

Likes, Validation, and Peer Pressure: The Emotional Drivers of Risky Online Behavior on Social Media

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Abstract

We often look to technology to solve cybersecurity problems, but what if the real drivers of online risk are emotional and social in nature? This presentation explores how emotional validation, peer norms, and social pressures shape what users share online, often at the expense of their digital safety. Drawing from a qualitative dissertation study on cyberpsychology and user behavior, this research focuses on how adult social media users navigate online identity, connection, and risk. Interviews with 63 participants revealed three key themes: (1) the emotional reward of social affirmation as a motivator for sharing; (2) peer pressure and group norms overriding privacy concerns; and (3) internal conflicts between digital safety and maintaining an online presence. These patterns suggest that users often know the risks but choose connection and visibility over caution. These insights represent one thematic aspect of a larger dissertation study and intentionally exclude data on cybersecurity risk perception and protective actions, which are being developed for peer-reviewed publication. By focusing on emotional drivers and social influence, this work contributes to interdisciplinary conversations on user behavior, cyberpsychology, and digital well-being, and recommends practical implications for social media platform design, cybersecurity education, and digital culture.

Keywords: cyberpsychology, social media, digital identity, online behavior, emotional influence

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Introduction

The digital age has fundamentally transformed how individuals communicate, construct identities, and engage in social life. Social media platforms have become embedded in everyday routines, shaping interpersonal relationships, self-expression, and access to information (Brossard & Scheufele, 2013; Smith & Anderson, 2018). What began as a technological innovation has evolved into a pervasive cultural and behavioral phenomenon in which users actively create, curate, and interpret content within networked environments. With global internet usage now reaching approximately 67% of the world's population (Xavier, 2024), social media engagement has become an established aspect of daily life. This is especially prevalent among adolescents and emerging adults, for whom online platforms play a significant role in identity formation, exploration, and facilitating social interactions (Arnett, 2000; Lenhart et al., 2010).

Early research on online behavior and digital risk primarily emphasized technical factors, including system vulnerabilities, security awareness, and infrastructure design. While these elements remain important, they provide an incomplete account of how individuals engage with digital platforms. As technology becomes increasingly reliable and seamlessly integrated into daily life, users develop trust in digital systems and rely heavily on devices such as smartphones and laptops for communication, information access, and task completion (Ancis, 2020). This reliance heightens the influence of psychological and social processes on online behavior and contributes to observable differences between behavior enacted in cyberspace and behavior expressed offline (Ancis, 2020). The emergence of cyberpsychology reflects this shift, focusing on the psychological mechanisms underlying interactions with digital technologies, including cognitive biases, online self-presentation, social comparison, and social influence (Attrill-Smith et al., 2019).

The purpose of this article is to examine the emotional and social influences that shape user behavior in social media contexts. By exploring how factors such as social validation, emotional responses to feedback, and interpersonal motivations interact with digital environments, this work contributes to a growing body of research that moves beyond purely technical explanations of online behavior toward a more psychologically and socially grounded understanding. These findings represent a single thematic component of a broader dissertation study and intentionally exclude analyses of cybersecurity risk perception and protective behaviors, which are reported separately for peer-reviewed publication.

Literature Review

Cyberpsychology examines the psychological processes underlying human interaction with digital technologies and computer-mediated environments (Attrill-Smith et al., 2019). As an interdisciplinary field, it integrates perspectives from psychology, computer science, engineering, and the social sciences to understand how technology influences cognition, emotion, and behavior at both individual and societal levels (Gulen, 2023). Core areas of inquiry include online behavior, social media use, internet addiction, digital identity, online relationships, and the mental health consequences of sustained technology engagement (Gulen, 2023). Rather than focusing solely on technological affordances, cyberpsychology emphasizes how psychological mechanisms such as perception, decision-making, and emotional processing shape user experiences and behaviors in digital contexts. As technology becomes increasingly embedded in everyday life, cyberpsychology offers a framework for understanding why individuals often behave differently online than offline. Features such as

anonymity, reduced social cues, and physical distance can alter self-regulation and risk perception, contributing to distinct online behavioral patterns. This perspective highlights the growing importance of psychological and social determinants, rather than purely technical explanations, in understanding online engagement and risk-related behavior.

