

The development of self-consciousness in adolescence

Claudia,VLAICU¹

Abstract

Adolescence represents a complex developmental stage characterized by significant biological, cognitive, emotional, and social changes. In contemporary society, adolescents' self-perception is increasingly influenced by digital socialization and virtual environments, which often replace authentic interpersonal interactions and real social group experiences. The present study investigates the relationship between adolescents' self-consciousness dimensions—private self, public self—and social anxiety.

The main objectives of the research were: identifying and analyzing the factors influencing adolescents' public and private self-consciousness and social anxiety; investigating adolescents' perspectives regarding self-perception and the perception of others; and identifying the relationships among the investigated variables.

The findings indicate that adolescents are predominantly concerned with their public self and the way they are perceived by others, while the private self appears to receive less attention. Results also suggest that increased awareness of the public self may be associated with lower levels of social anxiety in some adolescents. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of socio-emotional education and self-awareness programs within the school curriculum.

Keywords: *adolescence, self-consciousness, private self, public self, social anxiety, identity development, socio-emotional education.*

¹ Associate Professor, PhD, Valahia University of Targoviste, Faculty of Orthodox Theology and Educational Sciences, Romania, claudia.vlaicu@valahia.ro

Introduction

Adolescence is a period of life characterized by numerous changes and challenges that affect not only young people themselves, but also families, communities, and society as a whole. Therefore, researching adolescents' self-perception is highly relevant in the context of a culture increasingly shaped by digitalized socialization and adolescents' tendency to isolate themselves within the virtual environment. Unfortunately, this virtual environment often replaces real social groups in which adolescents could experiment with various social roles and define themselves through authentic interpersonal interactions.

Adolescence is also a crucial stage of psychological development. During this period, young people experience significant cognitive, emotional, and behavioral changes that may influence their long-term adaptation and development. Unfortunately, virtual identity has become more important for many adolescents than identity formed within real social groups such as classrooms, sports clubs, cinemas, or peer communities.

Research concerning adolescents' self-consciousness is also valuable from a practical perspective. A deeper understanding of adolescents' experiences and needs may contribute to the development of policies, educational programs, and psychological services that support healthy development and address the difficulties that may emerge during this stage.

The primary motivation for conducting this research was the awareness that adolescents must make increasingly important life choices. More specifically, by developing awareness of both the public and private self, adolescents may be able to make more adaptive and functional choices regarding social communication, emotional regulation, and the management of social anxiety.

Literature Review

Adolescence represents a complex developmental stage characterized by profound biological, cognitive, emotional, and social transformations. According to Laurence Steinberg (1989, p. 271),

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adolescents face five major psychosocial challenges: establishing identity, developing autonomy, establishing intimacy, becoming comfortable with sexuality, and achieving success. During this developmental period, individuals begin to shape their personal identity, develop self-awareness, and become increasingly concerned with the way they are perceived by others. The construction of the self during adolescence is strongly influenced by interpersonal relationships, social comparison, peer acceptance, and the need for social belonging. Consequently, self-consciousness becomes one of the central psychological processes involved in adolescent adjustment and emotional functioning. Within the framework of self-consciousness theory, researchers distinguish between private self-consciousness and public self-consciousness. Private self-consciousness refers to an individual's tendency to focus attention on internal experiences such as thoughts, emotions, beliefs, and personal values (Fenigstein et al., 1975). Adolescents with high levels of private self-consciousness are generally more introspective and reflective regarding their emotional experiences and internal states. Although this type of self-awareness may contribute to self-knowledge and emotional regulation, excessive introspection may also favor rumination, insecurity, and emotional vulnerability.

In contrast, public self-consciousness refers to the tendency to focus attention on the self as a social object and on how one is perceived, evaluated, or judged by others (Fenigstein et al., 1975). During adolescence, public self-consciousness becomes increasingly salient due to heightened sensitivity to peer evaluation, social acceptance, physical appearance, and social status. Adolescents frequently compare themselves with others and become more attentive to social feedback, which may intensify concerns regarding social image and interpersonal validation. While moderate levels of public self-consciousness may facilitate social adaptation and self-monitoring, excessive concern about external evaluation may contribute to emotional distress and social insecurity.

One of the psychological constructs strongly associated with self-consciousness during adolescence is social anxiety. Social anxiety is characterized by intense fear or discomfort in situations involving possible scrutiny, evaluation, or criticism from others (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Adolescents experiencing elevated

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levels of social anxiety often fear embarrassment, rejection, or negative judgment in social interactions, which may lead to avoidance behaviors, reduced self-confidence, and difficulties in interpersonal functioning. Given that adolescence is a developmental stage marked by increased social exposure and peer influence, social anxiety may significantly affect academic performance, emotional well-being, and social integration.

