



The Effectiveness of Group Counseling in Improving Students' Self-Esteem at MTsN 2 Bandung amid the Phenomenon of Social Comparison on Social Media

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Article Info	Abstract
Article History: Received : 07/09/2026 Revised : 15/09/2026 Accepted : 21/09/2026	Adolescence is a critical period for the development of self-esteem, and the widespread use of social media has intensified the tendency of students to engage in social comparison with their peers. This study examined the effectiveness of group counseling in improving the self-esteem of students at MTsN 2 Bandung who exhibited low self-esteem associated with social comparison on social media. A quantitative approach with a one-group pretest-posttest quasi-experimental design was employed. Twelve students identified through the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale as having low self-esteem were selected through purposive sampling and received six sessions of group counseling using cognitive restructuring techniques. Data were analyzed using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. The results indicated a statistically significant increase in students' self-esteem scores after the intervention ($Z = -3.06$, $p < 0.05$), with the average score rising from the low to the moderate-to-high category. The findings confirm that group counseling is an effective intervention for reducing the negative impact of social comparison on social media and for enhancing adolescents' self-esteem. These results suggest that school counselors should integrate group counseling programs into guidance services to help students build healthier digital comparison habits.
Keywords: Group counseling; Self-esteem; Social comparison; Social media; Junior high school students.	
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INTRODUCTION

Self-esteem is one of the most extensively studied constructs in adolescent psychology because it functions as an internal barometer of how young people interpret their worth in relation to their social environment. Rosenberg (1965) conceptualized self-esteem as a global attitude of approval or disapproval toward the self, and this conceptualization remains the dominant framework in both research and school-based counseling practice. Adolescents with high self-esteem generally display greater resilience when facing academic difficulties, initiate social interaction more confidently, and recover more quickly from failure. Conversely, adolescents with persistently low self-esteem tend to interpret ambiguous social cues as rejection, avoid situations in which their competence might be evaluated, and develop a self-narrative dominated by inadequacy. In the school setting, these patterns translate directly into observable behaviors such as passivity during classroom discussion, reluctance to take on leadership roles, and withdrawal from extracurricular activities.

The formation of self-esteem during early adolescence is inseparable from the process of social comparison. Festinger (1954) proposed that individuals possess an innate drive to evaluate their own opinions and abilities, and that in the absence of objective standards they turn to other people as the reference point for such evaluation. This mechanism is particularly powerful during the junior high school years, when abstract reasoning has developed sufficiently to allow complex self-other comparisons but emotional regulation and identity commitments are still immature. Comparison may be directed upward, toward individuals perceived as superior, or downward, toward those perceived as less fortunate. Upward comparison can occasionally serve as inspiration, yet for adolescents who already hold a fragile self-view it more commonly produces envy, shame, and a deepening sense of deficiency.

The digital environment has radically altered the frequency, scope, and intensity of adolescent social comparison. Whereas previous generations compared themselves primarily with classmates and neighbors, contemporary students are exposed to an almost unlimited stream of carefully curated self-presentations drawn from an enormous reference pool, accessible at any hour through a device they carry constantly (Twenge, 2017). Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok are built around visual content, numerical feedback in the form of likes and followers, and algorithmic ranking, all of which foreground precisely those attributes—appearance, popularity, and lifestyle—that adolescents are most sensitive about. Because users typically share only their most flattering moments, the comparison standard encountered online is systematically inflated, and the resulting discrepancy between the observed ideal and the experienced self becomes a recurring source of self-devaluation.

