

## DOES MEDIA INSPIRES REALITY? UNDERSTANDING THE SELF-CONCEPT AMONG EARLY ADULT READERS OF SELF-IMPROVEMENT BOOKS

Lygia Teresa Timoria Natan<sup>1</sup> & Sri Tiatri<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Psychology, University Tarumanagara Jakarta  
*Email: lygia.705200113@stu.untar.ac.id*

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Psychology, University Tarumanagara Jakarta  
*Email: sri.tiatri@untar.ac.id*

*Enter : 20-09-2023, revision: 02-10-2023, accepted for publication : 01-02-2024*

---

### ABSTRACT

Self-concept is a fundamental and personal psychological notion that every young adult possesses. There are several elements that influence the formation of a self-concept. Culture, gender, and media consumption are just a few examples. However, the impact of media (books, games, films, music, etc.) on a particular individual mental processes is yet largely unexplored. More so in Indonesia. Researcher chose self-improvement or self-help books from among the numerous sorts of literature. Stress, self-confidence, relationships, self-development, and identity are a few of the subjects that are regularly brought up in self-improvement books. Topics like this tend to emerge as inner ideas among individuals in their early adulthood. The purpose of this study is to explore the thought process that young adult readers of self-improvement books go through and how these thought process influenced their self-concept development. Purposive sampling was used to choose research participants. Three young adults who were readers of the self-improvement book were recruited as the study's participants. Data processing for the study involves Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method. In-depth interviews with subjects and interview observations were all used to collect research data. The study found that reading self-improvement books with a focus on self-identity is an inspirational experience for young adults through modeling mechanism. Given the shortage of research on this subject, this study helps to provide innovative knowledge and understanding. Further research regarding individual self-concept and how it interacts with media consumption is hoped to be conducted in the future.

*Keywords: Self-concept, self-improvement book, identity, media, young adult*

### 1. PREFACE

Individuals between the ages of 18 and 25 are considered early adults. The search for identity becomes critical during the early adult years of life. According to Santrock (2019), identity exploration is one of the traits of people in the early adult age range. Being in the transitional stage between adolescent and adulthood raises a lot of emotions and ideas. This argument is strengthened by Arnett's (2006) theory, which explains five characteristics of emerging adulthood. These five qualities consist of: (a) identity explorations; (b) self-focused; (c) instability; (d) feeling in-between; and (e) the age of possibilities. It appears that a common theme that centers on self-identity may be inferred from these five key traits. Identity exploration is a natural part of early adulthood, particularly in the realms of job, love, and worldview (Arnett, 2006 as cited in Coyne, 2013). Individuals are, in other words, on a journey of evolving their self-concept.

Baumeister (2005) defines self-concept as an understanding of an individual's self that is produced by the individual himself. This body of thoughts, ideas, or personal knowledge centers around the traits of the individual as well as what and who they are. Individual actions can be predicted and determined by one's self-concept, according to Shavelson et al. (1976). The way individuals act is influenced by their perceptions, which in turn affects how they see themselves.

The beliefs we have about ourselves, which collectively form our self-concept, are comparatively stable, in contrast to many of the views we make about the world (Richter et al., 2014). However, this does not exclude it from changing. Numerous factors could affect how self-concept forms and evolves. According to Calhoun and Acocella (2002), self-concept is comprised of three dimensions: (a) knowledge; (b) expectations; and (c) evaluations. The knowledge dimension comprises an individual's self-description. This pertains to age, weight, race, ethnicity, gender, and even occupation. An individual's perspectives, possibilities, and hopes for the future represent their hope dimension. The assessment dimension provides an individual's evaluation of himself.

According to Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986, in King, 2017), human cognitive alone is insufficient to impact behavior, interaction with the surrounding environment is also required. Both of these elements are interdependent on one another. This shows that exterior dimensions as well as internal dimensions have an impact on an individual's sense of self. The media, and particularly mass media (movies, books, television, music, games, etc.), can serve as a representation of an external dimension. By including mass communication in his conceptual framework, Bandura (2001) modified the Social Cognitive Theory. Most of these notions, in his opinion, were developed long before the invention or advancement of communication technology. Time shifts, people change, and theories evolve as well.

The emergence of novel mediums of communication causes a change in how the environment and human cognition interact with each other. The result of this transformation is a new and different aspect of human behavior. A thorough modeling of the symbolic environment in mass media can reveal plenty of information about human values, thought processes, and behavioral tendencies. Therefore, vicarious experience has a significant impact on how they conceptualize social reality through what they read, hear, and see (Ball & DeFleur, 1976; Bandura, 2001).