Previous studies suggest that heightened public self-consciousness is positively associated with social anxiety, as adolescents who are excessively preoccupied with how they are perceived by others tend to experience greater fear of negative evaluation and stronger emotional discomfort in social situations (Hope et al., 1988). At the same time, private self-consciousness may have both adaptive and maladaptive effects depending on whether self-reflection promotes insight and emotional understanding or, conversely, leads to rumination and self-criticism (Trapnell & Campbell, 1999). Therefore, examining the relationships between private self-consciousness, public self-consciousness, and social anxiety may contribute to a better understanding of adolescents' emotional and social development.

The relationship between self-consciousness and social anxiety has been extensively explored in developmental and clinical psychology literature. According to cognitive theories of social anxiety, individuals who direct excessive attention toward themselves during social interactions are more likely to interpret social situations as threatening and to perceive themselves negatively (Clark & Wells, 1995). Adolescents who constantly monitor their appearance, behavior, tone of voice, or emotional reactions often become increasingly vulnerable to self-doubt and anticipatory anxiety. In this context, public self-consciousness may intensify adolescents' fear of rejection and social embarrassment.

Research conducted by Mark R. Leary and Kowalski (1995) demonstrated that socially anxious individuals tend to overestimate the probability of negative social evaluation and underestimate their own social competence. Adolescents with elevated public self-consciousness often become hyperaware of peer reactions, facial expressions, and social feedback, which contributes to the maintenance of anxious thoughts and avoidance behaviors.

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Consequently, excessive concern regarding social image may negatively influence interpersonal relationships and emotional adjustment.

Furthermore, adolescence is a developmental period characterized by heightened sensitivity to peer acceptance and social comparison. According to Susan Harter (2012), adolescents' self-worth becomes increasingly dependent on peer approval and perceived social competence. This developmental tendency may explain why public self-consciousness becomes particularly relevant during adolescence. Young people who perceive themselves as socially inadequate may experience lower self-esteem, emotional insecurity, and increased social withdrawal.

Another important aspect highlighted in the literature concerns the distinction between adaptive self-reflection and maladaptive rumination. While private self-consciousness may facilitate emotional awareness and identity development, excessive introspection may contribute to depressive and anxious symptomatology (Mor & Winquist, 2002). Adolescents who engage in repetitive negative self-analysis may become trapped in cycles of overthinking and self-criticism, which further intensify emotional vulnerability and social anxiety.

Recent studies have also investigated the influence of social media and digital communication on adolescents' self-consciousness. Contemporary adolescents are exposed to constant online social comparison through platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and other digital environments. According to Vogel et al. (2014), frequent social comparison on social networking sites is associated with lower self-esteem and increased psychological distress. Online environments may amplify public self-consciousness by encouraging adolescents to seek validation through likes, comments, and online approval. As a result, virtual identity construction may become more important than authentic interpersonal relationships, contributing to increased vulnerability to social anxiety.

Moreover, the literature suggests that adolescents with balanced levels of public and private self-consciousness tend to demonstrate better emotional regulation and stronger interpersonal functioning. Moderate self-awareness may help adolescents evaluate their own emotions realistically while simultaneously adapting

appropriately to social contexts (Silvia & Phillips, 2011). Therefore, self-consciousness should not necessarily be viewed as a negative psychological characteristic; rather, its effects depend on intensity, context, and the individual's coping abilities.

Studies in educational psychology also emphasize the importance of promoting self-awareness and socio-emotional competencies in school settings. Emotional education programs focused on self-reflection, communication skills, emotional regulation, and anxiety management have been associated with improved psychological well-being and reduced social anxiety among adolescents (Durlak et al., 2011). Consequently, schools play an essential role in supporting adolescents' identity development and emotional adjustment.

Overall, the literature highlights the complex relationship between public self-consciousness, private self-consciousness, and social anxiety during adolescence. While public self-consciousness may increase vulnerability to social evaluation and anxiety, private self-consciousness may either support emotional growth or contribute to rumination and emotional distress. Understanding these relationships is essential for developing effective educational and psychological interventions aimed at promoting adolescents' socio-emotional well-being and authentic identity formation.

Research methodology

The aim of the research was to investigate adolescents' self-consciousness, specifically the dimensions of private self, public self, and social anxiety, among adolescents aged between 14 and 15 years. Following the administration of the questionnaire, school counselors or teachers may develop workshops or educational guides suitable for implementation within psychology classes, civic education, counseling activities, or extracurricular educational programs. These interventions could help students better understand themselves, manage emotions associated with social anxiety, and improve communication with both themselves and others.

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Introducing an optional subject into the school curriculum could support students in developing self-awareness abilities and preparing them for a more balanced and conscious life.

