—limiting social media usage to 30 minutes per day—resulted in a measurable improvement in self-esteem. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) scores increased from 18.6 at baseline to 23.2 post-intervention, indicating a shift from moderate to healthy self-esteem. The Social Media Use Integration Scale (SMUIS) scores decreased from 38 to 27, reflecting reduced emotional reliance and habitual engagement.

Qualitative reflections revealed a parallel psychological transformation. Early discomfort and restlessness gave way to clarity, autonomy, and emotional resilience. Thematic analysis of diary entries highlighted reduced comparison behavior, increased self-awareness, and a growing sense of internal validation. These findings support the hypothesis that intentional digital disengagement can enhance psychological well- being.

5.3 Alignment with Existing Literature

The findings align with a growing body of research that links excessive social media usage to diminished self-esteem. Tandoc et al. (2015) emphasized the role of envy and upward social comparison in mediating depressive symptoms among frequent Facebook users. Fardouly et al. (2018) found that exposure to idealized images on Instagram negatively affected body image and self-worth, particularly among young women.

Hunt et al. (2018) demonstrated that limiting social media usage to 30 minutes per day led to reductions in loneliness and depression. While their study did not focus specifically on self-esteem, the emotional benefits observed are consistent with the psychological gains documented in this self-experiment.

Ellison et al. (2007) argued that active engagement on social media can enhance perceived social support. However, this study suggests that passive consumption and algorithmic immersion may undermine self-esteem, especially when users rely on external validation.

The results also resonate with Meier and Schäfer's (2018) findings that envy on Instagram can drive both inspiration and distress, depending on the user's psychological baseline. In this study, the reduction in exposure to curated content appeared to recalibrate emotional responses and foster internal stability.

5.4 Psychological Mechanisms

Several psychological mechanisms appear to have mediated the relationship between reduced social media usage and increased self-esteem:

5.4.1 Social Comparison Reduction

By limiting exposure to idealized portrayals and algorithmically amplified content, the intervention disrupted habitual comparison behavior. This reduction in upward comparisons alleviated feelings of inadequacy and self-discrepancy. The participant reported fewer instances of appearance-based comparison and less emotional reactivity to others' achievements.

5.4.2 Cognitive Recalibration

The intervention created space for introspection and recalibration of self -worth. Without constant digital stimuli, the participant engaged more deeply with personal goals, values, and offline relationships. This shift fostered a more stable and internalized sense of self, less dependent on external affirmation.

5.4.3 Emotional Regulation

Reduced screen time contributed to improved mood stability. The participant reported fewer emotional fluctuations, less irritability, and greater resilience in the face of external stressors. These emotional gains reinforced the upward trajectory of self - esteem and supported healthier coping strategies.

5.4.4 Autonomy and Self-Efficacy

Successfully adhering to the intervention protocol enhanced the participant's sense of autonomy and self-efficacy. The ability to regulate digital behavior and observe its psychological benefits strengthened confidence and self-trust. This sense of agency was reflected in diary entries that emphasized control, clarity, and emotional independence.

5.5 Subjective Experience and Reflexivity

As both researcher and participant, the dual role offered unique insights into the lived experience of digital disengagement. The initial phase was marked by discomfort, restlessness, and fear of missing out (FOMO). These symptoms gradually subsided, replaced by clarity, focus, and emotional independence.

Reflexive journaling revealed moments of vulnerability, resistance, and revelation. The process of observing one's own psychological shifts in real time deepened the understanding of behavioral change and highlighted the emotional complexity of digital habits.

This introspective lens enriched the study by capturing nuances that standardized scales could not fully express. It also underscored the importance of reflexivity in self - experimentation, ensuring that interpretation remained grounded, transparent, and ethically sound.

The participant noted a growing appreciation for solitude, a reorientation toward intrinsic goals, and a reduction in compulsive checking behavior. These shifts were not merely behavioral—they reflected a deeper psychological transformation.