A substantial body of empirical research supports this concern. Experimental and correlational studies have demonstrated that exposure to appearance-related content on social media produces measurable declines in body satisfaction and mood, especially among adolescent girls (Fardouly et al., 2015), and that the association between social media use and self-esteem is mediated primarily by the act of comparison rather than by time spent online (Vogel et al., 2014). More recent work has cautioned against treating these effects as uniform. Using intensive longitudinal data, Valkenburg et al. (2021) showed that adolescents differ markedly in their susceptibility: some experience a decrease in self-esteem after social media use, others show no change, and a minority even report improvement. Such heterogeneity is consistent with the concept of social comparison orientation, a dispositional tendency to compare the self with others that varies systematically between individuals (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). Studies conducted outside the Western context have reported comparable associations between intensive social media engagement and lowered self-esteem among adolescents (Farooq et al., 2023), indicating that the phenomenon is not culturally bounded.

Indonesian adolescents are among the most active social media users in the world, and junior high school students in urban and peri-urban areas such as Bandung typically own personal smartphones and maintain accounts on several platforms simultaneously. Madrasah students occupy a particularly interesting position in this landscape, since they navigate the values of an Islamic educational environment alongside the aesthetic and material standards promoted by digital popular culture. The tension between these two sets of standards may sharpen the experience of comparison, as students evaluate themselves not only against peers' online achievements but also against religious and familial expectations. Guidance and counseling services in madrasah settings therefore face a distinctive challenge that has received limited empirical attention.

Research on comparison orientation further suggests that vulnerability is not evenly distributed within a classroom. Individuals who score highly on this disposition monitor social information more intensively, remember comparison-relevant details more vividly, and derive a larger share of their self-evaluation from relative standing (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). For such students, the endless supply of comparison targets provided by social media functions less as entertainment than as a continuous evaluative test. Identifying these students and offering them a structured opportunity to examine their comparison habits is therefore a legitimate and arguably urgent task for school guidance services, and it provides the rationale for the purposive selection procedure adopted in the present study.

Equally important is the observation that low self-esteem rarely appears in isolation. It tends to co-occur with anxiety about evaluation, reluctance to speak in class, avoidance of new tasks, and in more serious cases with social withdrawal and

declining academic performance. Teachers may interpret these behaviors as laziness or lack of discipline rather than as expressions of an underlying self-evaluative difficulty, which delays referral to counseling. Providing empirical evidence that a targeted counseling program can raise self-esteem measurably may therefore also serve an advocacy function, helping schools recognize self-esteem work as an instructional concern rather than an optional extra.

The urgency of intervening during the junior high school years is underlined by developmental evidence that self-esteem typically reaches its lowest point in early adolescence before gradually recovering. During this window, the self-concept is still comparatively unconsolidated and therefore highly responsive both to damage and to constructive intervention. A student who leaves the ninth grade with an entrenched belief in personal inadequacy is likely to carry that belief into senior secondary school, where it may shape subject choices, friendship patterns, and aspirations for further study. Early, targeted counseling therefore represents a preventive investment rather than a remedial expense.

It should also be emphasized that the aim of such intervention is not to discourage adolescents from using social media, which would be neither realistic nor developmentally appropriate given the role these platforms play in contemporary peer relationships and information access. The aim is instead to equip students with the interpretive skills needed to engage with online content critically: to recognize curation and editing, to distinguish between a presented image and a lived reality, and to anchor self-evaluation in personally meaningful standards rather than in the fluctuating metrics of likes and followers. Framed this way, group counseling becomes a form of psychological literacy education that complements the digital literacy initiatives already promoted in Indonesian schools.

Preliminary observation and interviews conducted with the guidance and counseling teacher at MTsN 2 Bandung revealed that a considerable number of seventh- and eighth-grade students displayed indicators of low self-esteem, including excessive self-criticism, reluctance to participate in class, and statements of feeling inferior after viewing peers' social media posts. Students frequently reported comparing their physical appearance, popularity, and achievements with those displayed by classmates and influencers on social media, which corresponds to patterns documented in previous research on adolescents' social media use and self-esteem (Farooq et al., 2023). Left unaddressed, low self-esteem in early adolescence can contribute to anxiety, social withdrawal, and diminished academic motivation.