The Online Self, Digital Identity, and Social Comparison

A central concept within cyberpsychology is the *extended self*, which proposes that individuals' identities extend beyond the physical body to include objects, relationships, and symbolic representations (Attrill-Smith, 2019). In social media environments, digital artifacts such as photographs, posts, and profiles become integral components of self-concept, serving as extensions of the offline self or as idealized representations of desired identities (Attrill-Smith, 2019). Social media platforms afford users substantial control over impression management, enabling them to curate content, edit posts, and selectively manage their audiences (Attrill, 2015). This capacity for controlled self-presentation can produce both beneficial and adverse outcomes. Curated self-disclosure may facilitate social connection, reinforce self-esteem, and support relationship development by allowing individuals to present themselves favorably and connect with like-minded others (Zajonc, 1968). However, sustained engagement in idealized or inauthentic self-presentation may contribute to psychological distress and diminished well-being (Zajonc, 1968).

These dynamics align with Higgins's (1987) self-discrepancy theory, which distinguishes among the actual self, ideal self, and ought self. Online environments may intensify discrepancies among these selves, particularly when social feedback is highly visible. Social comparison further shapes digital identity formation. Individuals frequently compare themselves with others on social media, often encountering idealized portrayals that distort perceptions of reality (Attrill-Smith, 2019; Walther, 1996). Exposure to these curated "highlight reels" can foster feelings of envy, inadequacy, and reduced self-esteem, underscoring the emotional consequences of online self-evaluation.

Social Validation, Emotional Feedback, and Online Disinhibition

Social media platforms are uniquely structured to provide rapid and visible forms of social validation, including likes, comments, and follower counts (Ellison & Boyd, 2013; Wang et al., 2012). The pursuit of social approval has been consistently identified as a primary motivation for social media use and self-disclosure, particularly among individuals with a high need for validation (Jong & Drummond, 2016; Savci et al., 2019; Tektaş, 2014; Twenge & Im, 2007). Public profiles offer increased visibility and access to feedback but also expose users to heightened social judgment and potential disconfirmation (Appel & Gnambs, 2019). Research suggests that emotional responses to social media feedback are shaped by discrepancies between expected and received validation. Receiving fewer likes than anticipated can elicit negative emotional reactions, whereas positive feedback can enhance self-esteem and reinforce continued engagement (Chua & Chang, 2016; Li et al., 2018).

Individual characteristics including personality traits, purpose in life, and authenticity of self-presentation moderate these emotional effects (Burrow & Rainone, 2017; Jackson & Luchner, 2018). Individuals with a high need for social approval appear particularly susceptible to both the benefits and harms associated with online feedback. The "like" function has been conceptualized as a form of social reward that operates through reinforcement mechanisms (Rosenthal-von der Pütten et al., 2019). Drawing on social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954)

and reinforcement theory (Skinner, 1953), research suggests that likes function as social currency, shaping self-evaluation and influencing future posting behavior. Emotional states such as anger, anxiety, and frustration may further amplify online disinhibition, increasing the likelihood of impulsive or harmful behaviors. Together, these findings emphasize the central role of emotional and social processes in shaping online behavior and highlight the value of psychologically informed approaches to understanding digital engagement.

Methodology

A total of 63 participants were recruited for this qualitative study. Of these, 60 participants comprised the main study sample, and three participants participated in a pilot study conducted to refine the interview protocol. Participants were adults residing within the United States and were recruited to provide insight into their experiences and behaviors related to social media use. Data from the pilot study were not included in the final analysis but informed minor adjustments to interview questions to improve clarity and flow. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted virtually via Zoom.

This approach was selected to accommodate participant preferences, increase scheduling flexibility, and allow participation across diverse geographic locations. Prior to each interview, participants completed a digital informed consent form outlining the study's purpose, voluntary nature, confidentiality protections, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Interviews lasted approximately 15 to 30 minutes, depending on the depth of participant responses, and followed a semi-structured format that allowed for consistency across interviews while providing flexibility to explore emerging themes. With participant permission, all interviews were audio-recorded. Automatic transcription was facilitated using Otter.ai, a secure transcription platform, to expedite the transcription process.

To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, participants were given a three-business-day period to review their transcripts for accuracy, a process commonly referred to as member checking (Birt et al., 2016). Minor clarifications or corrections were incorporated prior to analysis. A thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework to systematically identify, analyze, and interpret patterns within the data. Following transcript familiarization, initial codes were generated manually through close, iterative reading of the transcripts. Codes were then reviewed, refined, and organized into candidate themes that reflected shared patterns across participant narratives.

Themes were evaluated for coherence and distinctiveness before being clearly defined and named. While transcription was software-assisted, coding and theme development were conducted manually to maintain close engagement with the data. Participant confidentiality was rigorously protected throughout the study. All identifying information, including names and potentially revealing details, was removed from transcripts during the review process. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to further protect their identities. Audio files, transcripts, and consent documents were securely stored on a password-protected, university-provided drive, with access restricted to the primary researcher only. These procedures aligned with ethical research standards and data protection guidelines (Weller & Venkatesh, 2021).