According to the research conducted by Rentfrow et al. (2011), personality characteristics can predict reading preferences. Greenwood and Long (2009, in Coyne et al., 2013) discovered that young adults frequently use characters in their favorite TV episodes as "social surrogates." This allows early adult individuals to feel more connected to others while also increasing their self-discovery journey through the identification process. This demonstrates that media and individual mental processes are inextricably linked. Media can be consumed in a variety of ways, including viewing, reading, and listening.

Reading is one form of media consumption. Reading alone is insufficient; reading comprehension is required. Individuals should have this in order to appropriately obtain the reading material they consume. For reading comprehension to be successful, a number of linguistic and cognitive processes must work together, including word reading skills, working memory, inference making, comprehension monitoring, vocabulary, and fundamental knowledge (Perfetti et al., 2005 in Elleman et al., 2009).

There is always a goal behind all reading activities. Reading activities are based on various objectives, claims Grabe (2008). Depending on the situation, objectives, and motivations, an individual can read in many ways (and along various lines of thought). Identity exploration and self-focus are among the traits of early adulthood. Readings with themes regarding identity are often found in self-help or self-improvement books.

Self-improvement books fall into a category of literature that often deals with psychological ideas. It includes media content that provides guidance and information about how to address people's apparent socio-psychological inadequacies or difficulties (Rens, 2023). In self-improvement books, topics including anxiety, stress management, diet, exercise, weight reduction, self-esteem, body image, addiction, relationships, self-development, and identity are frequently covered (Wilson, 2000; Bergsma, 2007). Self-improvement books are extremely popular. Many people are beginning to read self-improvement books as a coping mechanism for dealing with Covid-19. The quarantine situation creates great anxiety because of the enormous number of cases of job loss, feelings of loss of relatives, friends, and family, and feelings of isolation (Pierce, 2021).

According to the article posted by American Psychological Association (APA, 2014), media psychology is a subspecialty of psychology that focuses on how the media affects psychological situations in people. Its research activities are defined as those that deal with all media technologies, including social media, mobile media, interface design, educational technologies, interactive media technologies, and augmented, virtual, and blended environments as well as traditional, mass media (such as radio, television, film, video, newsprint, magazines, music, and art). Therefore, media psychology researchers strive to understand why people choose specific forms of media over others, along with how media influences cognitive, emotional, social, and psychological processes (Fisher, 2021).

Ferguson (2014) studied the correlation between reading controversial works that were prohibited from publication and juvenile criminality in the 12–18 age group. This study focuses on adolescent delinquency as well as the well-being of these teenagers. He discovered that having the chance to consider ethical dilemmas might train one's openness of mind as well as help one think more critically. Many messages and ideologies can be received from media consumption, which is promoted by books as a medium that transmits deeper meanings than other forms of media (Coyne et al., 2013).

Unfortunately, there hasn't been much study done on books as a medium that influences human's mental process. Most studies concentrate on television and video games (Ferguson, 2014). In Indonesia as well, there hasn't been enough study done on this issue. More research on reading preferences and individual differences is needed for more in-depth investigations (Black et al., 2018). This discovery compelled the researcher to delve deeper into the picture of media influence on individual reality in terms of self-concept in early adulthood. This study aims to advance the understanding of how young adults interpret the self-improvement books they read by providing fresh perspectives on their interpretations. The dynamics of their self-concept are then examined in relation to the self-improvement book they read.

## **2. RESEARCH METHOD**

The primary goal of this research is to provide insight on the self-concept dynamics of early-adult readers of self-improvement books. The researcher chose a qualitative study method based on IPA (Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis). The key reason why the researcher decided to utilize this method is that because detailed data can be gathered, which is in line with the main goal of this research. The IPA technique allows research participants to share stories about their experiences from their point of view. Then, the researcher will make an effort to comprehend the participants' experiences and sentiments in relation to this event.

Data was collected using several approaches. In-depth interviews and observation are the main components of this data collection method. The researcher created an interview guide in advance and prepared it before the interview. The researcher asked questions based on the interview guide. As the interview went on, new impromptu questions were raised. This is intended to delve deeper into the responses of participants. During interviews, researchers also made direct observations of the research participants.

### 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Every participant has distinct self-characteristics, which distinguishes their self-concept from one another. Individual behavior and one's self-concept are closely related. Individual acts or conduct will be determined by one's self-concept. Throughout the course of a person's life, their self-concept will constantly evolve and alter. Self-improvement books, or more specifically the messages included in these books, are one aspect that may have an impact on the dynamics of this self-concept. The third participant believed that he had concentrated particularly on improving in the area of interpersonal communication, saying, "How to communicate with people, that's what I'm still lacking." He concurs as well that reading books is not the only way to learn about self-improvement. "If self-improvement can be obtained from various media, yes, not just books. Content from TikTok too, Instagram too, basically social media".

