

Social Media Engagement, Upward Social Comparison, and Subjective Well-Being in College Students

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Abstract—The rapid integration of social media into daily life has transformed how college students communicate, construct identity, and evaluate self-worth. While social media platforms provide opportunities for connection and self-expression, they also foster environments that intensify upward social comparison. Upward comparison evaluating oneself against individuals perceived as superior has been linked to diminished subjective well-being. This article examines the relationship between social media engagement, upward social comparison, and subjective well-being among college students. Drawing on social comparison theory and empirical research, the article explores cognitive, emotional, and behavioral mechanisms underlying these associations. It further discusses moderating factors such as self-esteem, self-compassion, and mindful engagement. The findings suggest that while social media engagement can enhance connectedness, excessive and comparison-driven usage may negatively affect life satisfaction and emotional well-being. The article concludes by emphasizing the importance of balanced digital engagement and psychological resilience strategies within higher education settings.

Index Terms—Social media engagement, Upward social comparison, Subjective well-being, College students, Social comparison theory, Digital psychology.

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and X have become central to the social lives of college students. These platforms allow users to share achievements, curated experiences, and idealized self-presentations. For many students, social media engagement includes activities such as posting content, scrolling through

feeds, interacting with peers, and monitoring online feedback.

While digital connectivity offers benefits such as social support and networking opportunities, it also introduces new psychological challenges. One prominent concern is the intensification of upward social comparison. According to Leon Festinger (1954), individuals have an inherent drive to evaluate themselves by comparing with others. In social media environments where users often display highlight reels of their lives, upward comparison becomes frequent and, at times, unavoidable.

Subjective well-being, defined as individuals' cognitive and affective evaluations of their lives, encompasses life satisfaction, positive affect, and low negative affect (Diener, 1984). Among college students, subjective well-being is closely tied to academic performance, interpersonal relationships, and mental health outcomes. The intersection of social media engagement and upward social comparison presents a complex dynamic influencing these well-being indicators.

This article explores how social media engagement contributes to upward social comparison and how this process impacts subjective well-being in college students. It also examines potential mediating and moderating variables that may buffer or exacerbate these effects.

II. SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT IN THE COLLEGE CONTEXT

Social media engagement refers not only to frequency of use but also to the quality and intensity of interactions. Active engagement involves posting

content, commenting, and direct messaging, whereas passive engagement primarily consists of browsing others' posts without interaction. Research indicates that passive consumption is more strongly associated with negative emotional outcomes due to increased opportunities for comparison (Verduyn et al., 2017).

College students often rely on social media for academic collaboration, event updates, and peer validation. The developmental stage of emerging adulthood, characterized by identity exploration and heightened sensitivity to peer feedback, makes this population particularly vulnerable to social evaluation processes. The visibility of metrics such as likes, shares, and follower counts may amplify perceived social hierarchies.

Moreover, algorithm-driven content prioritization exposes users to idealized images and high-achieving peers, reinforcing upward comparison tendencies. Students may encounter posts showcasing academic success, physical attractiveness, social popularity, or luxurious lifestyles, prompting self-evaluative judgments.

Although moderate engagement can strengthen social connectedness and belonging, excessive engagement may lead to compulsive checking behaviors and increased emotional dependency on digital validation. The psychological consequences of such patterns are closely tied to comparison processes.

Upward Social Comparison: Theoretical Perspectives
Social comparison theory posits that individuals evaluate their abilities and worth by comparing themselves to others (Festinger, 1954). Upward social comparison occurs when individuals compare themselves to those perceived as superior in certain domains. While upward comparison can inspire self-improvement, it can also generate feelings of inadequacy and envy.

Later expansions of the theory by Thomas A. Wills (1981) distinguished between upward and downward comparisons, emphasizing that upward comparisons may reduce self-esteem when discrepancies appear unattainable. In social media contexts, curated content often represents unrealistic standards, making upward comparisons more likely to produce negative emotional responses.

Research suggests that exposure to idealized images on platforms like Instagram increases body dissatisfaction and depressive symptoms among young adults (Fardouly et al., 2015). The constant

stream of curated success stories may distort perceptions of normative achievement, leading students to underestimate their own accomplishments.

Upward comparison is particularly potent in domains central to identity, such as academic competence and social popularity. College students who strongly identify with academic achievement may experience heightened distress when encountering peers' success posts. Similarly, social comparison related to physical appearance may affect body image and self-worth.