Results

The thematic analysis revealed that emotional and social influences play a central role in shaping participants' social media behaviors, often outweighing privacy concerns and rational risk assessment. Three interrelated patterns emerged across participant responses: (a) emotional validation as a primary motivation for sharing, (b) peer pressure and group norms overriding privacy considerations, and (c) a tension between identity performance and digital caution. By emphasizing emotional drivers and social influence in online behavior, these findings inform interdisciplinary discussions of cyberpsychology and digital well-being and offer practical implications for social media platform design, cybersecurity education, and the cultivation of healthier digital environments.

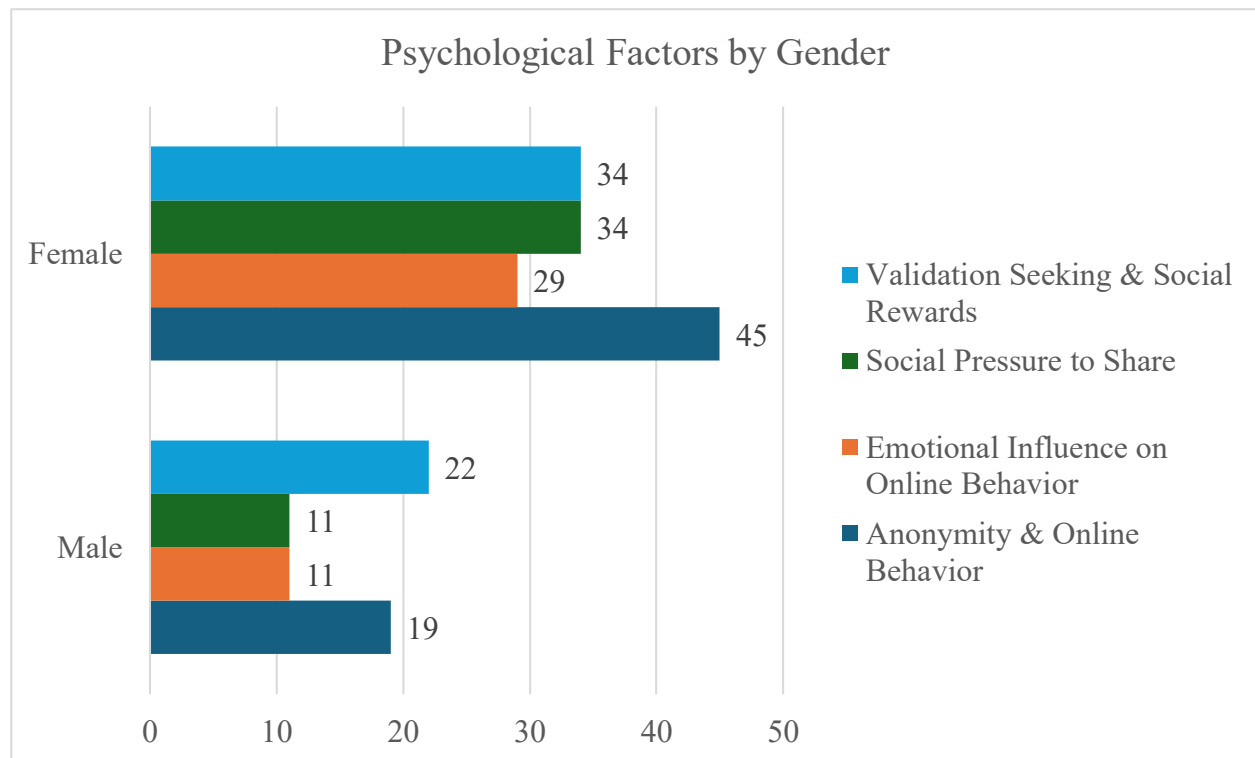
Theme 1: Emotional Validation as a Motivation for Sharing

Emotional validation emerged as a primary driver of social media engagement. Participants frequently described how platform feedback mechanisms such as likes, comments, and view shaped both their posting behavior and emotional well-being. Positive feedback was commonly associated with feelings of affirmation and social connection. User 022, a White man in his 30s, stated, "It feels good when people like or comment on my posts," while User 007, a biracial woman in her 30s, added, "It's nice when friends support your photos or milestones." These responses highlight how social media feedback functions as an emotional reward that reinforces continued participation.