According to Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, humans must undergo four phases before they can demonstrate that they have successfully learned a concept. The four phases are Attention, Retention, Reproduction, and Motivation. A model is required to complete this step as a learning resource. A verbal instructional model, or a model that describes and explains a behavior, is one kind of model that can be used in this context. Self-improvement books contain information about this. Humans have evolved their observational learning process so that they can learn in a variety of ways, including through a range of models (Bandura, 2001).

The third participant asserts that there is no need for constraints when one is growing as a person. Not only from self-improvement literature, but also through interactions with other people. "Aside from books, also, uh, from discussions. Coincidentally, in that office, I work in the business development division. Not only does the company develop, but we could also see it from how we interact with other people. With superiors, or how we handle people who need special treatment in the company. One of them, yes, from discussions with people."

The Dual Paths of Influence theory, which is an adaptation of Bandura (2001), explains that the influence of media on humans can occur in more than one way. In the direct pathway, communication provided by the media moves directly towards changes in individual behavior. In a socially mediated pathway, media influence will be distributed through interpersonal ties like communities or social networks before influencing people directly.

Social comparison is one of the essential processes in developing one's own self-concept. According to Myers and Twenge (2015), social comparison is a process of assessing a person's capabilities and viewpoints in relation to others. The third participant stated, "From my Instagram, I saw the content, my friends, I think, for example in the future, I only do this and this, I will be stuck." The second participant also felt the same way, saying, "I feel like there are some people who don't have to try to assert themselves but me on the other hand, I have to try. How come this person's skills and experience are so effortless, suddenly he's in a company this big. And I still have to try to start a small company."

According to Calhoun and Acocella (2002), self-concept is comprised of three dimensions: (a) knowledge; (b) expectations; and (c) evaluation. An individual's age, gender, nationality, ethnic origin, and other basic facts are included in the knowledge dimension. By evaluating their own particular traits against those of others, individuals indirectly identify themselves with this knowledge. The first participant describes herself as cheerful, saying, "I am a really joyful person. When others are joyful, I am also joyful. Really friendly." Depending on the context in which they compare themselves to others or make social comparisons, individuals can modify how they define themselves. The second participant did this by saying, "I usually describe myself in a general way when, for example, we've just met". The subject then explained that she would describe herself, in a more detailed way (in example, including her hobbies) to people she considered close to her.

The expectations dimension includes individual's expectations of themselves. It's crucial to keep in mind that everyone has a different conception of their ideal selves. This aspect of expectation guides individual's actions as they face the future. "I want to be at peace with myself. Write new stories that are happier than the bad stories in my life. I want to be the person I really want to be." The second participant is aware that there are still many shortcomings in herself that prevent her from becoming her ideal self. The first participant shared, "I want to be remembered as memorable, impactful. Remembered because I had a good impact, not because of a bad impact."

The evaluations dimension is a dimension consisting of an individual's evaluation of themselves. This dimension measures the extent to which individuals like themselves. The result of this dimension is the individual's level of self-esteem. An individual's self-esteem will increase if they set high expectations for themselves and achieve them. The second participant shared, "Self-reflection is just like a reflex. without planning it before, sudden I'm evaluating myself. There are moments when I have potential I am aware of it and I don't want it to be wasted. Using that potential is my way of being grateful for being given that potential. I make good use of it."

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The results of the study demonstrate that young adults find inspiration in reading self-improvement books that center on the concept of self-identity. Drawing from personal experiences discussed throughout the interview, many early adults have varied types of inspiration. Young adults' modeling contributes to the book's inspiration or interpretation process. Young adults' cognitive processes are stimulated by the self-improvement book through the modeling mechanism, allowing them to process the knowledge through their cognitive capacities. A reciprocal relationship is therefore established. During the modeling process, early adults convert knowledge into symbolic notions that will be used to guide their subsequent thinking and conduct.

The process of interpreting self-improvement books is one of the variables that contribute to the development of young adult's self-concept. The experience of reading self-improvement books brings positive contributions to young adults. Young adults are able to get to know themselves better, hone their critical thinking abilities, reflect on their previous deeds and thoughts, and engage in behaviors that promote their own growth.

Despite the valuable findings, there are limitations to this study. The participant or the target of the study should have a wider range of characteristics, gender, and cultural variations could be among the primary concerns. Much deeper analysis about the modeling process and its relationship with the individual's self-concept still need further examination. It is hoped that this

study can be used as a reference for further research on the relationship between media and individual cognitive processes in the future. Considering that this research is still rarely done, especially in Indonesia.