However, not all upward comparisons are detrimental. When perceived as attainable, they may motivate personal growth. The impact largely depends on individual differences such as self-esteem, emotional regulation capacity, and attributional style.

III. SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING AND ITS COMPONENTS

Subjective well-being (SWB) comprises three primary components: life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect (Diener, 1984). Life satisfaction reflects cognitive judgments about one's overall life quality, whereas affective components refer to emotional experiences.

Among college students, subjective well-being is influenced by academic achievement, social relationships, financial stability, and mental health. High SWB is associated with better academic performance, stronger relationships, and lower risk of psychological disorders.

Social media engagement intersects with SWB through emotional contagion, peer validation, and comparison mechanisms. Positive interactions, supportive comments, and online community involvement may enhance well-being. Conversely, exposure to upward comparison stimuli may decrease life satisfaction and increase negative affect.

Empirical evidence supports this dual effect. A study by Kross et al. (2013) found that increased Facebook use predicted declines in subjective well-being over time. The authors concluded that rather than enhancing happiness, frequent passive engagement may undermine it.

Furthermore, upward social comparison has been identified as a mediator between social media use and reduced life satisfaction (Appel, Gerlach, & Crusius, 2016). Students who frequently compare themselves

to others online report higher envy levels and lower self-evaluations.

IV. MECHANISMS LINKING SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT AND WELL-BEING

The relationship between social media engagement, upward comparison, and subjective well-being can be explained through cognitive, emotional, and behavioral pathways.

Cognitively, social media fosters selective exposure to idealized content. Users tend to present themselves in socially desirable ways, emphasizing achievements while concealing struggles. This creates an availability bias, where students overestimate peers' success and happiness.

Emotionally, upward comparison may evoke envy, shame, and inadequacy. Persistent exposure to such emotions contributes to chronic dissatisfaction. Envy, in particular, mediates the association between comparison and depressive symptoms (Tandoc, Ferrucci, & Duffy, 2015).

Behaviorally, negative emotional responses may lead to increased monitoring of others' profiles, reinforcing comparison cycles. Students may engage in compulsive scrolling, seeking reassurance or validation, which paradoxically intensifies dissatisfaction.

Sleep disturbances may also result from excessive nighttime social media use, further affecting emotional regulation and life satisfaction. The interplay between digital habits and psychological health underscores the multifaceted nature of this issue.

V. MODERATING AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Not all students experience negative outcomes from social media engagement. Individual differences play a crucial role in moderating effects.

Self-esteem serves as a protective factor. Students with high self-esteem are less likely to internalize upward comparisons. They interpret peers' success as non-threatening, maintaining stable self-evaluations.

Self-compassion also buffers negative comparison effects. Individuals who practice self-kindness and recognize common humanity are less likely to engage in harsh self-judgment. Mindfulness reduces over-identification with comparison-induced emotions, mitigating their impact on well-being.

Active engagement patterns may produce more positive outcomes than passive browsing. Posting authentic content and interacting meaningfully with peers fosters connectedness rather than isolation.

Digital literacy education can further equip students to critically evaluate online content. Recognizing the curated nature of social media reduces unrealistic expectations and comparison intensity.

VI. IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Universities play a critical role in addressing the psychological impacts of social media. Counseling centers can integrate psychoeducation on social comparison and digital well-being into workshops and orientation programs.

Promoting balanced technology use and encouraging offline social interactions can strengthen protective factors. Peer support groups and mindfulness-based interventions may enhance resilience against comparison-driven distress.

Faculty members can also model realistic narratives of success, emphasizing effort and growth rather than perfection. Such cultural shifts within academic institutions may reduce competitive comparison climates.

Policies encouraging digital detox initiatives or campus-wide awareness campaigns may further support student well-being.

VII. CONCLUSION

Social media engagement is an integral component of contemporary college life. While it offers opportunities for connection and self-expression, it also intensifies upward social comparison processes that may undermine subjective well-being. The impact of social media on college students is not inherently positive or negative but depends largely on patterns of use and individual psychological resources.

Upward social comparison, particularly when perceived as unattainable, contributes to decreased life satisfaction and increased negative affect. However, protective factors such as self-esteem, self-compassion, mindful engagement, and digital literacy can buffer these effects.

Understanding the nuanced relationship between social media engagement, comparison processes, and well-being is essential for developing effective

interventions. As digital environments continue to evolve, fostering psychological resilience and balanced engagement strategies will be critical in promoting healthy development among college students.

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