In contrast, the absence of expected validation often elicited negative emotional responses. User 041, a Black woman in her 30s, explained, "If a post doesn't get enough engagement, sometimes I take it down," illustrating how emotional reactions directly influence content moderation decisions. Emotional states also affected when and how participants engaged. User 050, a White woman in her 30s, noted, "If I'm in a bad mood, I stay off social media because it just makes it worse," whereas User 036, a Black woman in her 30s, shared, "I post more when I'm happy; vacations, celebrations, stuff like that." Negative emotions like anxiety and fear were also prevalent. User 020, a Black woman in her 20s, stated, "When I spend too much time on it, I'm anxious," and User 003, a Black woman in her 30s, explained, "When I'm scrolling social media, it definitely can spike some level of anxiety."

Gender-based patterns were evident. Female participants accounted for 61.8% of validation-seeking responses and 72.5% of emotionally driven engagement behaviors, compared with 38.2% and 27.5% among male participants, respectively. These findings suggest that emotional feedback plays a more central role in shaping women's social media experiences and decision-making. These emotional dynamics are summarized in Figure 1, which illustrates the relationship between emotional states (e.g., anxiety, fear, and validation), engagement behaviors, and cybersecurity-related caution.

Figure 1
Psychological Factors by Gender



Theme 2: Peer Pressure and Group Norms Overriding Privacy Preferences

Peer pressure and social norms emerged as powerful influences on participants' online behavior, frequently overriding privacy concerns and personal risk awareness. Participants described feeling compelled to share content because of perceived expectations within their social networks. User 007 noted, "Seeing others post about certain things makes you feel like you have to join in," while User 059, a Black man in his 30s, stated, "When all your friends are sharing vacation photos, it's hard not to feel like you have to do the same." This pressure extended to how participants curated their identities. User 016, a Black woman in her 30s, stated, "I feel like I have to post polished, happy moments only," and User 031 commented, "There's definitely pressure to seem like you have an exciting life." These narratives suggest that group norms promote idealized self-presentation, often at the expense of authenticity or caution.

Female participants accounted for 80.4% of social pressure-related responses, indicating that women may experience stronger expectations to maintain an active and engaging online presence. Validation-seeking behaviors reinforced these dynamics. User 022 admitted, "Likes make me feel good, not gonna lie," while others described removing posts that failed to meet engagement expectations. Despite this pressure, participants also described privacy-protective adaptations. User 025, a Black woman in her 30s, emphasized, "My page is private," and User 005 shared, "I've locked down a lot of my social media accounts so that you can't search for me." Self-censorship was common. User 034, a Black man in his 50s, explained, "I avoid talking about politics or personal stuff because you never know who's watching," while User 053, a White woman in her 20s, stated, "If I post pictures, I usually wait until after I leave the place."

Participants also managed visibility through selective sharing. User 026, a Black woman in her 30s and social media influencer, noted, “I only post curated content, nothing too personal,” while User 035 explained, “I share a lot, but only with my close friends list, not the public.” These behaviors reflect attempts to balance social participation with perceived safety.

Theme 3: Identity Performance Versus Digital Caution

A persistent tension emerged between identity performance and digital caution. Participants acknowledged risks associated with visibility but continued to engage in behaviors that prioritized social connection and self-presentation. Trust in platforms varied. User 017, a White woman in her 30s, stated, “I trust Instagram more than Facebook because it feels like they have better privacy options,” while User 003 expressed concern about “how our information that we’re sharing with the general public is being utilized.” Risk management strategies ranged from strict avoidance to cautious optimism. User 044, a Black woman in her 60s, stated, “I don’t click links anymore, period,” whereas User 010 admitted, “Sometimes I just hope nothing bad happens when I click on stuff.”

User 016 explained, “I’m okay sharing basic stuff, but anything financial or personal stays offline,” and User 058 remarked, “You can’t live your life paranoid, but you have to be smart.” Anonymity further complicated this tension. Some participants viewed it as enabling harmful behavior. User 039 stated, “People will be behind an anonymous profile and feel more comfortable to act a certain way,” while User 063 added, “I think anonymity gives people a false sense of power.” Conversely, anonymity was perceived as protective. User 048 shared, “When I’m anonymous, I feel safer talking about sensitive topics.”

Together, these findings illustrate that online behavior is shaped by emotionally driven trade-offs. Participants continuously negotiated between visibility, validation, trust, and caution often prioritizing emotional and social rewards over strict risk avoidance. By highlighting emotional factors and social influence in online choices, these results enrich interdisciplinary discussions about user behavior, cyberpsychology, and digital well-being. They also offer practical guidance for designing social media platforms, improving cybersecurity education, and shaping digital culture.