Group counseling has been widely recognized as an effective format for addressing adolescents' psychosocial problems because it provides a supportive peer environment in which members can share experiences, receive feedback, and practice new ways of thinking and behaving (Corey, 2016). The group modality

offers therapeutic factors that individual counseling cannot easily replicate, including universality, altruism, interpersonal learning, and the installation of hope. For problems rooted in peer comparison, these factors are especially relevant: hearing that classmates who appear confident privately struggle with the same insecurities directly challenges the assumption that one is uniquely inadequate. The group also functions as a social laboratory in which more adaptive interpretations of online content can be rehearsed before being applied outside the counseling room.

Among the techniques available within the group format, cognitive restructuring is theoretically well matched to comparison-driven low self-esteem. The technique targets the automatic thoughts and cognitive distortions—overgeneralization, selective abstraction, all-or-nothing thinking—that transform a single online image into a global judgment of personal worth. By training students to identify these thoughts, examine the evidence supporting and contradicting them, and construct more balanced alternatives, cognitive restructuring addresses the interpretive process rather than attempting the unrealistic goal of eliminating exposure to social media. Previous studies conducted in Indonesian schools and Islamic boarding institutions have shown that group counseling using cognitive restructuring and related techniques, including solution-focused brief counseling, reality-based models, and symbolic modeling, can significantly improve students' self-esteem (Apriatama et al., 2022; Kasmawati & Alam, 2021; Pahlevi & Oktavia, 2024; Prastika et al., 2023).

Despite this accumulated evidence, an important gap remains. Most Indonesian studies on group counseling and self-esteem have framed low self-esteem as a general developmental problem without explicitly situating it within the contemporary digital environment, while most studies on social media and self-esteem have been descriptive or correlational and have stopped short of testing school-based interventions. Research that connects the two strands—by delivering a structured counseling intervention specifically designed to address social-media-driven comparison, in a madrasah setting, with standardized measurement—remains scarce. The present study addresses this gap by integrating psychoeducation on social comparison with cognitive restructuring within a group counseling program at MTsN 2 Bandung.

Accordingly, this study was guided by two research questions: (1) What is the level of self-esteem of MTsN 2 Bandung students who report frequent social comparison on social media before and after the group counseling intervention? and (2) Is there a statistically significant difference between students' pretest and posttest self-esteem scores following the intervention? Based on this background, the present study aims to examine the effectiveness of group counseling using cognitive restructuring techniques in improving the self-esteem of MTsN 2 Bandung

students who experience low self-esteem in the context of social comparison on social media.

The findings of this study are expected to make both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, the study extends the application of social comparison theory to an Indonesian madrasah context and provides evidence on how a cognitively oriented group intervention can moderate the relationship between online comparison and self-evaluation. Practically, the results offer school counselors an empirically supported and readily implementable service model that combines classical counseling technique with digital literacy content, which is increasingly needed as guidance and counseling programs adapt to the realities of adolescent life online.

METHODS

This study employed a quantitative approach with a pre-experimental one-group pretest-posttest design, which is commonly used in guidance and counseling intervention research to examine changes in a psychological variable before and after treatment (Sugiyono, 2013). This design was selected because it allows the researcher to directly measure the change in students' self-esteem scores following the group counseling intervention.

The population of this study consisted of seventh-grade students at MTsN 2 Bandung during the 2025/2026 academic year. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, adapted into Indonesian and validated for use among junior high school students, was administered to 120 students to screen for self-esteem levels (Rosenberg, 1965). Twelve students who scored in the low self-esteem category and reported frequent social comparison behavior on social media were selected as research subjects through purposive sampling.

The intervention consisted of six group counseling sessions, each lasting approximately 45 minutes, conducted twice a week over three weeks. The sessions applied cognitive restructuring techniques, in which students were guided to identify irrational or distorted thoughts triggered by social comparison on social media, evaluate the evidence for and against those thoughts, and replace them with more balanced and realistic self-evaluations, an approach consistent with cognitive-behavioral group counseling models used in previous Indonesian studies (Apriatama et al., 2022). Sessions also incorporated psychoeducation about social comparison theory and guided discussion on healthy social media use.