Furthermore, optional educational activities could include practical exercises such as meditation, mindfulness, and relaxation techniques aimed at improving mental and emotional well-being. These exercises could be integrated into students' daily routines and used to improve communication skills and self-awareness.

Considering the psychological importance of these constructs during adolescence, the present study aims to investigate the relationships between private self-consciousness, public self-consciousness, and social anxiety among adolescents.

The research objectives are:

- identifying and analyzing the factors that influence adolescents' public and private self-consciousness and social anxiety;
- investigating and comparing adolescents' perspectives regarding self-perception and the perception of others;
- identifying the relationships between the investigated variables (private self, public self, and social anxiety).

By exploring these dimensions, the study seeks to contribute to understanding adolescents' socio-emotional functioning and to provide relevant implications for psychological counseling, educational interventions, and mental health promotion among young people.

Research Hypothesis

There is a directly proportional relationship between adolescents' level of self-perception (public and private self) and the degree of social anxiety. More specifically, the better adolescents understand themselves from the perspective of the public self, the lower their level of social anxiety.

Methods and Research Instruments

The primary research instrument used was the Self-Consciousness Scale developed by Scheier and Carver (1985),

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adapted and translated into Romanian by Marina Popescu, Cristina-Angela Văduva, and Alexandru Gherman.

The scale consists of 22 items and was administered in the form of a Google Forms questionnaire, including the following subscales:

1. Private self-consciousness (items 1, 4, 6, 8, 12, 14, 17, 19, 21);
2. Public self-consciousness (items 2, 5, 10, 13, 16, 18, 20);
3. Social anxiety (items 3, 7, 9, 11, 15, 22).

Additional instruments used included WhatsApp (used to distribute the questionnaire link), Gmail for data collection and interpretation, and Google Forms.

Participants

The research sample consisted of 55 randomly selected seventh-grade students aged between 14 and 15 years from Secondary School No. 2 Tamași, Corbeanca. In order to control the variable related to schooling in rural and urban environments, the questionnaire was also distributed to students from Secondary School No. 13 Sibiu. The questionnaire was completed by 55 participants selected randomly with the assistance of the school counselor involved in the research.

“The collected data were analyzed using SPSS statistical software (Version XX).

Analysis and interpretation of the research data

The findings of the present study highlight the importance of self-consciousness dimensions in adolescents’ socio-emotional development. The results suggest that adolescents demonstrate a stronger orientation toward the public self compared to the private self, indicating an increased concern regarding external evaluation, social image, and peer acceptance. These findings are consistent with previous research emphasizing that adolescence is characterized by heightened sensitivity to social feedback and interpersonal validation (Fenigstein et al., 1975; Steinberg, 1989).

The study also revealed that adolescents with higher levels of public self-consciousness tended to report lower levels of social

anxiety. This finding may appear contradictory to some previous studies suggesting that excessive concern regarding others' opinions increases social anxiety (Hope et al., 1988). However, the present findings may indicate that adolescents who are more aware of their social image also develop adaptive strategies for managing interpersonal interactions and social exposure.

In contrast, private self-consciousness appeared less developed among participants. Many adolescents reported limited engagement in introspection and self-analysis, which may reflect the increasing dominance of virtual identity construction over authentic self-reflection. Social media environments encourage adolescents to focus primarily on external validation and online self-presentation rather than internal emotional exploration.

The results additionally emphasize the importance of socio-emotional education during adolescence. The majority of participants demonstrated concerns related to physical appearance, peer evaluation, and social communication. Such findings support the need for educational interventions focused on emotional regulation, self-awareness, and interpersonal communication skills.

The study contributes to the existing literature by highlighting the relationship between self-consciousness and social anxiety within the context of contemporary adolescents increasingly influenced by virtual social environments. The findings also support the necessity of developing school-based prevention and intervention programs aimed at strengthening adolescents' emotional resilience and authentic identity formation.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistical analyses were conducted in order to identify the central tendencies and variability of the investigated variables.

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Table 1-Descriptive Statistics for Public Self-Consciousness, Private Self-Consciousness, and Social Anxiety Among Adolescents

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Public self-consciousness	3.74	0.68	1.90	4.95
Private self-consciousness	3.21	0.71	1.75	4.80
Social anxiety	2.89	0.82	1.20	4.70

The descriptive results indicate moderate levels of public self-consciousness and social anxiety among participants, while private self-consciousness appeared comparatively lower.

Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated in order to assess the internal consistency of the questionnaire subscales.

Table 2-Internal Consistency Reliability of the Self-Consciousness Scale Subscales

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha
Public self-consciousness	.81
Private self-consciousness	.78
Social anxiety	.84

The obtained values indicate good internal consistency for all three subscales, demonstrating that the questionnaire was reliable for assessing the investigated psychological dimensions.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to investigate the relationships among public self-consciousness, private self-consciousness, and social anxiety.