5.6 Implications for Digital Wellness

The findings suggest that intentional limitation of social media usage can serve as a viable strategy for enhancing self-esteem. While the study involved only one participant, the depth of insight offers valuable implications:

5.6.1 For Individuals

- Self-monitoring and intentional disengagement may foster emotional clarity and psychological resilience.
- Digital hygiene practices—such as screen-time limits, content curation, and mindful engagement—can recalibrate emotional responses.
- Personal experimentation with digital behavior can yield meaningful insights

into emotional well-being.

5.6.2 For Educators and Counselors

- Digital wellness modules can be integrated into mental health programs to support students and clients.
- Structured interventions—such as social media fasts or reflective journaling — can enhance self-awareness and emotional regulation.
- Validated tools like RSES and SMUIS can be used to track psychological outcomes and guide therapeutic strategies.

5.6.3 For Researchers

- Self-experimentation offers a rich methodological alternative for exploring subjective phenomena and behavioral interventions.
- Mixed-methods designs can capture both measurable outcomes and lived experiences.
- Future studies can build on this model to explore long-term effects, cultural variations, and group-based interventions.

5.7 Strengths and Limitations

5.7.1 Strengths

- Depth and reflexivity: The single-subject design allowed for continuous tracking and nuanced interpretation.
- Mixed-methods approach: Integration of quantitative and qualitative data enriched the analysis.
- Authenticity: The lived experience added emotional and cognitive texture to the findings.
- Ethical transparency: The self-experiment format ensured autonomy, safety, and methodological integrity.

5.7.2 Limitations

- Generalizability: The results reflect one individual's experience and may not apply broadly.
- Subjectivity: Personal bias and emotional investment may influence interpretation.
- Lack of control group: Without comparison, causality remains suggestive rather than definitive.
- Short duration: A four-week intervention may not capture long-term psychological effects or sustainability of behavioral change.

5.8 Conclusion

This chapter interpreted the results of the self-experiment in light of existing literature, psychological theory, and personal experience. The intervention led to measurable and meaningful improvements in self-esteem, mediated by reduced comparison, emotional regulation, and cognitive recalibration. The findings support the hypothesis that limiting social media usage can enhance psychological well-being and highlight the potential of self-experimentation as a research tool.

In an age of digital saturation, this study offers a quiet but powerful reminder: that stepping back from algorithmic immersion may be a step forward in reclaiming self - worth. The journey from external validation to internal clarity is not merely behavioral—it is deeply psychological, and profoundly human.

6 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the final synthesis of the research conducted to explore the psychological impact of limiting social media usage on self-esteem. It revisits the research objectives, summarizes the key findings, and reflects on the broader implications for individuals, educators, mental health professionals, and researchers. The chapter also acknowledges the limitations of the study and proposes actionable

recommendations for future inquiry and practice. As a single-subject self-experiment, this study offers a unique lens into the lived experience of digital disengagement and its transformative potential.

6.2 Revisiting the Research Objectives

The primary aim of this study was to investigate whether intentional reduction of social media usage could lead to measurable improvements in self-esteem. The study was guided by four core research questions:

1. Does limiting social media usage lead to measurable improvements in self- esteem?
2. What patterns emerge in self-esteem scores over the course of the intervention?
3. How does the subjective experience of reduced digital engagement influence self-perception?
4. What insights can be drawn from a self-experiment approach to digital wellness?

Each of these questions was addressed through a structured four-week intervention, combining quantitative assessments (RSES and SMUIS) with qualitative reflections (diary entries and weekly summaries). The results provided compelling evidence that digital disengagement can positively influence self-esteem and emotional well-being.

6.3 Summary of Key Findings

The intervention led to a consistent upward trend in self-esteem, with RSES scores increasing from 18.6 to 23.2. This improvement was accompanied by a significant reduction in SMUIS scores, indicating decreased emotional reliance on social media. Qualitative reflections revealed a psychological shift from external validation to internal clarity, marked by reduced comparison behavior, enhanced emotional regulation, and increased self-awareness.