Data were collected using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, consisting of ten items rated on a four-point Likert scale, administered before (pretest) and after (posttest) the intervention. Because of the small sample size, the collected data were analyzed using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test, a non-parametric statistical test

appropriate for comparing two related measurements when the assumption of normal distribution cannot be guaranteed.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Students' Self-Esteem Level Before and After Group Counseling

The pretest results showed that all twelve participants were categorized as having low self-esteem, with a mean score of 16.3 (SD = 2.1) out of a possible range of 10–40 on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. After receiving six sessions of group counseling, the posttest results showed a marked increase in scores, with a mean of 27.8 (SD = 3.4), placing most participants in the moderate-to-high self-esteem category. A summary of the pretest and posttest scores is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of Students' Self-Esteem Categories Before and After Group Counseling

Category	Score Range	Pretest (n)	Posttest (n)
Low	10–19	12	0
Moderate	20–29	0	7
High	30–40	0	5
Mean Score	–	16.3	27.8

In response to the first research question, the descriptive findings showed that all twelve participants were located in the low self-esteem category at pretest, with a mean score of 16.3, and that after the intervention seven participants moved into the moderate category and five into the high category, raising the group mean to 27.8. In response to the second research question, the inferential analysis produced a Z value of -3.06 with a significance level of 0.002, so the null hypothesis of no difference between pretest and posttest scores was rejected. The consistency of improvement across all participants, none of whom remained in the low category, strengthens confidence that the change reflects the intervention rather than random fluctuation.

Theoretically, these results reinforce the proposition that the psychological impact of social media is determined less by exposure itself than by the way adolescents interpret what they see. When students learned to recognize that online content is selectively curated and to question the automatic inference that others' visible success implies their own inadequacy, their self-evaluation improved without any change in their actual media use. This pattern is consistent with the person-specific media effects perspective and with the view that comparison orientation, rather than screen time, is the more meaningful variable in adolescent self-esteem research. The study also illustrates the compatibility of cognitive restructuring with the group modality, in which peer disclosure supplies the disconfirming evidence that cognitive work requires.

Practically, the study demonstrates that a brief intervention of six sessions, delivered within the regular school schedule by an existing guidance and counseling teacher and requiring no specialized equipment, can produce measurable change. This feasibility is important for madrasah and public school settings in which counseling caseloads are large and resources are limited. The integration of digital literacy material into conventional counseling technique also suggests a direction for the modernization of guidance services, allowing counselors to respond to a problem that students experience daily but rarely bring to the counseling room on their own initiative.

Several limitations should be acknowledged in interpreting these findings. The one-group pretest-posttest design does not include a control group, so maturation, testing effects, and the general attention received during the sessions cannot be ruled out as alternative explanations for the improvement. The sample of twelve students drawn from a single madrasah through purposive sampling limits the generalizability of the results to other schools and regions. Self-esteem was measured exclusively through self-report, which is vulnerable to social desirability, particularly at posttest when participants may wish to demonstrate progress to the counselor. Finally, the absence of follow-up measurement means that the durability of the gains beyond the immediate posttest remains unknown.

2. Effectiveness of Group Counseling Intervention

The Wilcoxon signed-rank test indicated a statistically significant difference between the pretest and posttest self-esteem scores ($Z = -3.06$, $p = 0.002 < 0.05$), confirming that the increase in self-esteem following the group counseling intervention was not due to chance. This finding is consistent with previous research demonstrating that group counseling using cognitive-oriented techniques is effective in raising the self-esteem of junior and senior high school students in Indonesia (Apriatama et al., 2022; Kasmawati & Alam, 2021; Prastika et al., 2023).