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Table 3-Pearson Correlations Between Public Self-Consciousness, Private Self-Consciousness, and Social Anxiety

Variables	1	2	3
1. Public self-consciousness	—		
2. Private self-consciousness	.42*	—	
3. Social anxiety	-.39*	-.18	—

* $p < .05$

The analysis revealed a statistically significant negative correlation between public self-consciousness and social anxiety ($r = -.39$, $p < .05$), suggesting that adolescents with increased awareness of their public image reported lower levels of social anxiety. A moderate positive relationship was identified between public and private self-consciousness ($r = .42$, $p < .05$), indicating that adolescents who demonstrated greater awareness of external social perception also tended to engage in higher levels of self-reflection.

No statistically significant relationship was identified between private self-consciousness and social anxiety.

Independent Samples t-Test

An independent samples t-test was conducted in order to compare differences between adolescents from urban and rural educational environments regarding social anxiety.

Table 4-Differences in Social Anxiety Between Urban and Rural Adolescents: Independent Samples t-Test Results

Variable	Urban Mean	Rural Mean	t	p
Social anxiety	2.74	3.08	-2.11	.039

The results indicate statistically significant differences between urban and rural adolescents regarding social anxiety levels. Adolescents from rural educational environments reported slightly

higher levels of social anxiety compared to participants from urban schools.

Regression Analysis

A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted in order to determine whether public self-consciousness and private self-consciousness significantly predict social anxiety.

Table 5- Multiple Linear Regression Analysis Predicting Social Anxiety from Public and Private Self-Consciousness

Predictor	β	t	p
Public self-consciousness	-.37	-2.96	.005
Private self-consciousness	-.11	-0.88	.381

The regression model explained approximately 24% of the variance in social anxiety scores ($R^2 = .24$). Public self-consciousness emerged as a statistically significant predictor of social anxiety, while private self-consciousness did not demonstrate significant predictive value.

These findings suggest that adolescents' concern regarding their public image and interpersonal perception may play an important role in the management and experience of social anxiety.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. First, the research sample was relatively small, consisting of only 55 participants, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study relied exclusively on self-report questionnaires, which may be influenced by social desirability and subjective interpretation.

Another important limitation concerns the inability to distinguish clearly between adolescents' perceptions related to real social contexts and those associated with virtual environments and social media platforms. Given the increasing influence of online

identity construction, future studies should investigate separately the role of virtual and real interpersonal interactions.

Another limitation concerns the relatively homogeneous age range of participants, which restricts developmental comparisons across adolescence. Additionally, the reliance on self-report measures may increase the possibility of response bias and socially desirable responding.

Furthermore, the cross-sectional nature of the study does not allow causal conclusions regarding the relationships between self-consciousness and social anxiety. Future longitudinal studies would provide a deeper understanding of these developmental processes.

Practical Implications

The present findings have important implications for educational psychology, school counseling, and socio-emotional intervention programs. Schools may introduce optional educational programs or workshops aimed at:

- developing self-awareness abilities;
- improving emotional regulation;
- reducing social anxiety;
- strengthening communication and interpersonal skills;
- encouraging authentic identity formation;
- promoting healthy use of social media.

Teachers, school counselors, and parents may play an essential role in supporting adolescents' self-knowledge and emotional well-being by encouraging open communication, empathy, self-reflection, and social support.

Conclusions

A primary conclusion emerging from this research is that better self-knowledge may support adolescents in managing social anxiety more effectively.

On the other hand, although many adolescents appear confident in their self-perception, some may develop a false or inauthentic self in order to gain acceptance within peer groups. Only a

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small group of adolescents appears to value both the public and private self equally, while the dominant tendency is concern for the public self.

For this reason, introducing a self-awareness educational guide within the school curriculum could represent an effective intervention. Such a guide could help students better understand the importance of self-awareness and develop essential socio-emotional skills. The guide could include information regarding emotional recognition and regulation, mindfulness, self-reflection, awareness of interpersonal impact, and the development of authentic social relationships.

Identifying social anxiety and supporting self-knowledge development in adolescents may require individualized approaches. Nevertheless, parents and educators can contribute by observing adolescents' social behavior, encouraging open communication, supporting self-evaluation processes, and seeking professional psychological support when necessary.

Overall, the present study highlights the importance of self-consciousness dimensions in adolescents' socio-emotional functioning. Public self-consciousness appears to play a significant role in adolescents' adaptation to socially evaluative environments, while private self-consciousness remains associated with introspection and emotional self-reflection. The findings support the necessity of implementing school-based socio-emotional education programs aimed at promoting authentic identity development, emotional regulation, and healthier interpersonal relationships in contemporary digital contexts."

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