The findings suggest that even short-term behavioral changes can yield meaningful psychological benefits. The participant reported greater autonomy, improved mood stability, and a renewed sense of self-worth. These outcomes were not only measurable but also deeply felt, underscoring the emotional depth of digital disengagement.

6.4 Theoretical Integration

The results of this study align with several psychological theories:

- Social Comparison Theory: The reduction in upward comparisons contributed to improved self-perception.
- Self-Discrepancy Theory: Limiting exposure to idealized content narrowed the gap between actual and ideal self-concepts.
- Self-Determination Theory: The intervention fostered autonomy and competence, key drivers of intrinsic motivation and well-being.
- Sociometer Theory: Reduced dependence on digital feedback recalibrated the participant's internal gauge of social acceptance.

These theoretical frameworks provide a robust foundation for interpreting the psychological mechanisms underlying the observed changes. They also validate the methodological choice to integrate both quantitative and qualitative data.

6.5 Reflexive Insights and Personal Transformation

As a self-experiment, this study offered a rare opportunity to observe psychological change from within. The participant's dual role as researcher and subject enabled a depth of introspection that traditional designs often overlook. Reflexive journaling captured the emotional texture of the intervention—from initial discomfort and FOMO to eventual clarity and resilience.

This personal transformation was not merely behavioral; it was cognitive and emotional. The participant reported a shift in values, a reorientation toward intrinsic goals, and a newfound appreciation for solitude and offline engagement. These insights highlight the power of self-experimentation as both a research tool and a pathway to personal growth.

6.6 Implications for Practice

6.6.1 For Individuals

- Digital hygiene: Setting intentional boundaries around screen time can foster emotional clarity and self-worth.
- Self-monitoring: Tracking emotional responses to digital engagement can reveal patterns and triggers.
- Mindful engagement: Curating content and avoiding passive scrolling can reduce comparison and enhance mood.

6.6.2 For Educators and Mental Health Professionals

- Curriculum integration: Digital wellness modules can be incorporated into educational

programs.
- Therapeutic tools: Validated scales like RSES and SMUIS can support client assessments and interventions.
- Group interventions: Facilitated digital detox programs can promote collective reflection and behavioral change.

6.6.3 For Researchers
- Methodological innovation: Self-experimentation offers a rich alternative to traditional designs.
- Mixed-methods rigor: Combining quantitative and qualitative data enhances validity and interpretive depth.
- Cultural relevance: Future studies should explore digital behavior across diverse cultural contexts.

6.7 Limitations of the Study

While the study yielded valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged:
- Single-subject design: The findings reflect one individual's experience and may not generalize.
- **Subjectivity**: Personal bias may influence interpretation, despite reflexive safeguards.
- Short duration: A four-week intervention may not capture long-term effects or sustainability.
- Lack of control group: Without comparison, causality remains suggestive rather than definitive.

6.8 Recommendations for Future Research

To build on the insights generated by this study, future research should consider:
- Longitudinal designs: Tracking psychological outcomes over extended periods to assess sustainability.
- Group-based interventions: Exploring collective digital detox programs and their social dynamics.
- Cross-cultural studies: Investigating how cultural norms influence digital behavior and self-esteem.
- Technology-assisted tracking: Using apps and wearables to monitor screen time and emotional states in real time.
- Clinical applications: Integrating digital hygiene protocols into therapeutic settings for anxiety, depression, and self-esteem issues.

6.9 Final Reflections

This study began as a personal inquiry into the subtle ways social media influences self- perception. Over four weeks, it evolved into a psychological recalibration—marked by discomfort, discovery, and growth. The findings affirmed that digital behavior is not merely a matter of habit but a reflection of deeper emotional and cognitive patterns.

Limiting social media usage created space for introspection, autonomy, and emotional clarity. It challenged the assumption that constant connectivity equates to fulfillment and revealed that intentional disengagement can lead to greater self-worth. In a world increasingly dominated by screens and curated identities, this thesis offers a quiet but powerful reminder: sometimes, less is more.

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