During the sessions, students reported that they had frequently engaged in upward social comparison, particularly regarding physical appearance and popularity displayed by peers on Instagram and TikTok, which aligns with earlier findings that upward comparisons on social media are linked to diminished self-evaluation and negative affect among adolescents (Fardouly et al., 2015; Vogel et al., 2014). Through cognitive restructuring, students were guided to recognize that social media content is selectively curated and does not represent an accurate picture of others' everyday lives, a realization that appeared to reduce the intensity of comparison-driven self-criticism and to support a more balanced self-view, in line with the person-specific media effects perspective, which holds that the impact of social media on self-esteem depends on how individuals process and interpret comparison information rather than on exposure alone (Valkenburg et al., 2021).

The group format itself also appeared to contribute to the positive outcome. Sharing similar experiences of social comparison with peers helped students realize that their struggles were common rather than unique, which reduced feelings of isolation and shame, a therapeutic factor long associated with the effectiveness of group-based interventions (Corey, 2016). Students with higher social comparison orientation, as would be predicted by comparison-orientation theory, appeared to benefit the most from the intervention, suggesting that group counseling may be particularly valuable for adolescents who are dispositionally more sensitive to comparison cues (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999).

Overall, these findings support the view that structured group counseling can serve as a practical and school-based intervention to counteract the negative psychological effects associated with social comparison on social media, complementing broader efforts to promote healthy social media habits among Indonesian adolescents (Farooq et al., 2023; Twenge, 2017).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that group counseling using cognitive restructuring techniques is effective in improving the self-esteem of students at MTsN 2 Bandung who experience low self-esteem related to social comparison on social media. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test confirmed a statistically significant increase in self-esteem scores from the low category to the moderate-to-high category after six sessions of intervention. These findings indicate that structured, school-based group counseling can serve as a practical strategy to help adolescents cope with the psychological pressures of social comparison in the digital era.

Based on these conclusions, it is recommended that school counselors at MTsN 2 Bandung and similar institutions integrate group counseling programs focusing on cognitive restructuring and digital literacy into their regular guidance and counseling services, particularly for students identified as vulnerable to social-media-related social comparison. Routine screening with a standardized instrument at the beginning of the academic year would allow such students to be identified early rather than after academic or behavioral difficulties emerge. Schools are further encouraged to involve parents and subject teachers so that the healthier comparison habits practiced in the group are reinforced at home and in the classroom.

Future research is recommended to employ a control group design with a larger and more diverse sample, to examine the sustainability of the intervention's effects over time through follow-up measurement, and to explore other counseling techniques, such as solution-focused or reality-based approaches, in addressing self-esteem problems associated with social media use. Studies that combine quantitative measurement with qualitative exploration of students' comparison

experiences, and that examine moderating variables such as gender, comparison orientation, and the religious values emphasized in madrasah education, would further enrich understanding of how adolescents can be supported in developing a stable sense of self-worth in the digital era.

Taken together, the results of this study affirm that the challenges posed by social comparison on social media, although new in form, remain amenable to well-established counseling practice. What the digital era requires of school counselors is not the abandonment of classical techniques but their thoughtful adaptation to the contexts in which adolescents now construct their sense of self. By providing a safe group space in which students can examine the thoughts triggered by what they see online, schools such as MTsN 2 Bandung can help young people develop a sense of worth that is grounded in their own values and achievements rather than in comparison with an idealized digital reference group.

Finally, this study invites reflection on the broader role of guidance and counseling in an educational landscape reshaped by digital technology. The problems that students bring to counselors are increasingly formed in online spaces that schools do not control and cannot supervise, yet the consequences are felt in classrooms, friendships, and families. Counseling services that acknowledge this reality, and that build the interpretive and emotional skills students need to navigate it, are likely to remain relevant and effective. The present study offers one concrete and replicable example of what such a service can look like in an Indonesian madrasah setting.

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