### **Acknowledgement**

We would like to express our gratitude to everyone who helped us complete this research and publication. We also want to express our gratitude to all the participants who voluntarily took part in our research, their contributions enabled us to conduct our study successfully. Finally, we want to express our heartfelt gratitude to our families and loved ones, whose unwavering support and encouragement have been a source of strength throughout the journey of completing this study. The success of this research is due to the invaluable contributions and assistance of everyone named above.

### **REFERENCE**

- American Psychological Association. (2014, n.d.). *What is media psychology?* Society for Media Psychology and Technology. <https://www.apadivisions.org/division-46/about/what-is>.
- Arnett, J. J. (2006). *Emerging adulthood: Understanding the new way of coming of age*. American Psychological Association.
- Ball-Rokeach, S., & DeFleur, M. (1976). A dependency model of mass media effects. *Communication Research*, 3(1), 3–21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009365027600300101>.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action*. Prentice-Hall.
- Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory of mass communication. *Media Psychology*, 3(3), 265-299. [https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532785XMEP0303\\_03](https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532785XMEP0303_03).
- Baumeister, R. F. (2005). *Self-concept, self-esteem, and identity*. In V. Derlega, B. Winstead, & W. Jones (Eds.), *Personality: Contemporary theory and research (3rd ed.)* (pp. 246-280). Wadsworth.
- Bergsma, A. (2007). Do self-help books help? *Journal of Happiness Studies*. 9(3), 341-360, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-006-9041-2>.
- Black, J. E., Capps, S. C., & Barnes, J. L. (2018). Fiction, genre exposure, and moral reality. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 12(3), 328. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/aca0000116>.
- Calhoun, J. F., & Acocella, J. R. (2002). *Psychology of adjustment and human relationship*. McGraw-Hill.
- Coyne, S. M., Padilla-Walker, L. M., & Howard, E. (2013). Emerging in a digital world: A decade review of media use, effects, and gratifications in emerging adulthood. *Emerging Adulthood*, 1(2), 125-137. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696813479782>.
- Ferguson, C. J. (2014). Is reading “banned” books associated with behavior problems in young readers? The influence of controversial young adult books on the psychological well-being of adolescents. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 8(3), 354–362. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/a0035601>.
- Fisher, J.T., & Hamilton, K.A. (2021). Integrating media selection and media effects using decision theory. *Journal of Media Psychology*, 33(4), 215-225. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-1105/a000315>.
- Grabe, W. (2008). The nature of reading: Defining reading. In *Reading in a second language: Moving from theory to practice (cambridge applied linguistics)*. Cambridge University Press
- Greenwood, D. N., & Long, C. R. (2009). Psychological predictors of media involvement: Solitude experiences and the need to belong. *Communication Research*, 36, 637-654. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650209338906>.
- King, L. A. (2017). *The science of psychology: An appreciative view*. McGraw-Hill Education.

- Myers, D. G. and Twenge, J. M. (2015). *Social psychology. 12th edition*. McGraw-Hill.
- Perfetti, C. A., Landi, N., & Oakhill, J. V. (2005). The acquisition of reading comprehension skill. In M. J. Snowling & C. Hulme (Eds.), *The science of reading: A handbook* (pp. 227-247). Oxford, UK: Blackwell. doi:10.1002/9780470757642
- Pierce, D. (2021, March 9). *Self-Help books fill a burgeoning need*. Library Journal. <https://www.libraryjournal.com/story/self-help-books-fill-a-burgeoning-need>
- Rens, S. (2023). "It's about finding and knowing myself": Why Johannesburg-based South African millennials consume self-help media. *Communicare: Journal for Communication Studies in Africa*. <https://doi.org/10.36615/jcsa.v42i1.1409>.
- Rentfrow, P. J., Goldberg, L. R., & Zilca, R. (2011). Listening, watching, and reading: The structure and correlates of entertainment preferences. *Journal of Personality*, 79(2), 223–258. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.2010.00662.x>.
- Richter, T., Appel, M., & Calio, F. (2014). Stories can influence the self-concept. *Social Influence*, 9(3), 172–188. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15534510.2013.799099>.
- Santrock, J. W. (2019). *Life-span Development (17th ed.)*. McGraw-Hill
- Shavelson, R. J., Hubner, J. J., & Stanton, G. C. (1976). Self-concept: Validation of construct interpretations. *Review of Educational Research*, 46(3), 407–441. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543046003407>.
- Wilson, D. & Cash, T. (2000). Who reads self-help books? Development and validation of the self-help reading attitudes survey. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 29, 119-129. [https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1016/S0191-8869\(99\)00182-8](https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1016/S0191-8869(99)00182-8).