Discussion

This study examined how adult social media users navigate online identity, emotional expression, and social influence, revealing that decisions made on social platforms are deeply rooted in psychological and interpersonal dynamics. While prior research highlights privacy concerns and platform design as important components of digital behavior (McHatton & Ghazinour, 2023), the present study extends this work by illuminating how emotional validation, peer norms, and self-presentation pressures often guide what individuals share online. These findings support the central argument of this presentation: users frequently prioritize connection and visibility over caution, even when they recognize potential downsides of online expression. Social Cognitive Theory offers an effective framework for interpreting these results, particularly the role of self-efficacy, observational learning, and perceived social expectations in shaping behavior (Amiruddin et al., 2021). However, this study illustrates those emotional processes such as anxiety, FOMO, mood fluctuations, and the desire for affirmation play an equally essential role.

Participants described posting more frequently when happy, withdrawing when distressed, deleting posts that lacked engagement, and experiencing emotional spikes from both positive and negative interactions. Such narratives demonstrate that emotional regulation is central to the way people use social media, influencing not only what they share but how they interpret their digital environments. Demographic patterns further highlight how identity shapes social media engagement. Women demonstrated significantly stronger emotional and social influences, contributing 80.4% of all social-pressure mentions and 72.5% of emotionally driven responses. These patterns suggest that women experience heightened expectations surrounding digital visibility, relational connection, and curated presentation. These pressures may amplify the emotional stakes of posting and responding online, making social validation a more powerful driver of behavior.

Age also influenced engagement. Millennials (29–44) contributed 90.0% of all privacy-related responses and 97.6% of adaptive behaviors, suggesting that this group raised alongside the rise of social media is both highly fluent and highly affected by social norms within digital environments. Their comments reflected a nuanced understanding of reputation management and emotional expression online, balancing authenticity with curated identity. Educational differences were similarly meaningful. Highly educated participants contributed 90.5% of privacy-related responses and 95.5% of adaptive actions, indicating stronger awareness of platform mechanics and greater intentionality in managing digital footprints.

This suggests that educational experiences may help cultivate critical awareness around platform visibility, audience reach, and social interpretation. Racial identity also shaped the emotional experience of online engagement. Black participants contributed 75.6% of privacy-related concerns and 76.9% of emotionally influenced responses, reflecting a heightened sensitivity to being observed, critiqued, or misinterpreted online. Many expressed concern about reputational consequences and the visibility of personal information, highlighting intersections between race, identity, and digital vulnerability. These findings emphasize how sociocultural experiences influence digital participation and self-presentation.

Comparisons between general users and cybersecurity professionals (despite the latter not being the primary focus of this presentation) demonstrated a notable distinction: general users frequently based their decisions on emotional factors and peer influence, whereas individuals with technical training were more likely to utilize analytical approaches. This finding highlights that emotional and social processes, rather than technical expertise, predominantly influence typical social media behavior. These findings show that social media engagement is shaped by emotions, identity pressures, and social expectations as much as platform features or user knowledge. Users often knowingly accept risks for emotional fulfillment and visibility. Designing effective social media environments requires addressing these emotional motivations as central to user experience.

Conclusion

This study highlights that social media behavior is shaped less by rational evaluation and more by emotional needs, interpersonal expectations, and identity-based pressures. Participants frequently described posting, editing, or withholding content based on how they felt, how they wished to be perceived, or how they believed others expected them to act. Emotional validation through likes, comments, and algorithmic engagement proved to be a primary driver of online expression, often outweighing concerns about privacy, judgment, or self-protection. Demographic insights demonstrated that these dynamics vary across gender, age, education,

and racial identity. Women described stronger emotional impact and social expectations; Millennials showed greater fluency and intentionality; highly educated participants demonstrated more strategic forms of digital participation; and Black participants expressed unique concerns tied to visibility and reputation.

These distinctions highlight the importance of understanding users not as a unified group, but as individuals navigating social media through the lens of their identities, experiences, and emotional landscapes. As social media platforms continue to shape social connection and identity expression, it is essential to recognize the psychological forces that influence user choices. Emotional needs such as belonging, validation, and affirmation are deeply embedded in digital participation. For this reason, strategies aimed at improving digital well-being must account for the affective and social dimensions of online behavior. Platform design can encourage healthier engagement by reducing visibility pressures, offering more nuanced audience controls, and diminishing the emphasis on public engagement metrics.

This research adds to cyberpsychology by showing that emotions and social factors, rather than just technology, shape how people act online. Future studies should keep looking at how identity, culture, and emotional control affect users' experiences with visibility, connection, and self-expression in digital spaces. Focusing on people's experiences will help create digital environments that support communication and promote psychological well-being.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that no AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate, refine, or correct the content in the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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